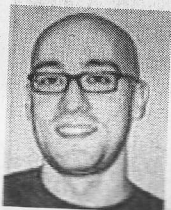


TENNESSEE VOICES

Let's pay home-care providers fairly

By Matthew Ozga

Home care is a civil right. That was one of the messages of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which turns 22 this month. Under the ADA, people with disabilities have the right to receive assistance in their own homes and communities instead of an institution or nursing home.



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Here in Tennessee, people with disabilities rely on home care aides every day to exercise their right to live where they choose. These aides assist with bathing, getting dressed, using the bathroom, meal preparation, and more.

Home care aides do important, difficult, and often danger-

ous work. It's a job that should be treated with respect.

Yet the federal Fair Labor Standards Act defines home care workers as mere "companions" to the people they assist. Never mind that they provide a majority of the hands-on care to elders and people with disabilities: Under federal law, they're regarded as casual baby sitters.

Consequently, home care workers are excluded from basic wage protections. Their employers can legally pay them less than the minimum wage and not pay time-and-a-half for overtime.

In Tennessee, the median wage for home care workers is less than \$9.50 — less than \$20,000 per year for full-time work, which is rare in this occupation. Moreover, adjusting for inflation, home health aides' wages have declined in Tennessee since 1999. Nationally, nearly

half of home care workers use public assistance to make ends meet.

Building a stable workforce of qualified home health aides is difficult when wages are so low. Predictably, the home care industry is marred by sky-high turnover rates. With demand for personal care aides and home health aides expected to grow by 35 percent and 59 percent, respectively, by 2018, it's never been more urgent to make home care an attractive employment option for Tennesseans.

That's why President Barack Obama has proposed to amend the FLSA provision that excludes home care workers from basic wage protections. But this common-sense proposal has been met with resistance.

Sixteen senators — including both Tennessee senators — have already signed a bill that would continue to block home care

workers from minimum-wage and overtime-pay protections. And trade associations representing the \$84 billion home care industry claim that they can't afford to pay workers more without passing costs to consumers.

But a U.S. Labor Department analysis found the compliance costs associated with the administration's proposal amount to less than 1 percent of the industry's annual revenue. By reducing high turnover rates, the proposal would save the industry money in the long run.

If we truly respect the civil rights of people with disabilities, we must ensure that those who assist them earn a fair wage. Home care workers can't wait any longer.

Matthew Ozga is a local resident who works for PHI (<http://www.phination-al.org>), a national nonprofit that supports quality jobs for direct-care workers.