

Long-Term Care Workforce Issues: Principles For Advocacy To Assure Quality Dementia Care Across Settings

Preamble

The single most important determinant of quality dementia care across all care settings is direct care staff.

Research validates that there is a positive relationship between staffing levels and the quality of care in nursing homes. Despite the importance of staff, we are faced with a nationwide workforce shortage that applies across settings. Residential care settings (i.e. retirement communities, board and care, assisted living and skilled nursing facilities) and home health agencies are not only finding it difficult to recruit workers, but the annual turnover rate is estimated at 96 percent in some areas. To assure quality care for persons with Alzheimer's disease, providers should hire and maintain sufficient numbers of staff that are well trained in dementia care.

Workforce issues continue to be a two-pronged priority for state advocacy; to draw attention to workforce issues and to offer policy solutions. The Alzheimer's Association supports the following principles to guide workforce policy development:

Staffing levels should be adequate to allow for proper care at all times - day and night.

Staffing levels should be based on numbers of direct care staff only, and levels will need to be adjusted based on changing needs throughout the course of the disease. Sufficient staff also ensures that staff members will not be overworked during their shift.

Staff should be sufficiently trained in all aspects of care, including dementia care.

- With nearly half of all nursing home residents having some form of dementia, it is imperative that staff understand the symptoms and behaviors associated with the disease in order to properly understand the person for whom they are caring. It is also necessary that staff receive the proper tools to respond appropriately to the needs of individuals with dementia. With approximately 75 percent of persons with dementia living in the home, it is also important that home health workers receive proper dementia training.
- Staff should receive training to facilitate increased understanding of the cultural values of the client population.
- Staff should be appropriately trained in reporting elder abuse and neglect.

Staff should be adequately compensated for their valuable work.

Adequate wages are a vital link to staff recruitment, retention, morale, and quality care. States can implement wage pass through legislation that increases Medicaid reimbursement for staff in nursing homes and other settings for which Medicaid payment is available. Residential care settings and home health agencies are encouraged to increase wages. In addition to low wages, some positions do not offer benefits - staff should be offered affordable health insurance and other benefits. Benefits can also be creative - transportation to and from work, day care services or reimbursement for these can be offered.

Staff should work in a supportive atmosphere that appreciates their contributions to overall quality care. Improved working environments will result in reduced turnover in all care settings.

- Staff should be recognized as key members of the care team and therefore involved in the development of care plans.
- Staff should be able to participate in peer support networks with other direct care workers.
- Supervisory staff must have adequate training and skills to oversee direct care staff.

- A positive relationship between staff and their supervisor is essential, and should include training, support and feedback.
- Mentoring relationships should be available to all staff upon hiring and throughout their career.
- The well-being and safety of staff must be accounted for at all times.
- The cultural values of staff should be respected, and the work atmosphere should demonstrate sensitivity to cultural diversity.

Staff should have the opportunity for career growth.

Residential care settings and home health agencies are encouraged to incorporate career ladders that will result in improved staff morale and retention. This should include recognition and enhanced compensation for staff who demonstrate proficiency in dementia care. For example, collaboration with community colleges could provide for the career development of staff.

All direct care staff should be appropriately licensed and/or certified in all settings.

Criminal background checks are recommended for all staff working with the elderly, and the abuse registry should be checked when applicable.

This procedure can provide peace of mind to families with a loved one in a residential care setting and particularly for those bringing a home health worker into their home.

Staff should work with families in both residential care settings and home health agencies.

Families must be involved in and informed of the care plan. To accomplish this, staff should be given opportunities to develop skills in working with families.

States are encouraged to take a leadership role in improving the workforce situation by drawing attention to the issue.

States can implement education campaigns, study the issue, facilitate workshops that promote supportive working atmospheres, and provide awards to direct care workers. Governors could recognize direct care workers that have provided excellent care to both acknowledge good work and illuminate the issue statewide.