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Massachusetts comp bill would assist lowest-paid workers

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A Massachusetts bill that would improve access to medical care and increase benefits for injured workers in the state has been heard by the state's Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development.

S.B. 976, filed on Jan. 16, by Democratic Sen. James B. Eldridge, would change how average weekly wages are determined and require payers to cover the cost of interpreters, transportation and other necessary services. During the hearing Tuesday, advocates said the bill could significantly help injured workers who earn less than minimum wage, according to media reports. In determining a worker's average weekly wage, "all available evidence of the employee's paid wages, wages earned and required to be paid even if not actually received by the employee, and hours worked shall be considered," according to the bill. In other words, if an injured worker earns less than the amount required under local, state or federal law, that worker's average weekly wages would be determined using wages that are in compliance with the law, the bill states. S.B. 976 would also require payers to cover the cost of a qualified interpreter if an injured worker's primary language isn't English. "The insurer further shall furnish the services necessarily incidental to the adequate and reasonable health care services provided to an injured employee," including transportation, so workers can "obtain effective and timely health care services," according to the bill. For some employees, workers comp "is their only lifeline," Brian Flynn, senior staff attorney at Greater Boston Legal Services, said during the hearing, according to media reports. "The hearing provided a valuable opportunity to listen to various perspectives on the need for continued investment in workers compensation benefits," Sen. Eldridge said Wednesday in an email. "I look forward to the next steps for the bill in the committee process."