

**Open Letter to Governor Richardson and New Mexico Legislators
from the New Mexico Direct Caregivers Coalition
January 26, 2010**

Dear Governor Richardson and New Mexico State Legislators:

Persons who are elderly and those with disabilities are among New Mexico's most vulnerable populations. The current state budget crisis mean that people who are elderly and/or disabled may soon lose one of the most important resources they have: the direct caregiver.

Continued support and education for caregivers is imperative for professionalizing the field of direct care. A home health aide worker in New Mexico earns approximately \$8.00 per hour, \$7.53 per hour less than that of an average New Mexico worker.¹ And, while average hourly wages for direct caregivers increased ten percent from \$6.62 (1999), these are wages at 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Level!

While we understand the fiscal crises have impacts for all workers, it is imperative that direct caregivers feel supported if they are to continue in the field of direct care.

In spite of budget constraints, we can act to support direct caregivers by *implementing recommendations of the House Memorial 37 Task Force report that cost little or nothing* and that will make better use of state funds for educating direct care workers.

The HM37 Task Force offered recommendations in October 2009 with knowledge of imminent budgetary problems throughout the nation and in New Mexico. Two of the recommendations that would go a long way toward supporting direct caregivers at little to no cost to state government included the following:

1. *“Conduct a crosswalk of skills and competencies among the Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs), Home Health Aides and Personal Assistants. We need to know the training requirements of the Federal Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) for the service provided, regardless of relationship to the individual who is receiving services...”*
2. *“Locate, document and correct program funding inefficiencies. Evaluating system efficiencies is the key to effectively funding a program of education and credentialing. We believe that duplication most likely exists within agencies providing education, training and credentialing for those serving persons who are elderly and those with disabilities. As a way of gaining greater efficiencies, additional research is needed on how those funds are distributed, spent and accounted for...”*

The New Mexico Direct Caregivers Coalition advocates for and seeks better wages for workers across all occupations of direct care. Though we will continue to advocate for better wages and job benefits, today we have an opportunity to implement educational policies that support and recognize those people who serve our state's most vulnerable citizens.

¹ May 2007 State Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates: New Mexico. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May, 2007. <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nm.

There is no doubt we will lose some of the best qualified direct care workers because of the current fiscal climate. However, acting to support workers today by recognizing their contributions and seeking to provide educational supports may lessen the impact of agency budget cuts and furloughs, and retain a few more committed workers in the field until the climate improves.

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The New Mexico Direct Caregivers Coalition was created to enhance and promote family and professional direct care workers, supporting their professional development and advancing issues of importance to the field of long-term and direct care. Program areas include career opportunities and advancement, better wages and job benefits, social and professional networking and advocacy for caregivers in New Mexico.

For more information about HM37 Task Force report, see <http://www.edworkforce.com/state-publications/hm37-final-report.pdf>.