

A VIEW FROM THE HILL

A commentary from a
legislator on human services



Day of observation wins great respect, gratitude for HS work

By Rep. Jeffrey Roy

On February 26, I found an unusual email from a constituent in my inbox. It was from a human services worker describing the stressful, emotional and challenging work she faced on a daily basis.

It was not a complaint. Rather, it was a plea for understanding.

The author explained that she takes great pride in her work, enjoys working with children and families, and is willing to think creatively to enhance the safety and well-being of those under her care. However, she was concerned about the impression that many people had about her line of work.

The email came with an offer: She was willing to make herself available to me or any legislator to shadow her any day of the week and see firsthand what a "typical" day is like for a human services worker.

It took me all of seven minutes to take her up on the challenge. I wrote her back, thanking her for her commitment and passion to the human services, and we set a date.

My commitment as a candidate and now as a member of the General Court is to learn as much as possible about an issue before taking a vote, making a comment or otherwise passing judgment.

This day in the life of a human services worker promised a means to further develop a moral imagination, that capacity to empathize with others. It offered an opportunity not just to feel for myself, but also to feel with and for others. It also offered a chance to become better at the job of legislating.

Three weeks later, I arrived to begin a day of observation in the office and in the field. This agency employs 65 workers who service between 800 and 1,000 clients.

I sat face to face with some of those clients in the office and in their homes. I met with families of clients, co-workers of my constituent and a host of other vulnerable citizens who count on the work that human service workers provide on a daily basis. I read files (after signing a confidentiality agreement), learned about the computer tracking system and case-loads and even sat in on a meeting of a support group for families receiving services.

I got to hear in person some of the real-life stories of how illnesses, addictions, mental health and the legal system have impacted families. I heard more than a dozen stories and felt the raw emotion – sometimes anger – in some of the voices of people

sharing deeply personal information. The voices were united in a plea for support, and they offered each other some measure of comfort.

All in all, it was a 10-hour day and experience that had a tremendous impact. I was exhausted by the end of it, and I left there with a sense of gratitude to those who take on these challenges each and every day.

The experience further opened my eyes to a world of dedicated, caring, compassionate and hardworking people who are doing noble work.



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Hubert Humphrey once said that "the moral test of a government is how it treats those who are at the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those who are in the shadow of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped."

The work I observed clearly demonstrated that these human service workers are exceeding that moral test. I met many people who answer that call and provide assistance to our most vulnerable populations.

In this context, it was an honor to co-sponsor Rep. David Linsky's Salary Reserve amendment, which will provide some relief to low-paid direct care workers. Having seen the work firsthand, it was an easy choice.

In his book *Journey of Purpose*, Senator Paul Tsongas described a larger reason for our work:

"In the end, there must be a purpose to our journey. Human endeavor cannot consist simply of random acts and happenstance. There needs to be meaning beyond self that gives our limited days definition and direction. And only within that meaning can the judgment rendered upon our lives have worth."

"Beyond individual achievement and failure, there is common purpose, shared and inescapable. It is not purpose derived from legislative mandates. It is genetic. It resides in every being because it is the continuance of that being. It is the sacredness of generational responsibility. To be given life and to ensure that life passes on, enhanced, cherished, protected."

Those words aptly describe the work of our human services workers, and so I thank you for your continued compassion and commitment to making the world a better place for all of us.

Rep. Jeffrey Roy, D-Franklin, represents the Tenth Norfolk District.

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