

# Crain's

## State Expands Health Care Worker Bonus Program

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The state has expanded its Health Care and Mental Hygiene Worker Bonus Program, which gives up to \$3,000 bonuses to employees of qualified agencies that bill for services under Medicaid, the Department of Health announced Thursday.

This expansion comes after certain workers, including direct support professionals who work with disabled New Yorkers, protested their exclusion from the bonus program when it was launched in August, and Mount Sinai medical residents and fellows rotating at New York City Health + Hospitals/Elmhurst revealed they did not receive bonuses.

Now workers will be eligible for the bonuses who are employed at Department of Health-funded Health Homes—groups of health care providers who work with Medicaid patients—and permanent supportive housing agencies; Office of Mental Health psychiatric centers; Office for Addiction Supports and Services addiction treatment centers; and residential programs operated or certified by the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, OASAS, OMH, Medicaid Assisted Living Programs and Hospice Residences. These offices' workers, whom the program designates as "health care support workers," must support patient-facing care that's provided within the patient care unit of a hospital or institutional medical setting in order to get their bonuses.

Specific worker titles that are newly eligible to receive bonuses include health home care managers, who are considered front-line health care workers, and security guards and peace officers in residential settings.

This expansion was made possible by unspecified changes to the budget for the program, which the state Health Department reports were reviewed and approved by the state's budget director.

According to the state, there will be a designated submission period during which employers involved in the expansion can submit claims for their newly eligible workers. It will begin in December—the exact date will be announced—and run for 30 days, during which employers must submit their workers for vesting periods one and two, which includes Oct. 1-March 31, 2021, and April 1-Sept. 30 of this year. If employers submit claims before December, the system will deny or reject them, the Health Department said.

After the 30-day submission period, bonuses for newly qualified employers and employees will follow the same vesting schedule as the rest of the agencies in the program.

New York's fiscal 2023 budget includes \$1.2 billion allocated toward the health care worker bonus program, which started during the summer in an effort to compensate workers who have experienced the perils of working in the sector throughout the pandemic and incentivize them to stay in health care.

To be eligible, workers must make less than \$125,000 per year and remain in their positions for at least six months. The amount of money that workers can get is commensurate with the number of hours they work within vesting periods. It maxes out at \$3,000 per person.

The inclusion of certain types of health care workers—and not others—in the bonus program has been the subject of controversy among the workforce. On Sept. 29, Mount Sinai residents and fellows rotating at New York City Health + Hospitals/Elmhurst delivered a petition to the school saying that they had been

excluded from the bonuses because the school classified them as part of the education sector, not the health care sector. The residents and fellows also said that Mount Sinai residents rotating at the health system's Manhattan hospitals did not have an issue getting their bonuses.

Medical residents and fellows are included in the group of job titles eligible for bonuses. Beyond those jobs and the worker titles included in the expansion, health care titles eligible for the bonuses include case managers, certified first responders, many kinds of mental health workers, nurses, physician assistants, people who support health care facilities in janitorial or food prep roles, dietitians and dental assistants.

This expansion of the program comes at a time when New York's direct support workforce—those who directly care for people with disabilities and elderly New Yorkers, among others—is nearing “the brink of collapse,” experts say, because these employees are chronically underpaid.

The direct support workforce is not New York's only section of health care workers dealing with pay and retention challenges. In the wake of the pandemic, nurses struggling with burnout, fleeting work-life balance and mandatory overtime requirements have left the sector. Hospitals have turned to nursing agencies to make sure wards are correctly staffed, driving up costs (although the state in October did introduce pay increases for nurses working at 15 state agencies).

The Home Care Association of New York State estimates that the state will need to fill more than a million long-term-care jobs by 2029.

Representatives from the state Department of Health, the Office of Mental Health, the Office for Addiction Supports and Services and the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities referred Crain's to the Health Department website for information on the bonus program.

The Health Care and Mental Hygiene Worker Bonus Program is open to qualified employers who bill for services under the Medicaid state plan or home- and community-based services waiver, which allows Medicaid to cover services it normally wouldn't, such as residential placement.

Qualified employers include those that have a provider agreement to bill for Medicaid services through a managed care organization and educational institutions or other funded programs, such as facilities or pharmacies licensed by the state Public Health Law, Mental Hygiene Law and Education Law.