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Partnering to Overcome Nonprofit Workforce Shortages

There is a mantra in the networks of the National Council of Nonprofits when applied to policy issues: **What's the problem? What're the solutions? Let's get them done!** Recent activities in **Illinois** prove that the mantra isn't unique to our networks; it's the way to advance nonprofit missions through advocacy.

On January 21, the Association of Community Mental Health Authorities of Illinois, **Forefront**, the state association of nonprofits in Illinois, and a coalition of health and human services providers [held a virtual advocacy event to share their experiences](#) during the pandemic as providers of direct services and called for long-overdue solutions to the challenges they have faced for years. The event featured seven frontline health and human services professionals working in the fields of behavioral health, domestic violence, care of older adults, community health, and child care. Coalition partners shared proposals for immediate solutions to the workforce crisis. Importantly, a legislative panel of seven state elected officials shared bills that have been or will be introduced this session to support the sector and communities served by providers.

Much of the focus was on the data presented in an [Illinois Partners for Human Service report](#) published in November 2021 highlighting factors affecting the health and human services workforce in the wake of the pandemic. Some key findings

showed that nearly 3 out of four (77%) human service employees are essential frontline workers; smaller organizations experienced more volatility than their larger counterparts; lack of applicants and lower wages were the most reported barriers to hiring. The report's [two-page summary](#) shows that the sector is "collectively experiencing increased workforce challenges with record levels of vacancies, turnover, and growing wage gaps, likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic."

Viewers of the event heard testimonials from frontline health and human service professionals representing community-based provider organizations. Lore Baker, President & CEO of the Association for Individuals Development, illustrated how the pandemic impacted the number of clients they can serve. This key data point stands out: for every person they hire, they lose two, and she described it as "truly a crisis across the social service system we have never seen before." Another community leader, Suzana Rosas, shared her testimony in Spanish on how she became a volunteer community health worker at Mano a Mano, a nonprofit that helped her family with medical debt due to a COVID-19 hospitalization and promotes health and wellness in Lake County. She believes that as volunteers, "we have been like heroes during the pandemic," explaining that she believes "that this type of work needs to be paid well so that we can dedicate ourselves full-time to the people in our community. The last speaker, Niya Kelly, Director of State Legislative Policy, Equity and Transformation at the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, stressed that the pandemic has stretched providers and staff to a point of exhaustion. For smaller organizations, she explained, their challenges are following the line of requirements, staying in compliance with agency directives on how to spend the funding, and ensuring that funds are spent in a way that meets the needs of their staff and clients – it is an additional burden on providers.

Several state elected officials shared bills that are being considered. In opening remarks, Senator Cristina Pacione-Zayas emphasized that "government should always be people-centered," and that "child care is literally the backbone of the economy." She expressed support for legislation that increases the wages of professionals in the early childhood space. Recognizing the challenges at the federal level around the faltering Build Back Better Act, Sen. Pacione-Zayas said that "as a state, we have the responsibility to do the work, we have to also exhibit the leadership," and shared other bills to support children and families through renter protection, child savings account, and expanding the earned income tax credit.

Senator Laura Fine gave an overview of a bill ([S.B. 3617](#)) that would remove barriers to care in the Medicaid mental health assessment and treatment planning process, accelerate the process for out-of-state professionals to apply for licensure as a clinical social worker, and make other changes aimed at creating a more diverse community behavioral health workforce. Representative Tom Demmer, a co-sponsor of the Rebuild Illinois Mental Health Workforce Act ([H.B. 4238](#)), noted he and his colleagues want to attract more qualified service providers to the state, which means establishing a “payment methodology” that supports the highest quality providers.

People-centered organizations that continued to operate through the pandemic are facing multiple crises that have left them with fewer resources to operate and provide services at higher rates. As this advocacy event demonstrates, there are opportunities for state legislators to hear from people on the frontlines, share solutions, and continue to lead the way on addressing the workforce shortages impacting nonprofits in their communities.