

## County backs raises for home-care workers

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Many home caregivers who aid 1,450 elderly and disabled residents are in line for a pay raise as a result of a proposed revision to Marin County's "living wage" law.

The county Board of Supervisors has tentatively endorsed a proposal that would remove the law's two-tier process and give roughly 1,000 part-time workers a raise, lifting their hourly rate to \$11.55 per hour in 2009.

Those workers now have a base hourly wage of \$11.30, which is already scheduled to be increased to \$11.50 in January. Bringing that pay in line with the "living wage" law would raise it to \$11.55, a nickel-per-hour increase that will cost the county \$40,000 to \$50,000 per year.

"I feel very strongly that there can't really be a living wage, unless there's a single tier," Supervisor Steve Kinsey said last week. "They are both a vulnerable workforce and they serve a vulnerable clientele."

But supervisors also gave their initial OK to a policy that would suspend the law's provision for an automatic annual increase, enabling the county to put an annual lid on those pay rates due to budget cuts.

County supervisors recently cut more than 20 vacant positions in an austerity move. The state budget crisis is laying a foundation for more cuts, warned county Administrator Matthew Hymel.

Supervisors will decide whether to give an annual cost-of-living increase during their budget hearings in July.

Hymel said the county's cost for caregivers is going up about 5 percent to 10 percent per year, a reflection of Marin's aging population. A 3.5 percent cost-of-living increase, for example, could cost the county \$400,000

to \$500,000, Hymel noted.

Evelyn Schaaf of Fairfax, who with her late husband, Val, helped convince the county to adopt a "living wage" law, argued against suspending the annual increase, especially for caregivers.

"We can't afford to be frugal with human lives," she said. "I don't think the county can say, 'This is where we can cut first.'"

In recent months, advocates - local religious and political leaders and workers themselves - have lobbied supervisors, urging the county to raise the "living wage" for caregivers. They have argued that better pay improves recruitment and retention of workers, whom Supervisor Judy Arnold said "do the work of angels."

The county's "living wage" law was passed in 2002 as a measure to help workers employed by contract with the county.

The county in 2006 created a second tier for county-contracted caregivers, whose salaries are mostly paid for by state funds.

The county's second tier did not apply to those caregivers - roughly 1,000 workers - working part-time and not eligible for benefits.

By getting rid of the second tier, those workers would not be exempted from the law, which dictates a pay rate of \$11.55 per hour for workers without benefits.

Marin's "living wage" is low compared with two other Northern California counties that have a similar law. The "living wage" for workers without benefits is \$13.80 in Santa Cruz and \$13.03 in San Francisco. The living wage for Los Angeles County is \$11.84.

Marin's is higher than Ventura County's, which is \$11.