

Personal care attendants get new contract

By DAVID KIBBE
 Standard-Times staff writer

BOSTON—More than 25,000 personal care attendants who help elderly and disabled clients live independently in their homes are getting a raise and health benefits in their first labor contract with the state.

The contract, approved overwhelmingly through a mail ballot this week, boosts pay from \$10.84 to \$12.48 an hour over the next three years, grants paid time off based on hours worked, and provides health insurance benefits in the second year of the contract.

It's the first raise the MassHealth-funded PCAs have gotten since 2005.

The union estimated there are close to 2,500 PCAs in the SouthCoast region.

They perform a wide range of tasks for disabled or MassHealth-eligible clients, such as helping people shower and get from wheelchairs to beds.

They also help with tasks such as shopping, cleaning and food preparation.

The program allows PCAs to care for elderly and disabled

family members. Lizete Rosa, a PCA from Fall River, assists her 13-year-old grandson, who is disabled and needs full care.

"I thank God for this program of PCAs that can help people like this young boy, and other disabled people," Rosa said. "It's not an easy job, but it's good to have PCAs so he can be home with his family."

This year, the hourly wage for PCAs will go up to \$11.60 an hour, with pay retroactive to July 1.

It rises to \$12 the second year of the contract and \$12.48 in the third.

In November 2007, Massachusetts personal care attendants voted overwhelmingly to form a union with 1199 SEIU to bargain collectively with the state.

"When we started this journey, PCAs worked for no benefits whatsoever, including no health insurance, no sick days and no paid vacation," Mike Fadel, the executive vice president of 1199 SEIU, said in prepared remarks at the contract announcement Tuesday at a Brighton senior center.

Mr. Fadel said the contract meant that PCAs would have

fewer financial worries, and there would be more stability as people stay in the job, rather than leaving every year "due to the low wages and lack of benefits."

The PCAs took their case directly to Beacon Hill, lobbying at the Statehouse when negotiations appeared to bog down, and sending thousands of postcards to the governor's office.

Cathy Taylor, assistant director of the Cape Organization for the Rights of the Disabled, said having a stable PCA work force is crucial, because the demand is so high.

"This is going to be huge," she said. "Right now, it's so hard to keep PCAs because of their low wages and no days off, no holidays, and no vacation time. A lot of people want to do this work, but they just can't afford to."

She said she thought the new contract would help change that.

"This is really going to allow PCAs to work in the program without worrying so much about their own families and their health needs."

"This is going to be huge. Right now it's so hard to keep PCAs because of their low wages and no days off, no holidays, and no vacation time."

CATHY TAYLOR

