

# NY must invest in human service providers, who are mostly women (Commentary)

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"With a human services industry predominantly composed of women, investment into the infrastructure of these organizations is imperative in order to spur economic mobility and development not only for the women the communities serve, but for the women the organizations employ," writes Loretta Zolkowski on behalf of the Human Services Leadership Council of Central New York. *(Zhenikeyev)*

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By [Special to syracuse.com](https://www.specialtosyracuse.com)

*Loretta Zolkowski is executive director the Human Services Leadership Council of Central New York. She writes on behalf of the coalition's 65 nonprofit agencies.*

**By Loretta Zolkowski | Special to Syracuse.com**

March is National Women's History Month. It's a time to recognize the important contributions women are making in our communities.

Yet here in New York state, women continue to experience economic disadvantages. In Syracuse, 34.8 percent of citizens live in poverty, more than double the national rate of 14.7 percent. In 2015, the most recent year for which data is available, the two largest categories of people living in poverty were women 18 to 24, at 11.9 percent, and women 25 to 34, at 9.4 percent.

One of the most direct ways Gov. Andrew Cuomo and state Legislature can improve the lives of women is by making sufficient investments in the human services sector. Not only do nonprofit human services agencies help address poverty through their programming, but they also employ significant numbers of women in strong, middle-class jobs. Within the human services industry in New York state, 81 percent of the workforce are women and 41 percent of workers are people of color. This sector provides vital services to our state including homeless services, mental health care and elder assistance.

#### ADVERTISING

During Women's History Month, the Human Services Leader Council of Central New York (HSLC)-- a coalition of 65 local nonprofit human service agencies -- is calling on our elected officials to support women by supporting the human services sector which employs and serves hundreds of thousands of women statewide.

Most importantly, women in the human services sector deserve to be paid fairly for their work.

The \$15 minimum wage increase, while much needed for workers, has left the human services industry behind as state government contracts still have not compensated for the raise. This means nonprofits are forced to fill the gap with funding allocated for programming, infrastructure, extra personnel and health benefits making many nonprofits on the verge of insolvency.

Last year, a \$55 million investment to direct care workers helped part of the sector. However, this has left many other direct service providers well below the basic cost of living. This affects employee retention, recruitment, and the impact our organizations have on our communities.

The HSLC, in coordination with the coalition Strong Nonprofits for a Better New York, is advocating for two solutions for these issues. First, to allocate \$23 million in the fiscal year 2019 budget to offset the minimum wage increase. Second, to allocate \$65 million in the same budget for the equivalent of a 3.25 percent salary adjustment for employees not covered under the funds for direct care workers.

But that's not all. With a human services industry predominantly composed of women, investment into the infrastructure of these organizations is imperative in order to spur

economic mobility and development not only for the women the communities serve, but for the women the organizations employ.

Better infrastructure will result in expanded services, better technology and improvements to facilities. These results will help the community with the services provided, as well as spur economic activity in cities and towns as local workers are hired to execute these improvements.

The Nonprofit Infrastructure Capital Investment Program (NICIP) was created in 2015 in order to meet the needs described above. With \$120 million non-recurring grant funds allotted since 2015, 635 organizations applied for over \$300 million in funding. Only 37 percent of these organizations received NICIP funding. That's why we're calling on our elected officials to provide \$100 million in funding in the upcoming fiscal year to combat this discrepancy.

Cuomo has already indicated he's ready to lead on women's issues, putting out a 2018 Women's Agenda and a report on the Status of New York Women and Girls. Now, it's time for Governor Cuomo and the legislature to show real leadership to address these issues of gender equity in the nonprofit human services sector.