

How will we handle the 'Care Gap'?

A 138 percent increase in the elderly population in New Hampshire alone is projected by 2030 without a near similar increase in the number of direct care workers available to assist them.

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Many Americans think ADLs (activities of daily living) are enterprises like going to the bank, visiting a neighbor or cooking dinner. But with 78 million aging baby boomers in the United States, ADLs may increasingly need to be defined along more basic health care terms.

ADLs, as they are called in health care parlance, are composed of six functions: bathing, dressing, transferring, toileting, continence and feeding.

"They are your most personal of care needs," says Susan Antkowiak, N.H. project director for the Alzheimer's Association. The workers whose job it is to provide this level of care are known collectively as direct care workers.

"These folks can make sense of the world for a person with Alzheimer's disease; they can be an emotional guiding light for you in the storm."

The looming social problem, according to Antkowiak and to others like her in the policy and advocacy fields, is a coming Care Gap; the projected 138 percent increase in the elderly population in New Hampshire alone by 2030 without a near similar increase in the number of workers available to assist them.

"I would be a CNA for the rest of my life except for the shortages," says Carrie Breton, a certified nursing assistant for 13 years in Maine who is now pursuing her registered nurse degree. Breton is warm and friendly and just the sort of person you might want helping you get in the tub if you couldn't get there yourself. "Being a CNA requires attention, love and patience, more than any job I've ever had." Her dark eyes become troubled, though, when she talks of the Care Gap and the risk of what she calls an elderly assembly line. "Go to this room. They're safe, they're dry. That room. They're safe, they're dry." There is precious little room now, she says, for the time it takes to be compassionate with touch, slow movement and a gentle voice.

Breton won't make more money as a nurse, given the amount she has in loans and lower pay as an entry level nurse, but she does expect to be offered health insurance as part of her compensation package.

New Hampshire resident and health care worker advocate Jenn Craigue, a 10-year veteran of direct care, says she "is one of the lucky ones" because she receives health benefits as part of her employment. The statistics bear out her comment, since, as a group, direct care workers are uninsured at a rate of 50 percent higher than workers in the general population. And there is within industry disparity too: nursing home workers are two times more likely to be uninsured than hospital workers.

"Stabilizing the benefits for the (direct care) work force is key," points out Allison Lee, national campaign manager for the Healthcare for Healthcare Workers Initiative. "Benefits are more important in many cases than wages. Direct care workers with health care insurance stay on the job twice as long as workers with no health care coverage."

Research has shown a strong positive link between health insurance coverage and recruitment and retention of direct care workers. But part time or newly hired workers are often not eligible. "That gives the industry a way to get out of expenses for benefits they should be granting," says Liz McConnell, presidential campaign associate for the New Hampshire branch of the Alzheimer's Association. "There should be no tax incentives unless a business is doing the right thing for employees."

Wages for tucking in, spoon feeding and dressing our elderly are historically low. The mean annual income for nursing aides (who requires licensure) is \$21,890. That drops to \$19,200 if you are simply an orderly or an attendant, and to just \$17,560 if you are a home health aide. After taxes, unless health-care benefits were offered as part of a compensation package, it would be difficult to purchase them on such a salary.

The National Alzheimer's Association has recruited and hired advocates in the early primary states — New Hampshire, Iowa, Nevada and South Carolina — to talk to the presidential candidates about health care for health care workers. McConnell notes that "the country is primed for a change and this is a good opportunity to talk with candidates in a non-partisan way. Quality care trickles up. Quality direct care staff with health insurance will provide quality direct care.

"The world of dementia is a very isolating disease process," Antkowiak says. Direct care workers are the "folks that provide the touchstones of life; socialization, comfort."

Carrie Breton reminds us of this too. On tough nights, when there is not enough coverage, or when a resident is having a hard time, "you make yourself think about the person you are with and not other

competing needs."

Asked why she is leaving a job she so clearly loves, Breton pauses before answering. "Because I can't keep up with this. I can't keep up with this."

"If it doesn't get fixed...;" her voice trails off and she shrugs.

QUALITY CARE PARTNERS

Several New Hampshire agencies have come together with a mission to influence policy, legislation and education, simultaneously undertaking grass root multi-state efforts to organize and coalesce, while endeavoring to deliver care through community based worker led agencies.

Jenn Craigue, a licensed nursing assistant, president of the Direct Care Worker Association, and board member for the Direct Care Alliance and for PHI, formerly Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute, says "Families don't know what they're entitled to. Legislators say 'we have no money'. Direct care workers need to step up for themselves."

Quality Care Partners was established in 1999 and, while not an actual worker cooperative, calls itself employee centered and values worker input on principle. It has a dual mission: to provide high quality direct in-home care by providing high quality jobs for direct care workers. This means benefits, a voice and a forum to encourage leadership and creative thinking about the stark statistics facing our graying nation.

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