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Boyd, Culver: Need is critical for home care workers | Opinion

Sherri Boyd and Todd Culver

Published 11:00 p.m. ET Oct. 2, 2022

It's hard to imagine that people experiencing mental health challenges and developmental disabilities — and the people who love them — could be trapped in an underfunded, failing structure that is on the verge of collapse. But that's exactly where we are.

Family members across Michigan are struggling with catastrophic challenges as they work to care for their loved ones. Why? Because our state's behavioral health system is built on the idea that direct care workers will always be available to provide in-home care when it's needed. When those workers disappear, the system quickly falls apart.

That's what's happening now. Each day, we hear stories of people who have been hospitalized for months on end, simply because there aren't enough workers to help them come home safely. Many of these individuals can't fully understand what's happening to them, or why they are in these unfamiliar settings.

One young adult with autism has been in the hospital since May 2021. It's scary and confusing for her, but there aren't enough direct care workers available to support her in the independent life she'd been living before the pandemic. She's taken a turn for the worse in recent months, retreating inside of herself even more deeply.

So where did all these workers go? The simple truth is the job market has made it impossible to continue in the role. Salaries are going up for everyone except these workers.

Most in Michigan earn a starting wage of \$14.35 per hour, according to recent survey findings. This includes the \$2.35 per hour premium pay increase. That amount is simply too low to keep these workers on the job, which is why today's turnover is nearly 45 percent.

This is difficult to understand, considering the Legislature has around \$6 billion in unspent federal COVID relief money. These dollars are specifically to help communities across

Michigan manage the many difficult issues that have arisen during the pandemic, and yet they remain in limbo when they could be protecting our state's most vulnerable citizens during a time of urgent need.

Our coalition is working to ensure sufficient funding for Michigan's direct care workers. We are sounding the alarm for tens of thousands of individuals and families that are living out their worst nightmares. They are going without the much-needed personal care, training, emotional support and respite they need. Worse yet, many of them are entering emergency rooms — often for extended periods — when they can't get the help they need at home.

We urge the Legislature to act quickly to appropriate a portion of these funds — \$175 million — to help keep these workers on the job and bring our state's behavioral health system back into balance. There is simply no time to lose.

Sherri Boyd is executive director of The Arc Michigan, and Todd Culver is president and CEO of Incompass Michigan.