

## Senate vote upholds rights of working families

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After 11 committees and a record-setting 17-hour debate on the Senate floor last week, home care workers are celebrating a win after the Senate voted 35 – 32 to pass a bill that would extend collective bargaining rights to workers in self-directed public home care programs.

“I am so excited to see the Senate pass such an important bill to my family and me,” said Darleen Henry, a 23-year-old home care worker from Rosemount who cares for her mom. “Republicans stalled all night, but I’m happy the Senate ultimately granted me the same rights enjoyed by other workers to simply choose whether or not we want to join together in a union.”

Ziggy Norberg and his mom, Karen Urman, joined Henry in celebration. Norberg was born with Spina Bifida. At 19, he now attends community college and is a leader in his community, something he says is possible because of his mom, who works for him as his PCA (personal care attendant).

“I am so fortunate to have my mom, because there are fewer and fewer people entering this field due to low wages and a lack of benefits,” said Norberg. “My mom shouldn’t have to struggle to get by because she is a home care worker. It would be nice if along with the hard, round-the-clock work of being a home care worker, my mom could enjoy the benefits and fair wages of a real career.”

Urman assists Norberg with daily tasks that allow him to live independently, rather than in a group home or other institution. The mother-son duo have been a constant presence in the Capitol since February, when lawmakers introduced a bill that would grant collective bargaining rights to self-directed home care workers in public programs. Unlike workers employed by agencies, these workers employed directly by their clients do not currently have the right to join a union under state law, even though the state provides the funding and sets reimbursement rates that determine the workers’ wages. If passed, the bill would allow the workers to call for an election to decide if they would like to join together to collectively bargain with the state for better wages, benefits and standards.

“This bill will strengthen the self-direction model that is so vital to these programs,” said Norberg. “It will also make sure that we can attract the best people to the profession. Home care workers like my Mom should have the same rights as others to join a union and have a voice in their career. Their work saves the state and taxpayers millions each year – without these workers, the state would have to foot the bill for thousands of people entering nursing homes and institutions.”

Urman, Norberg and Henry were among the sea of purple that awaited the Senate vote which began Tuesday afternoon. By morning, purple still dotted the seats of the gallery.

If passed, the bill would allow Minnesota to follow in footsteps of several other states which have passed similar legislation. Those states have seen a reduction in worker turnover and a stabilization of the workforce. Workers and participants there have also seen an increased access to services, better wages and benefits, the creation of registry and referral services, greater access to training and a voice on the job.

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“We just want the same rights as other workers,” said Urman. “Nurses and teachers have the right to form a union. The work we do isn’t more important, but it certainly isn’t less important. We should have the same right to choose for ourselves if we want to join together in a union.”

The bill would extend organizing rights to roughly 12,000 self-directed home care workers in Minnesota.

“When the day finally comes that I might need to find someone else, I want to rest assured that I will be able to find someone who takes the job seriously like my mom does,” said Norberg.

The House is expected to take up the Senate version of the bill later this week. The Governor is expected to sign the bill as well.