

Home-based caregivers to vote on unionizing

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[BY MAURA POSSLEY](#)

Families across the Southland are waiting for the counting to begin in a vote to unionize workers in a state program that funds the care of disabled residents.

More than 3,000 people statewide mailed in their ballots this month. Their options were to join the Service Employees International Union, join the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees or opt for no union representation at all.

The vote came after Gov. Pat Quinn signed an executive order this summer making way for organizing this group of workers.

Unions since have canvassed the state in an organizing campaign, creating a contentious debate in the home-based support services program, which earlier this summer was fighting for its survival against the budget ax in Springfield.

These workers care for the developmentally disabled who otherwise would need institutional care; the majority of these caregivers are family members.

"The voiceless need a voice," said Jonathan Labe, spokesman for SEIU Local 73, which the workers would join if unionized under the organization. "That's the main argument for these providers banding together in a bargaining unit is to have a greater voice in Springfield."

Orland Park mother Stathia Xanos disagrees. Union representatives visited her family's home at least twice and followed up with telephone calls, saying they can bring better wages and benefits.

"I said, 'We're not interested,' " she said. "We don't need all those supports. We have our own insurance and everything."

A union wouldn't help the care she gives to her son Nicholas, who is disabled with Down syndrome and cerebral palsy, Xanos said. In fact, she believes it

would cost her money because her pay under the program now is capped and she'd have to pay union dues.

"I'm afraid they're going to railroad us through, and we'll be out \$600 for no reason," she said, referring to the amount she heard union dues would set her back.

But the unions say dues would at most cost \$300 annually.

And though state law sets caps on funding for families at three times the current Social Security allotment, both the SEIU and AFSCME say a union would mean a chance to increase funding and thus better the lives of the disabled who are cared for.

"There's nothing that prohibits the state from increasing rates," said Tracey Abman, organizing director for AFSCME Council 31, its statewide union. "It can be changed, and it can be improved."

The vote to unionize will be counted Monday at the American Arbitration Association's Chicago office.

"These workers are generally not making high wages, and many are not covered by health insurance," a statement from the governor's office said. "However, workers should not be pressured into any decision, and whether they decide to organize is totally up to them."