

Direct Care Workers

Reinforcing the Numbers, Reinforcing Commitment

Jerry Cooper

One of the most daunting issues facing the assisted living industry, as with all forms of healthcare, is the ability to hire and retain direct care workers. At the same time that the need for these workers is increasing, the available workforce is shrinking and becoming increasingly competitive. In North Carolina, projections indicate that by the year 2025 there will be more than two million people over the age of 65. This statistic is alarming and only recently have policy makers given significant thought to the implication of this demographic shift.

As employers of direct care workers we can no longer focus only on career caregivers; we must direct attention to other more creative sources for our employees. Students wishing to work part-time, retired folks, and others wanting only part-time work are an invaluable resource. Persons with life experience and compassion can be taught the necessary job-related tasks. Compassion and the desire to work with this population are the most important traits a prospective employee brings to the work place. This direct care workforce is engaged in physically and emotionally demanding work, yet it is among the lowest paid. Reimbursement to providers limits the ability to pay these workers much above minimum wage.

From employee satisfaction surveys we have learned that salary alone will never solve this problem. Unquestionably, an appropriate living wage is necessary; however, it is the working conditions and dignity provided that truly make the difference. It is the feeling of having control over some

decisions in the workplace. Employee recognition both on an individual basis and through a formal recognition process reinforces these workers' value as employees and individuals. Our association has developed an employee recognition program for the frontline worker, and we acknowledge these folks at state conferences. In conjunction with our national affiliate we have developed a Caregiver Newsletter to address issues particular to the caregiver. This newsletter is provided to all members in sufficient number to share with all staff.

We must be flexible and recognize the family dynamics of employees. The employer's approach must be sensitive to the employee's total world, not just the work world. Often employees face challenges with day care, transportation or other basic needs. The employer who acknowledges these social needs and assists with resolution both gains employee respect and elevates the employee's self-esteem.

A total change of perception is needed by both employers and society to view these employees as a valuable resource. Frontline staff must be considered an asset, not a liability. Far too often compliments about care go to the management staff while negative statements are made to the caregiver.

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