Health Care Workers Rally in Olympia

Local News

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Olympia, WA - About 300 home-care aides from around the state are in Olympia today, asking lawmakers for a 50-cent hourly raise per year for the next two years.

The state pays for home-care services for about 52,000 of the lowest-income seniors and people with disabilities. Last year, an arbitrator in the workers' contract talks with the state suggested they be paid $11 an hour instead of $10 by July 2015.

Susie Young of Spokane, who has been a home-care aide for 25 years, said she and other workers will meet with lawmakers to explain their needs.

"We have been invisible for so long," Young said, "and now we're out of the shadows and you really have to encourage the workers to tell their stories - not only the story of the client, because that's where it starts, we're always advocating for the client - but we also now have to tell our story."

They'll share results of a new survey by their union, SEIU Healthcare 775, which found that most Washington voters support the wage increase. The backing crosses party lines, from 76 percent of Democrats to 69 percent of independents and 64 percent of Republicans.

Home-care workers are an increasingly important part of the long-term care picture, Young said, keeping people out of more expensive nursing homes by assisting with their chores, medications and doctor visits. For the money, she said, it's a big responsibility.

"We have not had a pay raise for five years. Five years! We perform essential jobs here," she said. "We're barely able to take care of ourselves, let alone our clients. So, we have so many workers that choose between gas in the car or food."

The wage increase is part of the budget that former Gov. Chris Gregoire submitted for the next two years, but it's up to the Legislature to agree. Funding shortages in the past few years already have prompted the state to cut back the hours of care that home-care clients receive.

The SEIU poll results are online at seiu775.org.