



## Lawsuit challenges lack of benefits for adjunct professors

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After 20 years, Cynthia Duda has had it with her employer who refuses to pay health insurance.

Unfortunately for the 61-year-old Salem resident, her paychecks come from the state.

"I'm tired of being exploited by the state and gouged by insurance companies," she said.

Duda, who teaches at two community colleges, is one of five adjunct professors, along with the Massachusetts Teachers Association and the Massachusetts Community College Council, suing the state for benefits last week in Suffolk Superior Court.

The lawsuit claims the state unfairly denies adjunct professors benefits even though their combined workload is comparable to their full-time counterparts'.

"We are taking legal action to right a wrong that has been overlooked for too long and get some much-needed relief for these faculty members," MTA President Anne Wass said in a statement. "This lawsuit is about investing in public higher education."

The state's Commissioner of Higher Education, Richard Freeland, said in a statement he recognized the importance of adjunct faculty and the great service they provide in helping to educate students, especially with expanding enrollments at the state's public campuses.

"I also recognize their need, shared by all residents of the commonwealth, for affordable health insurance, but I am not in a position to comment further on the legal merits of the suit," he said.

Wayne Burton, president of North Shore Community College, said he understands the adjunct professors' stance in the lawsuit, but the decision lies with the state. Burton said the case points out how community colleges have come to rely on the adjunct teachers.

"How to deal with that is way above my level," he said. "I certainly understand the feeling behind it."

Burton said North Shore has about 300 adjunct professors and 140 full-timers, a ratio he said was among the highest in the state.

An English professor, Duda typically teaches six courses each semester between North Shore and Bunker Hill community colleges. She also works summers to make ends meet.

"I love what I do. I think I do it well," she said. "At 61, I'm not going to be cranking up a new career. I have 20 years' experience at the community college level. It's rewarding and very fulfilling."

-The older she gets the more costly her insurance. The professor pays \$638 a month for health insurance through the state's Health Connector program. Duda had to downgrade because her former \$910 monthly insurance fee was just too much.

"I'm sorry I had to leave that plan," she said. "It was fabulous, but I couldn't go on."

In contrast, a full-time professor covered under her current plan pays \$84.46 per month and the state chips in \$422.31, she said. Duda can hardly wait to be eligible for federally subsidized Medicare.

"I'm paying so much more with so much less ability to pay," she said. "It's completely crazy."

Duda said her gripe is not with the individual community colleges but with the state, which allows them to rely heavily on part-time professors to cover course loads.

"We are financially indispensable to these schools," she said. "On the other side, what is the human cost?"

A formula determines a full-time course load, but generally it translates to about 30 credits a year, Duda said.

She typically teaches between 45 and 48 credits, including summers, but unlike full-time faculty she is not required to hold formal office hours or provide services like student advising.

Many nonteaching, part-time staff at state colleges receive benefits, yet part-time instructors somehow are treated differently, Duda said.

This semester, she's teaching six courses, one of which is online. As a writing instructor, Duda said she line edits every one of her students' papers.

She bristles at critics who suggest that she and fellow adjunct professors feel entitled.

"The time I spend in the classroom is the tip of the iceberg," she said. "It's all the time to assign the papers. It's all the prep time between semesters. I'm not paid for that but can't go into the classroom without being prepared."

Though she's tried since 2001 to make her case before the Legislature, Duda said her cause has simply been "off the radar."

"We just are invisible," she said.

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