OASIS · AT A GLANCE

Half the Workforce Caring for Our Kids Is on Public Assistance

Forty nine percent of direct care workers rely on public assistance. The median wage is $17.36 an hour. This is not a recruitment problem, it is the price of the job, and it explains why your service keeps breaking.

PILLAR: WHY, WHO | COMPANION TO BLOG POST B172 | 2-PAGE BRIEF

49%

ON PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Of direct care workers rely on Medicaid, food assistance, or cash assistance themselves.

How a rate becomes an unfilled shift

RATE, WAGE, EXIT

STAGE 1

A rate is set

Medicaid reimbursement determines what a provider can pay. The provider cannot charge families the difference or ignore staffing ratios.

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STAGE 2

A wage follows

The median direct care wage lands at $17.36 an hour, under $26,000 a year, below occupations with similar or lower entry requirements in all 50 states.

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STAGE 3

The worker leaves

Turnover runs 37.1% a year, and 63.7% of those who left in 2024 had been there less than twelve months.

What the wage produces

PHI 2025 AND NCI-IDD 2024

Share of the direct care workforce, by measure

Percentages from PHI Key Facts 2025 (2024 federal data) and the 2024 NCI-IDD State of the Workforce survey.

Measure	Share
Left agency within 12 months	63.7%
Rely on public assistance	49%
Annual DSP turnover	37.1%
Below 200% of poverty	36%
Below the poverty line	15%

$17.36

Median hourly wage

For direct care workers in 2024, with median annual earnings just under $26,000.

37.1%

Annual turnover

Weighted mean DSP turnover, ranging from 16.7% to 53.7% across states.

5.4 million

Workers nationally

Projected to add over 772,000 new jobs by 2034, the largest growth of any job sector in the country.

THE ARITHMETIC IN MY OWN KITCHEN

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She told me she was leaving because she had just been recertified for food assistance for the third year running and could not do it anymore. She loved my daughter. She was doing math, and the math was correct.

REPORTED BY A MICHIGAN PARENT.

THE TAKEAWAY

A state can hold the wage down. It cannot hold the cost down. It can only choose which budget line the cost appears on, and it keeps choosing the ones that are harder to see.

TURN THE PAGE

The two questions to ask your provider, and the numbers to carry into a hearing room.

Turning the number into leverage

FIGURES FIRST, THEN THE AFTERNOON

ASK

Two questions for your provider

- [ ] What do you pay direct support professionals?
- [ ] How long has our person worked here?
- [ ] Did you receive the most recent wage passthrough?
- [ ] What was your turnover last year?
- [ ] Ask by email so the answer is in writing

LOG

Document the gap

- [ ] Hours authorized in the plan of service
- [ ] Hours actually delivered, month by month
- [ ] Every unfilled shift, with the date
- [ ] What you paid out of pocket or lost in wages
- [ ] Any incident or ER visit tied to a missed shift

TESTIFY

Numbers to lead with

- [ ] Median wage $17.36, under $26,000 a year
- [ ] 49% rely on public assistance
- [ ] 36% below 200% of the federal poverty level
- [ ] Turnover 37.1%, with 63.7% leaving inside a year
- [ ] Then thirty seconds on one afternoon in your house

ESCALATE

When the service does not arrive

- [ ] Report a passthrough failure at a board meeting
- [ ] Name the amount and the period on the record
- [ ] Treat chronic undelivery as a denied service
- [ ] Request a written adverse action notice
- [ ] File for a Medicaid fair hearing with your log

BRING ONE PAGE, NOT A BINDER

The wage evidence sheet

01
Wage
$17.36 median, under $26,000 a year.

02
Hardship
49% on public assistance, 36% near poverty.

03
Churn
37.1% turnover, 63.7% gone inside a year.

04
You
One afternoon, described in ninety seconds.

YOUR MOVE

When you are told this is a labor market problem

1. **Name the wage**
$17.36 median, under $26,000 a year.

2. **Name the hardship**
Half the workforce is on public assistance.

3. **Name the churn**
Two thirds of leavers had under a year of tenure.

4. **Reject the word shortage**
People are available. They leave.

5. **Point at the rate**
The wage is a rate decision, renewed every year.

A job requiring medication administration, seizure response, de-escalation and personal care pays less than work asking less of the person doing it, in all fifty states.

SOURCES

PHI. Direct Care Workers in the United States: Key Facts 2025, using May 2024 federal data. Source of the 5.4 million workforce size, $17.36 median hourly wage, under $26,000 median annual earnings, 36% below 200% of the federal poverty level, roughly 15% in poverty, and 49% relying on public assistance.

PHI. Finding that direct care workers earn less than workers in occupations with similar or lower entry-level requirements in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

National Core Indicators IDD. 2024 State of the Workforce Survey Report, covering 3,936 provider agencies across 27 states and DC and 344,179 DSPs. Source of the 37.1% weighted mean turnover, the 16.7% to 53.7% state range, 63.7% of separations with under twelve months of tenure, the $18.39 median DSP wage, and the $18.00 median starting wage.

Direct Care Worker Wage Coalition, Michigan. Current Michigan direct care wage requirements and passthrough tracking, 2026.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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