

Adult foster home care providers win first pact

Adult foster home care providers represented by Service Employees International Union Local 503 have negotiated a historic one-year agreement with the State of Oregon, becoming the first such workers in the U.S. to win a union contract, the union said.

The settlement, which comes after seven months of bargaining with the State Department of Administrative Services, covers about 2,000 professional providers who care for up to five clients as well as 1,500 individuals who care for relatives in the Medicaid-funded adult foster care program.

The program is intended to be both efficient and humane, offering a lower-cost and more personal alternative to institutional care.

The accord follows legislation signed by Gov. Ted Kulongoski in July 2007 recognizing the providers' right to for a union, executive orders by the governor certifying SEIU Local 503 as the bargaining agent for both groups of providers after majorities signed union recognition cards, and funding lawmakers approved during a special session in February 2008 to cover increases. Without the increases, some providers said they couldn't afford to stay in the program.

The tentative agreement provides for a \$260-per-client-per-month increase in service fees, plus a 2.1 percent cost-of-living increase retroactive to July 1, 2008. The union also won a new training program, a grievance procedure, and a provision for pre-placement planning, ensuring providers appropriate information before clients are placed in their homes.

Ratification voting will take place throughout the state later this month. The bargaining committee is recommending a "yes" vote.

"Since 2007, we have banded together as a union, speaking out with one voice for dignity — for ourselves and for our residents," the bargaining committee wrote to the providers. "Instead of facing decisions thrust upon us, now we can be decisionmakers. We are not alone now, but standing together, working together to improve standards of care for our residents and improve our own quality of life."

In March, New Jersey Gov. Jon Corzine followed Kulongoski's lead, signing an executive order recognizing a local of the Communication Workers of America as the union for adult foster home care providers. Negotiations are under way there.

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