



Healthcare | Aging Services

# A Focus on Staff Recruitment and Retention: The Importance of Building Leaders and Careers



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In an environment with growing resident acuity and increasing expectations concerning accountability and transparency, aging services organizations must identify staffing discrepancies and challenges, as they may translate into higher rates of resident injury and death, with consequent malpractice allegations. Staffing challenges directly affect resident care while simultaneously placing greater stress on the existing workforce. An ever-changing staff, who lack familiarity with the residents, presents a heightened potential for risk, as they may not be as apt to identify changes in condition – resulting in a delay in residents receiving medical attention.

In addition to quality of care concerns, staff turnover also presents financial ramifications. According to the [LeadingAge Turnover Cost Calculator](#), the general rule involving cost for replacing any employee is 25 percent of the salary amount. The minimum direct costs of replacing a direct care worker – which includes activities such as exit interviews, the use of temporary staff, and training, is estimated to be \$2,500. The indirect costs – such as loss of productivity and lost clients – is minimally \$2,000. This totals a minimum of direct and indirect costs of turnover at \$4,500 per worker. If an aging services organization averages 40 terminations per year, this expense equates to \$180,000. In addition, staff turnover may affect the ability to adequately defend malpractice actions. For example, direct care staff who have left the organization may not be available to be deposed in support of the care rendered that becomes the subject of litigation.

Perpetual staff turnover may be viewed as an inherent epidemic. A recent [article](#) in McKnight's Senior Living highlighted the 45th annual [Nursing Home Salary & Benefits Report](#), issued by the Hospital & Healthcare Compensation Service and created in cooperation with the American Healthcare Association and endorsed by LeadingAge. The survey revealed that nursing home staff turnover for all employees has increased 25 percent from the prior year.

According to a recent [study](#) of the American Health Care Association and National Center for Assisted Living, 87 percent of respondents reported that their facilities were currently experiencing moderate to high staffing shortages. To adjust for staffing shortages, 99 percent of the nursing home providers reported that they are asking staff to work overtime or extra shifts, with 70 percent hiring temporary staff. The use of temporary staff presents additional exposures as they will not have familiarity or rapport with the residents and may not be aware of organizational policies and procedures.

In this time of nationwide economic and staffing crises, aging services providers must hire and retain qualified, committed staff. The retention of staff not only lessens the financial impact of turnover, but it provides a more significant value in the close relationship that committed, attentive staff develop with residents. Dedicated staff are engaged with residents and become a part of the resident's life story. Retention depends upon a healthy, trust-based workplace culture, which is characterized by the following attributes:

- **Emphasis on employee relations.** Successful organizations cultivate employee satisfaction by expecting supervisors and management staff to behave courteously, offering competitive wages and benefits, instituting flexible staffing policies, creating employee recognition programs and providing opportunities for advancement.

- **Empowered employees.** The leaders of high-performing organizations understand that staff should feel appreciated and be recognized for their contributions. Organizations should reexamine their supervisory style and attitudes in order to foster a non-punitive environment, which enables staff members to fully utilize their abilities, intelligence and training.
- **Shared decision-making.** Successful organizations utilize a team-based care and service planning process, including significant input from the direct care staff who spend the most time with residents. These communities also encourage staff autonomy in the areas of scheduling, social event planning and hiring decisions.
- **Consistent staffing.** Dynamic organizations know that consistent staffing patterns promote individualized care while simultaneously helping to reduce staff turnover and boosting morale. By focusing on the consistent scheduling of staff members to the same residents, frontline staff are better equipped to identify changes in the resident's condition and behavior in a more timely manner.

*"Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile"* - Vince Lombardi. A commitment to recognizing and building upon the strengths and talents of existing staff creates the ability to cultivate their leadership potential that benefits both the individual and the organization.

When hiring new staff and potential leaders, organizations may wish to consider being more creative in their hiring process. In addition to direct care staff, aging services organizations are seeking individuals with customer service expertise. Even if an individual lacks a healthcare background, they may be able to serve a vital role in an aging services organization. With Life Plan Communities and aging in place initiatives, offerings maintain a hospitality focus, much like a resort with a healthcare component. Although you cannot teach individuals to have empathy, you can focus on hiring individuals who do.

Successful organizations implement programs to hire and develop committed staff and future leaders. A focus on career development and reward for loyalty is highlighted. Some steps toward success that may be considered include the following:

- **Be open to positive change.** Improvement in performance cannot be achieved if basic assumptions and day-to-day practices remain stagnant and unexamined.

- **Recognize staff strengths and limitations.** Identify staff who possess an innate ability to encourage, engage and express empathy for fellow staff members, residents and families. Delegate tasks to onsite leaders with a demonstrated ability to connect with staff, residents and their families.
- **Promote aging services as a viable career choice** that will attract talented and dedicated individuals. Assist staff with envisioning the ladder for advancement of their careers through both promotion and additional training opportunities.
- **Focus on staff training and empowerment.** Implement improved training, support systems and career ladders, as well as a leadership commitment to strengthen work-life balance and encouraging greater workplace autonomy and creativity. Empower staff and demonstrate that they are valued as individuals and that their contributions are appreciated.
- **Develop leadership training programs.** Consider mentoring programs to help cultivate leadership skills, transfer knowledge and build successful relationships. Recognize leaders for positive outcomes and highlight the importance of staff retention and positive morale.
- **Emphasize the impact of enhanced staff retention and other quality markers on achieving financial goals and long term viability.** By focusing on improving the work environment, organizations may be able to increase resident census, reduce litigation, avoid regulatory sanctions, strengthen brand reputation and improve present and future financial performance.
- **Include staff retention measures in leadership and management performance reviews.** Staffing-related problems lead to financial and reputational risks for aging services organizations. By including retention metrics in ongoing performance reviews – such as quarterly staff turnover rates and average staff tenure – organizations can motivate leaders, directors of departments and supervisors to maintain a healthy work environment and culture.

The ongoing focus on recruitment and staff retention, as well as leadership and career development, will represent a paramount goal for aging services organizations. Staff retention is an important indicator of quality care, effective leadership and financial well-being. Organizations must be willing to change and adjust their workplace practices and culture in order to thrive in a challenging environment.

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