



## NEWS RELEASE

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### **“bFair2DirectCare” campaign comes to Niagara County**

#### **Minimum Wage bill must provide for workers who serve those with developmental disabilities**

**“We stand with Governor Cuomo. Now we need Governor Cuomo to stand with us.”**

**Town of Niagara** - Advocates for people with developmental disabilities came to Empower Children’s Academy in the Town of Niagara from across Niagara County today to urge Governor Cuomo and the New York State Legislature to **#bFair2DirectCare** in the drive to raise New York’s minimum wage.

Today’s news conference is part of the **#bFair2DirectCare** campaign to ensure that non-profit organizations that provide direct services to 128,000 New Yorkers with developmental disabilities – including autism, serious brain injury, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome – are not saddled with an unfunded mandate if the proposed minimum wage increase is enacted.

The not-for-profit agencies participating in the **#bFair2DirectCare** campaign provide direct care to people with developmental disabilities and are calling on the Governor and Legislature to include funding in the FY 2016-17 state budget to allow them to provide corresponding raises to their direct support employees numbering more than 100,000.

The campaign supports Governor Cuomo’s proposed minimum wage increase, but reminds him 90% percent of the funding for supports for people with developmental disabilities comes from government sources and they would need increased funding to avoid potential service reductions, layoffs and denial of services.

The campaign kicked off with a series of well-attended rallies held last Friday in Buffalo, Suffolk County, Rochester, and outside Governor Cuomo’s Manhattan office and Wednesday at the Capitol in Albany. Today’s rally brought together local agencies, direct care professionals, parents and people with developmental disabilities to make sure their voices are heard in Albany as state budget negotiations come to a conclusion.

**Jeff Paterson, Chief Executive Officer of Empower** said, “Today, we are shining a light on the implications of Governor Cuomo’s proposal to increase New York State’s Minimum Wage to \$15 per hour. All across New York State over the last two weeks, people have sent a loud and clear message to Governor Cuomo and state lawmakers: please provide the state funding to back up those increases for people who work with people with disabilities, the elderly—our most vulnerable.

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**Kellie Spsychalski, Executive Director/Chief Executive Officer of Opportunities Unlimited of Niagara, the Niagara County Chapter of NYSARC** said, “Niagara County service providers, Opportunities Unlimited of Niagara, Empower, and Rivershore, currently support 1,642 individuals with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. Together, we employ more than 750 dedicated, skilled, and extremely hardworking Direct Support Professionals. It is only fair that the people who are truly at the crux of providing the vital supports which allow people to live, learn, work, and play alongside their peers in the community be appropriately compensated for the critical work they do.”

**Jay Mapstone, Executive Director of Rivershore, an affiliate of People Inc.** said, “Direct support staff have one of the most important jobs in our community, yet Rivershore and other non-profit agencies have never been given the resources by NY State to pay them a salary commensurate with what they do. Now after many years of advocating for better pay for our workforce we may finally be on the verge of a significant increase to the state minimum wage. However, without a funding increase it won’t be possible for agencies to meet this standard leaving them with a choice to either lay off staff or go out of business, both of which are unacceptable.”

**Mariah Auriumma, Direct Support Professional, Rivershore** said, “We provide vital supports to and ensure the safety and well-being of people with intellectual and other developmental disabilities. It is often demanding and challenging work, both physically and emotionally. I support the \$15 minimum wage movement. But if the Governor and Legislature pass that wage without putting the dollars needed into the Medicaid funding, the nonprofits across the state will never be able to pay higher wages without sacrificing staffing and levels of care. The people who will be hurt most by unfunded mandates—are individuals we are working so hard to support.

**Tara Stufkosky, Preschool Teacher Aide at Empower** offered, “Special education preschool programs are not given enough funding. We’ve had only one small increase (2%) in the past six years. Some programs around the state have closed because they can’t afford to continue. Costs go up but funding stays frozen. Because the state has underfunded preschool programs like ours, employees have gone without raises. My entire paycheck now goes to health insurance, with nothing left over. It is time for New York State to recognize the great work of special education preschool staff – not just with words, but with action. They need to increase funding so workers can get a raise.”

**Michelle Nolan, Direct Support Professional, Opportunities Unlimited of Niagara,** said: “I have been providing direct care and support for more than 30 years! I love my job! There is a shortage of Direct Support Professionals across the state. It’s because many people are forced to leave jobs they love—leaving the people they care about behind—so they can take work with another field to make ends meet. We need the Governor and our legislature to understand—yes, increase the minimum wage. My coworkers deserve it. But make sure you are funding it, so that my employer—and others—can continue to fully support quality services for the people we care so much about.”

**Mike Rogers, a representative from the Self-Advocacy Association of NYS** said, “Without fair pay, direct support staff go away. Without good direct care I would not be able to function or even physically live in society, period.”

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**Lorraine Ciraolo, a mom from Niagara Falls** said, “I am the mother of a 56 year old man with severe mental retardation. Every day I wake up and thank God for the direct care staff who take care of my son 24/7! They chop his food into very fine pieces, administer his medications, help with bathing so he doesn’t fall and take him out in the community. These dedicated people strive to understand his limited speech and know when his aggressive behaviors are starting and help him through it. My son visits us weekly and is always happy to return to his group home, which tells us that he is receiving good care there! It is important to keep the same staff. Turnover in the staff is very hard on the individuals and their families. The Governor and the Legislature need to see the whole picture – the enormity of the staff and services needed for EACH person with a disability. I am rallying for the employees today! The Governor needs to make an iron clad and public commitment to funding living wages for the people in this field that care for our family members!”

**Wendy McCarthy of The Developmental Disability Alliance of Western New York** said, "Direct support professionals provide services essential for the health and safety of people with developmental disabilities. They are the backbone of our field. Providers must receive rate relief from New York State in order to be able to compensate them fairly for the *critically important job they do*,"

Today’s **#bFair2DirectCare** event was organized by local not-for-profit organizations serving people with developmental disabilities in the Niagara Frontier. Agencies attending today’s rally include: Empower, Rivershore, and Opportunities Unlimited of Niagara.

The **#bFair2DirectCare** campaign is asking Governor Cuomo and the NYS Legislature to take action in the state budget, specifically:

- Funding increases indexed to any minimum wage increase legislation
- For the sake of equity and fairness, funding increases for dedicated higher wage, but still low wage, workers. Providers already pay many employees above — but not far above — the minimum wage because of their added responsibilities and seniority. The jargon for this aspect of the issue is “compression.”

**#bFair2DirectCare** statewide supporters include:

- Alliance of Long Island Agencies (ALIA)
- Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State (CP of NYS)
- The Developmental Disability Alliance of Western New York (DDAWNY)
- The InterAgency Council of Developmental Disabilities Agencies (IAC)
- The NYS Association of Community Residential Agencies(NYSACRA)
- NYSARC Inc.
- New York State Rehabilitation Association (NYSRA)

Follow **#bFair2DirectCare** on Facebook, Twitter

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