

## **Nonprofit workers rally for more state funding**

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HARTFORD -- Chantell Paris, a life skills trainer with Ability Beyond Disability of Bethel, loves her job but hates that she also has to work as a bartender to make ends meet and support her two children.

"Sometimes life is tough," said Paris, one of more than 100 staff members with the social services organization who attended a rally Thursday on the steps of the state Capitol.

"I can't afford to take care of my kids and keep my home with the amount of money I get. There is nothing I would like more than to be able to work one job, the job that I love, but it's just not possible."

Paris, a single mother who lives in Waterbury, said she earns about \$25,000 a year caring for people with mental retardation. Her duties include bathing clients, helping them go to the bathroom, taking them to their jobs, distributing medications and much more.

"It's not easy doing such a challenging job, taking care of a family and a home and also having to work other jobs," she said. "But I love my job and I'm proud that I make a difference in people's lives."

Paris said she could look for a job with a state agency, where wages are as much as 50 percent higher, but most of the group homes in the state are run by nonprofit organizations.

Officials with those organizations rallied at the Capitol for additional state funding for competitive wages and an assurance the services they provide will be available well into the future.

Stagnant state funding over the years is also threatening crucial services, such as transportation and independent living facilities throughout the greater Danbury area, according to Tom Fanning, president of Ability Beyond Disability. The organization provides services to more than 700 disabled residents in the region.

"Layoffs would be our last resort," Fanning said. "But if we don't get any funding increases in the next two years, there would likely be no other choice. If the governor's budget goes through as it's proposed, we would have to make significant cuts to our services just to survive."

Fanning and hundreds of other staff members and clients of social service organizations were calling for a 13 percent jump in funding over the next two years.

Nonprofit organizations, he said, provide services for 80 percent of the state's disabled population for the same cost that state agencies expend to provide services to the remaining 20 percent.

"There is no question that our quality of care is as good as the public sector and much more cost efficient," Fanning said. "The state has been asking us to provide more and more services over the years, but they haven't been providing the funding we need to do that."

State Sen. David Cappiello, R-Danbury, said it would cost the state billions of dollars a year to replace the services provided by the nonprofit organizations.

"The best way to service people in the state is through community providers," he said, urging those at the rally to continue fighting for more funding. "We've been working on this issue for years and now is the year to get the job done."

House Speaker James Amann, D-Milford, said it is socially irresponsible for the state not to provide the funding the organizations need.

"I want to thank the nonprofits for all the work that they do," he said. "We will take care of you."

Chris Cooper, a spokesman for the governor's office, said Gov. M. Jodi Rell did include \$15 million in her budget that would be directed to employees with nonprofit organizations who earn the lowest salaries.

"The governor dedicated this year to increased education funding and some tough decisions had to be made," Cooper said.

Ability Beyond Disability offers services for people with disabilities that include employment training, career counseling and job placement, cognitive and life skills instruction, and volunteer and recreational activities, according to its Web site.

#### **By the numbers**

The cost of providing services to state residents with mental illnesses in 2003:

\$410 million

The total cost of service for the 3,644 clients in the public sector.

\$112,680

Cost per client in the public sector.

\$413 million

The total cost of service

for the 17,183 clients from  
nonprofit organizations.

\$24,038

Cost per client from  
nonprofit organizations.