

# They're some of Michigan's most vulnerable. The system supporting them is broken

The Detroit News



[Karen Bouffard](#)

[kbouffard@detroitnews.com](mailto:kbouffard@detroitnews.com)

Twitter: [@kbouffardDN](#)

It's the worst-case scenarios that keep Julia Rupp up at night.

As the executive director of HealthWest, the Community Mental Health Agency for Muskegon County, she oversees 59 specialized adult foster care homes that house 214 intellectually disabled adults.

As COVID-19 has periodically raged through long-term care facilities across the state, infecting staff and residents alike, there have been days when so few workers show up that office staff and administrators take on caregiving duties, Rupp said.

Specialized adult foster care homes house some of Michigan's most vulnerable people, residents with severe intellectual and physical disabilities that require constant care. Direct care workers help them with every necessity of daily living, such as spoon-feeding, cleaning feeding tubes, showering, dressing and attending to their toileting needs. Most are non-verbal and in wheelchairs.



"I think something very, very bad is going to happen — we're just going to all of a sudden find ourselves with no one to go in and work at these homes," said Rupp, when asked what worries her most.

Employees have worked double or even triple shifts. Relatives of residents have shown up to help. Some residents have been sent home for short stays with family until staffing improves. In some cases, homes have permanently shut down, Rupp said.

"We can't get workers to cover those shifts," Rupp said. "We had two homes close in December. ... So in an already stressed system, we're having to find places to put them. In the one place, those people had been living there for 20 years."

The shortage of direct care workers goes beyond Muskegon County and is a problem all over the state and nation, industry leaders said.

The state has been addressing the shortage of adult foster care workers by forming an advisory committee and hiring the Center for Health Care Strategies to do an economic analysis to address the needs of direct care workers, including pay, said Robert Wheaton, a spokesman for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

"This became even more of a priority during the pandemic as the shortage worsened," Wheaton said.

Direct care workers received a \$2.35-per-hour increase in pay in 2021 that was part of Michigan's COVID-19 recovery plan, Wheaton noted. Funding also was provided to facilities to pay for retention bonuses and other worker incentives. Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's budget plan that was released Wednesday includes continued funding into 2023 for the \$2.35-per-hour subsidy.

The Center for Health Care Strategies is producing a report with recommendations about the direct care worker shortage, Wheaton said.

## **How staffing crunch is felt**

Michigan's care homes historically have struggled to recruit workers for direct care positions. The jobs are mentally and physically taxing, and often pay little more than the minimum wage, industry leaders said.

Unlike certified nurse assistants, there is no pathway to certification or licensing for direct care workers, though they typically complete many hours of training required by their organizations. Industry leaders said many such workers have decades of experience and are highly skilled.

The pandemic has lent new urgency to calls for higher pay and improved status for direct-care workers because they face the same risks of catching COVID-19 as other health care staff. Their efforts, too, have at times been heroic, said Jill Bonthuis, CEO of Pioneer Resources, which runs six specialized adult foster care homes in Muskegon County.



"We have staff who have gotten COVID and haven't been able to return to work yet," said Bonthuis, who herself came down with COVID while caring for an infected patient and suffers long-term effects.

"They give of their hearts to them," said Bonthuis of some workers' commitment to their charges. "We have staff that have worked 12- to 24-hour shifts straight to make sure these individuals are cared for."

LaQuandra Robinson is a residential support staff supervisor at the Ruddiman Home, one of Pioneer Resources' specialized adult foster homes in Muskegon County. She supervises 13 staffers who care for the home's six residents.

"Ever since COVID started we've been dealing with staff who are afraid to come into work," said Robinson, adding she will celebrate her 23rd year in the direct-care workforce next week. "I had a lot of staff that was sick, that actually did catch COVID, so they're off, and it put us in a bind.

"People don't feel safe to come out and work," she added. "Just this last month, in January, I had a total of nine staff that ended up with COVID."

As a result, Robinson said she has "worked a lot of shifts." As a supervisor, she is on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"I have to fill in when I don't have enough staffing," she said.

The high absenteeism has put a strain on all of the employees, Robinson said, with some quitting. Some haven't returned to work because they still suffer from long-term symptoms of COVID, she said.

"I have some staff working like 60 hours in four days," Robinson said.

"They'll work a shift, and then they'll work a second shift, and then they'll maybe go home for a few hours and come right back, and do that same 16-hour shift again."

## **COVID vaccinations an issue**

COVID-19 outbreaks have been common in Michigan's adult foster care facilities in part due to low vaccination rates among workers, experts said.

All six residents at the Ruddiman home are vaccinated, according to Robinson. But she's the only staffer out of 14 who is fully vaccinated, she said, though two more recently told her they'd made appointments to get their first shots.

"We were hit so hard in this home, you'd think that'd change some minds," Robinson said. "But I don't think it changed nothing."

About 85% of residents are vaccinated statewide, but the percentage is much lower among direct care staff, said Robert Stein, general counsel with the Michigan Assisted Living Association. The association represents assisted living, adult foster care and similar facilities, other than nursing homes, which house about 42,000 residents.



"Our best estimate is that the vaccination rate among staff is between 40% to 60%, or substantially lower," Stein said. "There is a reluctance to be vaccinated."

Bonthuis in Muskegon said many direct care workers juggle jobs at more than one facility, a factor that has contributed to the spread of COVID-19.

"When COVID first started, we pulled back so that residents weren't leaving the homes, but COVID was still being brought into the homes by the staff," Bonthuis said.

Bonthuis noted her organization worked with county health officials to determine and obtain the appropriate level of personal protection equipment for direct care workers. They also offered incentives such as gift cards to encourage workers to be vaccinated.

But Bonthuis and others from the industry said they would not favor a vaccination requirement for direct-care workers.

On Dec. 28, the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services issued a new rule requiring COVID-19 vaccine immunization of staff among Medicare- and Medicaid-certified providers and suppliers. But it doesn't apply to adult foster care homes.

Institutions were given 90 days for their staff to be fully vaccinated, with some exemptions. Those not complying could potentially lose their enrollment in the federal health care insurance programs, though CMS said 90% compliance would be acceptable if the facility had a plan to reach 100% compliance.

Bonthuis noted it was initially unclear whether adult foster care homes were included.

"We were trying to determine where we fit in, and frankly, as a leader in this organization that petrified me — because at that time we had about 32% of our direct care professionals who worked in the residential homes who were vaccinated," Bonthuis explained.

"I was panicking through the thought of 'Am I going to have to call in support from the National Guard' because how else are we going to maintain these services if that vaccine mandate went through?"

## **Boosting pay for workers**

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services funnels the Medicaid money for specialized adult foster care homes through the state's 46 Community Mental Health Service Programs, which contract with local service agencies to provide and manage the homes.

Last year, the Legislature and Whitmer approved funding to increase the pay of direct-care workers by \$2.35 per hour, but the funding will expire at the end of this fiscal year on Sept. 30. Whitmer wants to continue the \$2.35-per-hour subsidy in the new budget year that starts on Oct. 1. Some Republican leaders said Wednesday they are concerned about continuing "hero pay" only to certain industries even though Michigan families also sacrificed during the pandemic.

The hourly pay increase was funded by Michigan's Medicaid program, with a total appropriation of \$414 million that included \$146 million from the state's general fund.

Stein, with the Michigan Assisted Living Association, said both short- and long-term solutions are needed to solve the workforce shortage crisis.

A \$1.2 billion COVID relief bill, which the Michigan Legislature has approved, would provide \$300 million for health care recruitment, protection and training, Stein said. Whitmer is expected to sign it into law.

"There's also \$70 million allocated to adult foster care facilities and homes for the aged for COVID-19 pandemic expenses," Stein said.

The funding would alleviate the worker crisis by providing items such as recruitment and retention bonuses for workers, or incentives for workers to be vaccinated, he said.

"It provides much-needed one-time financial relief to adult foster care homes and homes for the aged related to pandemic costs," Stein said.

For the long term, industry leaders hope to increase wages for direct-care workers to about \$18 an hour — a \$4 or 29% increase over the current average rate of \$14 an hour for direct care workers in the Community Mental Health system.

Assuming the current \$2.35-an-hour boost is continued, the increase would require an additional \$689 million in state-federal Medicaid funding, of which the state's share would be \$225 million, Stein said.

"That's roughly 80,000 staff working in approximately at least 1,500 homes," he said.

"This funding would be appropriated as part of the regular state budget, and go into the base funding for Community Mental Health," Stein added. "The idea would be that it would be funded through Medicaid as a permanent increase."

Most direct-care workers were making about \$11 per hour prior to the \$2.35 increase approved by lawmakers last year, said Bonthuis of Muskegon's Pioneer Resources.

Staff turnover among Pioneer Resources' direct care workers has been about 55% over the past year and a half, Bonthuis noted.

The board of directors a few months ago voted to raise the starting wage for their direct-care workers to \$15.50 per hour — the highest starting wage for direct care workers in the county at that time, and more than most direct-care workers make across the state.

"The state average is now \$14 an hour — you can go work at MacDonal'd's and not have to take care of someone's personal care, not have to walk into an environment where you know there are individual diagnosed with COVID," Bonthuis said.

## **'Respect these employees'**

On a day in January, six residents of the Mill Iron Home in Muskegon waited for their lunch.

Built like a large modern home, the residence has an open floor plan that allows residents to watch what's going on in the kitchen from the dining area, where they're parked around a large kitchen table in their wheelchairs.

The residents follow the staff around with their eyes, watching them busily chop, mix, measure and puree food to meet each of their individual needs and preferences.

One resident called out repeatedly with loud, unintelligible noises while she waited to be fed. Then a caregiver approached her; it was her turn to be fed, one spoonful at a time.

Most of the residents at the Mill Iron Home are non-verbal, but not 53-year-old Jeannie Shields. She loves butterflies, as one can see from her colorful T-shirt. She said she's lived here for four or five years.

Asked how she likes living here, Jeannie looks up at residential supervisor Tracy Kroll and resident support staff Africa Sydnor.

"Well, with Tracy and Africa and all of them, yeah, I like it," she said. "They are nice and kind."

In Bonthuis' view, what is needed to attract and retain more direct-care workers like these really comes down to respect.

"We have to respect these employees in these situations," she said.

"We have to professionalize this position, and we have to ensure that we can fund this service appropriately to make sure that employers can provide the wages that these employees deserve."