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Angry care workers demand wage increases Some staff 'have to go to food bank'

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Mounting frustration drove more than 400 care workers to descend on McDougall Centre on Thursday and demand a 20 per cent, across the board raise for those working with developmentally disabled clients.

Dubbed the "Double-Double our wages rally," a play on how Tim Hortons pays better than many agency jobs, protesters turned out with picket signs and boxes of Kraft Dinner used as rattles to demonstrate the meager rations they say many are forced to live on.

"Workers are saying enough is enough, pay us or we're leaving," said Ryan Geake, executive director of the Calgary Scope Society, which helped organize the rally. "We have a 50 per cent turnover rate in the city right now."

A choir sang a song outlining the workers' grievances.

"Many of our workers have to go to the food bank," said Geake. "I had a woman, a full-time worker who just qualified for a house from Habitat For Humanity."

Last week, the province announced a \$15-million bump for agencies that work with the developmentally disabled, to be used for staff retention.

Geake said it worked out to about a 30- to 40-cent raise for front-line workers.

Many workers start as low as \$11 an hour and top out around \$15. The low wages have led to dramatic declines in enrolment numbers at schools that train workers for the industry. Some programs in the province have shut down due to lack of demand.

"I'm a student at Mount Royal College and we won't be able to pay off our student loans," Montana Hancocks, a co-ordinator at Scope, told the crowd. "We want to be paid fairly for what we've gone to school to learn."

The province funds 120 organizations to provide community support for about 9,100 Albertans with developmental disabilities.

Janice Schroeder, spokeswoman for the Seniors and Community Supports, said it has increased funding over the past eight years and now has a budget of over \$500 million for the persons with developmental disabilities program.

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