

**Q: Are we running out of people to take care of our elderly?**

A: Yes, the shortage of “long term care” workers is a growing problem in Massachusetts and around the nation.

According to the U.S. Census, the number of people in Massachusetts over the age of 65 is going to rise from 827,000 in 2005 to 965,000 by 2015. That’s a 17% increase in just a ten year span. Our state is not the only one facing the graying of the population, but we have the 11<sup>th</sup> highest percentages of people 85 and over - the very people who need in home assistance the most.

A new report from the federal government warns that by the middle of this century, America will need three times as many long term care workers as are employed today to meet the needs of the aging Baby Boom generation.

Today there are close to 2 million of these workers. They are visiting nurses, nurses aides, home health and personal care workers. By the year 2050, we are going to need as many as 6.5 million long term care workers. President George Bush’s highest ranking official in Human Services says “if we want to ensure quality of long term care for Baby Boomers, we need to act now to build the workforce and encourage creative ways to improve long term care – both in their own homes and communities, and in long term care institutions.” According to the Department of Labor report, the shortage of long term care workers “if left unaddressed, will affect all Americans in very personal ways.”

Closer to home, Governor Mitt Romney’s Administration has worried about how to recruit new home care workers. Yet workers in the profession have told state officials that they need to raise wages and improve working conditions in order to meet the challenge of a growing elderly population. Ironically, workers in nursing homes were the beneficiaries this year of a \$50 million wage package, while home health workers received no supplemental help. Some homemakers and home health aides make little more than a retail clerk selling bath towels. Many of these long term care workers lack health insurance, and are not able to work full-time hours.

The federal government says we are facing a critical worker shortage, and has put the call out to community based organizations “to see how they might increase the number of volunteers for family respite and caregiving.” The government wants to reach out to older workers, welfare recipients, military personnel transitioning to civilian life, and people with family caregiving experience. The federal report emphasizes supporting informal family caregivers with tax credits and respite care programs, and expanding the use of new technology to provide care in the home. But the core worker issues remain salaries, fringe benefits like health insurance, career ladders, and adequate hours. If these bread and butter issues are not addressed, many families are going to be asking themselves: “Where have all the workers gone?”

####