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Disability care workers getting long-awaited raises

By Nick DiMarco

Nick@MarylandReporter.com

Daniel Zaragoza wants to help people in need so badly that he's worked as a pizza delivery man on the side to make ends meet.

He usually works as a residential counselor for the Spring Dell Center in La Plata, taking care of three men with mental disabilities, "basically running their households" and making \$9.05 per hour. He says he's unique among his colleagues, because he has not not abandoned the position to make more money. Instead, he's moonlighted as a delivery driver.

As of Thursday, Zaragoza's patience may have finally paid off. People who work in the developmental disabilities service field could be in line to receive pay increases. Gov. Martin O'Malley signed into law [a bill](#) that aligns mental health caregivers with state employees when it comes to cost of living, inflationary and general salary increases. The new law requires the Community Services Reimbursement Rate Commission, an independent body within the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, to determine an appropriate amount to allocate to providers starting next year.

Zaragoza is just one of thousands who will be affected by the new law, which lawmakers say may help address the gaping vacancies that plague the field.

Sen. Thomas "Mac" Middleton, D-Charles, estimated the vacancies at around 35 to 40 percent. He was the lead bill sponsor. "We felt it was very urgent to address this issue as we move forward so the state will start treating these employees like they're our own employees," Middleton said.

Zaragoza helps people with mental disabilities to carry out basic tasks like personal hygiene routines, preparing meals, doing chores and managing finances. He says from time to time he'll take them out to events like baseball games. "It's important to do it because these people need support to live a full life like the rest of us," Zaragoza said. "They just need a little more help to do that. It's important for them to have qualified staff that cares for them the way every human being deserves."

He said in the last 10 years, people in his line of work haven't been given pay increases "anywhere close" to the rate of inflation.

He said he was grateful for a provision that adds prevents the state from decreasing pay after the bill expires in June 2016. "It means I can stay in my field at little easier, knowing that our rate increases won't be stagnant for 10 years. A lot of us have to work second jobs, just to make ends meet," he said. "It's a peace of mind that the state won't leave us behind when the increases are going around."

Donna Ratzlaff, executive director of the Spring Dell Center, said the just over \$9 per hour pay rate makes it difficult to retain a workforce. "It is incredible," she said moments after the bill was signed. "Quite frankly, [these employees] can go to a fast food restaurant and earn more per hour. What this means for us, especially for the staff who want to make this a career, they will have ways of getting increases each year so they won't be at poverty level."

The bill passed both chambers unanimously without a single vote of opposition.