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News

## A push to raise pay for those who work with developmentally disabled



Direct support professional Rosalind Wakefield, left, works with client Simone Kilberts as she waters plants in the horticulture center at Little City in Palatine. DSPs like Wakefield say they love their work, but are facing challenges because of low pay and the state's plans to not give them a raise next year. *Joe Lewnard/jlewnard@dailyherald.com*

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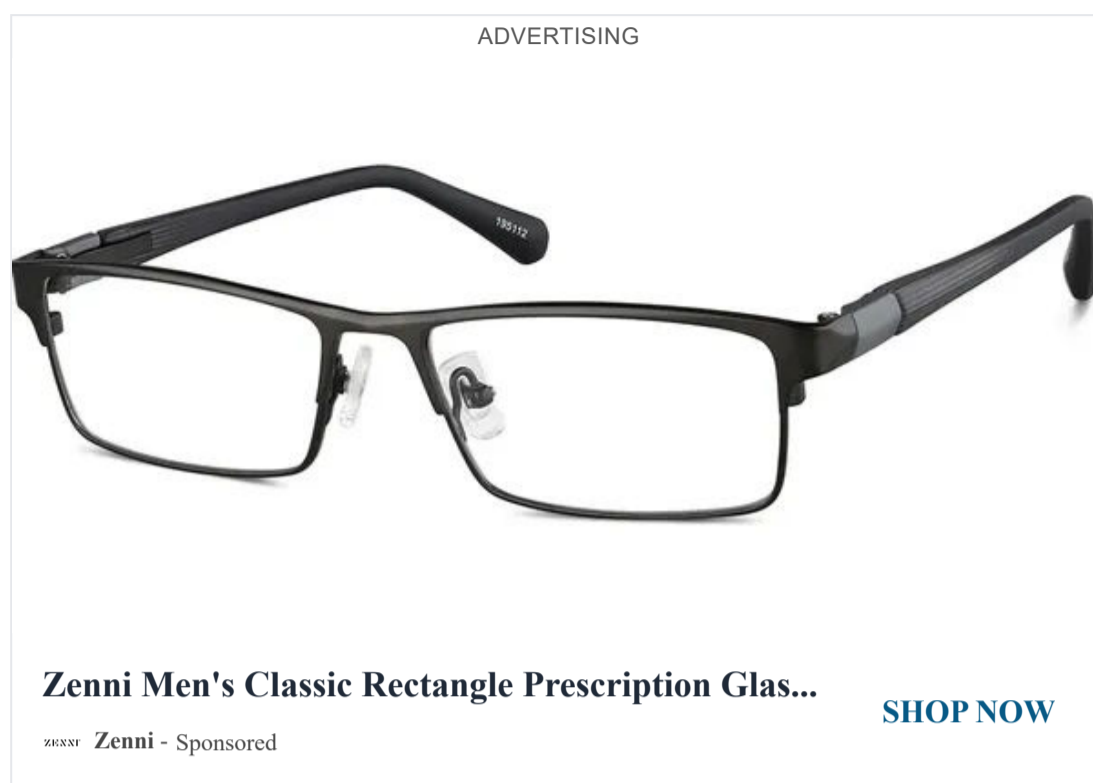
Steve Zalusky

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The inner rewards are rich for Rosalind Wakefield, who works as a direct support professional at Little City in Palatine, assisting people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities.



But with wages likened to fast-food workers and the likelihood of no raise next year, Wakefield and those like her are finding it increasingly difficult to get by doing the job they love.

Making ends meet can mean logging as many as 60 hours a week, she said.

“We still aren’t quite where we need to be,” the Itasca resident added. “It’s still hard to make a livable wage without overtime.”

The outlook is not likely to improve. The state, which pays for 90% of DSP wages, included a \$2.50 an hour raise for those workers in the budget year that ends June 30, but a raise is not planned in the 2025 budget.

Starting pay for a DSP at Little City is \$18.75 an hour. The state’s minimum wage is \$14 an hour and slated to go up to \$15 on Jan. 1.

DSPs provide a wide range of basic care to the intellectually and developmentally disabled, from daily tasks like grooming, housekeeping and preparing meals, to assisting in art classes and horticulture programs.

“They’re really the backbone of our organization,” said Little City CEO Rich Bobby, whose Palatine-based agency serves children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities from the suburbs and Chicago. “Without them, we would not exist.”



Karen Bieschke plants flowers in the horticulture center at Little City in Palatine. The agency provides services to people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Joe Lewnard/jlewnard@dailyherald.com*

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James Sitati, who has worked at Little City for 20 years, describes DSPs like himself as jacks-of-all-trades. His duties include waking up residents, getting them breakfast and medication, and taking them to daily enrichment activities.

“You’re a counselor. You’re a friend,” he said.

Wakefield has been a DSP for 29 years. Her duties include working in Little City’s horticulture center, where she helps residents nurture plants, some of which are sold at the facility’s annual plant sale, which began May 2.

“I love working directly with the individuals,” Wakefield said. “When I can work directly with them and see them change and grow and learn, it’s rewarding.”



John King fills planters in the horticulture center at Little City in Palatine. The agency provides programs and services to people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Joe Lewnard/jlewnard@dailyherald.com*

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Prospect Heights resident Colleen Getz knows firsthand the value of DSPs. Her autistic 22-year-old daughter, Katie Helmer, is a Little City resident.

“They help her take care of all her daily needs,” she said. “My daughter requires 24/7 supervision, and so they are able to keep her safe and also help her progress with being as independent as she can.”

Sitati said the \$2.50 raise this year has helped, but a raise next year also would mean less overtime and more time with his family. It would also help attract more people to the profession and ensure a higher quality of work, he added.

“On a good week, I work 85 to 90 hours. One of my biggest fears is falling asleep on my drive home,” said Sitati, who lives on Chicago’s North Side.

Jessica Smart, president and CEO of Arlington Heights-based Clearbrook, said DSPs are responsible for people with significant personal care needs. Someone may be in a wheelchair and need assistance with bathing. Another may need groceries and medications picked up or help with transportation to a job.

Clearbrook provides services to more than 8,000 children and adults impacted by intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Smart noted that many of the DSPs are heads of households.

“They work a lot of hours so they can support their families,” she said.

A 2020 study by Guidehouse Inc. for the Illinois Department of Human Services Division of Developmental Disabilities recommended that the average wage of a DSP be increased to at least 150% of minimum wage. For the 2024 fiscal year, DSP wages in Illinois are 139%, and that is likely to drop to 130% at the beginning of 2025 without a raise.

“They could work at McDonald’s and make just as much as a DSP,” Bobby said.

Bobby added there also are equity issues at play, since the majority of the DSP workforce consists of people of color and women.

Samantha Alloway, director of government relations for the Little City Foundation, said recruiting and retaining DSPs is a challenge “due to the fact that we can’t pay them what the job is worth.”

“We don’t have the staff to do the services that are needed to create fulfilling lives for individuals with (intellectual and developmental disabilities,)” she added.

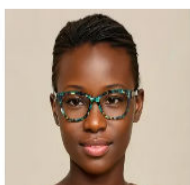
This year’s wage increase helped, Smart said, but any progress will be lost without a pay hike next year.

State legislation could provide a remedy. Two pending measures, [Senate Bill 3764](#) and [House Bill 4806](#), call for a \$3 an hour raise effective Jan. 1. That would bring pay up to the recommended 150% of minimum wage.

“Right now in Illinois we are far behind in what we should be paying our direct support professionals,” said state Rep. Nabeela Syed, a Democrat from Palatine and one of the sponsors of the House bill.

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