



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

John W. Mannion

NY group home staffing crisis forces woman into weekly 120-mile trip away from caregivers she loves

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Port Byron, NY -- Sherry Chayka doesn't say many words, but she's clearly comfortable at the Port Byron group home where she's lived for the past 42 years, her mother said.

Chayka's home is now shuttered on the weekends due to lack of group home staffing. The state sends Chayka, 59, on a nearly 120-mile journey back and forth each week to a home in Sherill, Oneida County, said her mother, Donna Krueger, of Auburn.

Recently, the state has tried to place her in a home in Liverpool. That has led Chayka to begin biting her arms, leaving teeth marks, Kreuger said.

"I hate it, I don't want her there," her 79-year-old mom said. "My back is against the wall."

Chayka's ordeal is similar to dozens of Central New York group home residents, whose lives have been upended by a staffing crisis that has left the state scrambling to fill 2,000 open positions.

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To help retain workers and recruit new ones, the state has committed \$1.2 billion to pay bonuses of up to \$3,000 for frontline health workers, including group home caregivers. There are also new training and recruitment efforts, including an effort to train new workers through Access CNY and Onondaga Community College.

“The system is really in a desperate place,” said state Senator John Mannion (D-Geddes), who chairs the Senate’s Committee on Disabilities.

Historically, wages for entry-level group home workers has hovered around minimum wage, Mannion said.

Recent changes have bumped state salaries to roughly \$18 an hour to start, he said. There have also been cost-of-living raises in the past three years ranging from 1% to 5.4% each year.

Group home workers still say that the stress and burnout of working in a challenging field has led them to leave for jobs in retail or fast food, which pay comparable rates, Mannion said.

“With the rising minimum wage, because the challenges are so great, (some workers) have had to make a decision to take their employment elsewhere,” Mannion said.

He’s advocating for additional payments to workers in the thousands of dollars per year range, as well as a \$5,000 tax credit for people working in the industry.

“It really comes from a lack of investment in the system over the course of a decade,” Mannion said. “We need individuals who are highly trained, caring and compassionate, and drawn into this type of work.”

In addition to state homes, non-profits also run 5,796 group homes for developmentally disabled people across the state. Of the non-profit group homes, 44 have shut down since March 2020, according to state figures. In Central New York, there are 277 non-profit group homes. Five have closed since the pandemic.

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In Port Byron, Chayka has a good relationship with her caregivers, whom Krueger calls “angels from God.”

But the house’s staff have been split among other Cayuga County homes on the weekends, leaving the Port Byron residents to be shuttled to other homes with a spare bed.