



SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

HEALTH CARE WORKER RETENTION – IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT THE MONEY!

HOME CARE WORKER CO-OPS OFFER AN ALTERNATIVE WORKFORCE RETENTION STRATEGY

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Through its workforce strategy, the Ministry of Health is attempting to lure PSW graduates with money. The Ministry is paying up to \$5,440 to PSW students during their clinical placements in long-term care institutions and/or in home and community care. The Ministry is also providing \$10,000.00 to recent PSW graduates, provided that they commit to work in a long-term care facility or for home and community care for a year. They will also pay \$10,000.00 in relocation costs for recent PSW graduates to work in rural, remote, or northern areas for 12 months (Health Force Ontario, 2024).

This of course, disregards the fact that the Ministry has not addressed the wage gap between PSW’s working in institutions and those working in home care that the Ontario Community Support Association reports as being \$4.00 per hour. Retroactive increases paid to staff in hospitals have further exacerbated wage gaps between the home care and hospital and institutional sectors.

Home and community care are unable to fill PSW and other nursing positions and struggle with a 25% staff turnover rate, resulting in home care clients receiving poor services (Ontario Community Support Association, 2023).

The Home Care Worker Co-operative Model – A Viable Staffing Alternative

The Home Care Worker Co-operative Model offers a promising solution to the myriad challenges that confront Home Care workers today. In an era where these dedicated professionals face issues ranging from low wages to lack of benefits and job insecurity, the cooperative model offers a transformative approach to improving their working conditions and overall well-being.

It’s Not Just About the Money – It’s About Respect

While wage parity between the home and community care and the institutional sectors – hospitals and long-term care facilities - would help, other things also matter, in some cases just as much.

Home Care Worker Cooperatives prioritize the well-being of their members, including fair wages, benefits, and by providing profit-sharing opportunities. Unlike traditional employment models where profits may go to external shareholders or executives, in a cooperative, earnings are reinvested back into the cooperative or distributed among worker-owners. This ensures that PSWs are fairly compensated for their hard work, making them more likely to stay with the cooperative.

Organizational Culture and Job Demands

Organizations that do not care about their staff put organizational priorities above them and seldom take their needs into account. Organizations with supportive employee policies retain employees. “Retention strategy goes far beyond raising wages and offering whatever fringe benefits the competition is dangling. In a strong company culture, executives know their people and what they need individually in terms of job flexibility, time off, and benefits. Managers help team members develop their skills and move on when appropriate, whether that involves a promotion, a lateral move, or following their dream elsewhere. That last possibility may sound like the opposite of a retention strategy, but there’s a real possibility the dream-chaser will either return with more skills and experience or become a loyal and grateful source of job referrals” (Randall, 2022).

Home Care Scheduling is Problematic

If we look at what PSW’s and other front-line staff in Home Care are reporting, their needs are seldom taken into account. A case in point is scheduling. Rather than scheduling staff close to their homes with clients who all live close by, they are forced to travel long distances - often to provide one hour of care. Is it any wonder that some workers are then seen as “unreliable” or that they may seek work closer to home in one place – like a hospital or long-term care institution?

The Home Care Worker Cooperative mitigates this issue by offering a minimum visit of two hours for each client. This not only limits the amount of time spent traveling for PSWs, but it also fosters more meaningful relationships that can develop between client and caregiver since PSW’s now have time to offer the care in a more client-supportive way.

Job Control and Autonomy

“Research has demonstrated that job autonomy is one of the most important predictors of job satisfaction and work motivation and that it positively affects job performance—in part by increasing motivation and in part by permitting employees to use their skills and knowledge of the job to work more efficiently” (Harvard, n.d.).

How much input do those providing direct care have in helping to determine how much home care a client should receive or how it should be delivered? Very little, if any. Care Coordinators often make those determinations, and there are few to no mechanisms for direct care staff to provide additional feedback in a timely manner. Result? The caregiver feels disempowered in their work, and the client suffers.

Disrespect – A Big Problem in Ontario’s Health Care System

When an organization’s needs repeatedly trump the needs of those providing care, and caregivers feel disrespected, both caregivers and clients suffer, and turnover tends to be higher.

A supportive organizational culture is characterized by senior managers showing gratitude and appreciation to direct caregivers, not just to their managers, and not just by writing cheques. Those providing direct care are part of the decision-making structure, and should be listened to and given respectful feedback (Randall, 2022).

One of the key advantages of the Home Care Worker Co-operative model is its ability to empower Home Care workers by giving them a stake in the cooperative. By collectively owning and managing their cooperative, workers have greater control over their wages, working hours, and the quality of care they provide. They are treated as key stakeholders, and are a valued part of the broader health care community. This sense of ownership fosters a stronger sense of commitment and pride in their work, leading to improved job satisfaction, better care to clients, and higher retention rates.

As a PSW-owned and operated cooperative, it is the PSWs, together with those being supported who decide what the care plan should be. There are regular client care meetings and PSWs who are directly involved in the individual's care discuss the care needs and may suggest changes – not the coordinator or CEOs who have no relationship or direct understanding of the needs of those being supported.

Work Relationships – Isolation, or a Community of Practice?

Home Care provision can be an isolating experience. Many workers form positive relationships with those to whom they provide care, but how much opportunity do they have to meet with other home care staff, share information and support, and provide input to superiors? The answer at the present time is almost none.

Without co-worker support, retention becomes an issue. Failure to provide opportunities for direct caregivers to meet with supervisors in team meetings that they are paid to attend, and social events such as monthly lunches, sends a message that they are not valued as full team members.

Building loyalty to an organization's mission and to each other as employees boosts retention. Failure to provide opportunities for Home Care staff to meet may cause them to choose to work in institutional and hospital settings, not just because the pay is better, but because there is more opportunity for collegiality.

Home Care Co-operatives often foster a supportive work culture where PSWs feel valued, respected, and supported in their professional growth. Through collaborative decision-making, mentoring programs, and ongoing training opportunities, cooperatives empower PSWs to develop their skills and advance in their careers. This positive work environment not only enhances job satisfaction but also strengthens the bond between PSWs and the Cooperative, leading to higher retention rates.

A well-structured Cooperative model creates a culture of camaraderie by fostering a supportive community among worker-owners through monthly meetings and check-ins, and regularly bouncing ideas off each other. There are staff dinners and events. And worker-owners volunteer together in the community. Home Care Worker Co-operative members work as a team and feel like a family, and that increases job satisfaction, loyalty, and retention.

Opportunities for Training and Career Development

In-service training is dreaded in many organizations because it is often of poor quality and not engaging. Being forced to take training rather than consulted on what training might be helpful, with the ability to opt in on training that workers feel they need, and that would also help them

with career advancement, would be ideal. Providing time at least three to four times a year for employees to congregate for training chosen by them also helps to build a sense of collegiality.

Too often organizations providing Home Care also fail to partner with community colleges to provide on-site training with certification which would be valuable for many health care workers wishing to broaden their academic credentials and certifications.

The Co-operative structure allows workers to have a say in the training they receive, promoting engagement and empowerment. Rather than being subjected to generic in-service training, workers can opt for relevant training sessions that align with their career goals, current clients' needs, and their own skill development needs, for example, PSWs who want to specialize in areas such as palliative or dementia care. These courses may not be for everyone, but PSWs are supported to grow and develop skills in their areas of interest. This approach not only enhances job satisfaction, but also contributes to the professional growth of home care workers, thereby raising the level and standard of the PSW profession.

Mentoring and Strengths-Based Supervision

Very few PSWs and other front-line workers report receiving excellent supervision geared to their learning needs that helps them to build on their strengths. Performance evaluations are often dreaded, rather than opportunities to discuss workers' career interests, strengths and learning needs. Where workers feel that their strengths are noted and respected, and their learning needs, as identified by them, or collaboratively with a supervisor, are addressed, retention is much less of an issue.

The best supervision is supportive in nature where a relationship is built between a supervisor and employee and expectations are clear and concise and workers are supported to meet those expectations. Not only does good supervision improve performance, but it also builds loyalty to the organization and its mission.

The Co-operative model can facilitate strengths-based supervision, where performance evaluations are seen as opportunities for growth and development rather than mere assessments. By recognizing and leveraging the strengths of each worker and addressing their learning needs, Co-operatives can significantly improve retention rates and loyalty among employees. It is also important to note that because members are owners, the typical hierarchical structure that exists in most Home Care businesses does not exist in a Co-operative. This promotes and creates a work environment based on collaboration, cooperation, and a willingness to work with others. In the Co-operative model workers do what they do because it works, and because they are personally and emotionally invested in the co-op. Its success is also theirs.

Worker Engagement and Respect

Behaving like truly bad managers, the provincial government used Bill 124 Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act as a club to cap wages in health care at 1% as inflation was rising (Laucius, 2022). Unions were forced to go to court to fight back – and won (United Steel Workers, 2024). This has left a bitter taste in the mouths of many health care workers who feel slighted by a government that disrespected them during a time of crisis when they were putting in long hours and sacrificing significantly to help keep the health care ship afloat.

Rather than showing the health care work force some respect and rewarding them with the equivalent of danger pay for working during a pandemic, the Ontario government delivered a death blow to any trust that had existed with its health care work force, and it is now desperately trying to fix the problem with an employee recruitment strategy. This is rather like closing the door after the horse has left the barn. Respect of its workforce should have been the most basic retention strategy.

Thousands left the health care field in Ontario for this most basic of reasons. Once trust is lost, it is difficult to get it back, and if managers in Home Care and elsewhere in the health care system are uninformed about how best to retain their employees and build loyalty, the problem is further exacerbated.

Health care workers want and deserve a say, but they are often the last to be asked what needs to change to make health care better.

Reward

Reward is not just monetary. It is a way of showing appreciation to employees for the work that they do. It may be a gift card to a spa in recognition of a job well done. It can be as simple as a congratulatory note from senior managers who take the time to walk around, visit clients and hear about the work caregivers are doing. It may be financial assistance in obtaining additional academic credentials. It could be a bonus or a bouquet of flowers sent to someone's home for going beyond the call of duty. Or a team lunch out.

Among the best rewards for employees is providing them with health benefits and professional recognition. Offering them choice about which benefits plans they would like adopted, and having a yearly employee recognition luncheon would go a long way to helping employees to feel valued and cared for.

Reward means that managers are noticing and rewarding good work, and it encourages employees to strive to meet and surpass expectations. Rewards can take many forms, and be as creative as the managers providing them.

At the Home Care Worker Co-operative workers have a voice, and can collectively advocate for fair treatment and recognition of their contributions. Moreover they collectively decide to implement various forms of rewards – monetary, such as paid days off, staff dinners, holiday bonuses, and non-monetary, such as words of appreciation, and public recognition of a job well done. A simple thank you can go a long way.

CONCLUSION

Retention strategies involve a great deal more than pay. They involve improving working conditions, relationships between employees, supervisors, and managers by seeking feedback and employing it to create change, as well as helping employees to advance in their careers, and most importantly, rewarding excellent performance.

The Home Care Worker Co-operative Model offers a multi-faceted approach to addressing the challenges facing Home Care workers. By prioritizing fair compensation, opportunities for collegiality, training, career development, supportive supervision and respect, Co-operatives can

create a work environment that not only attracts, but also retains, dedicated and skilled professionals in the home care sector.

The current Ontario government and the health care system it funds are failing badly at all of these, and the results are predictable – health care workers that government has spent millions recruiting are continuing to leave, to the detriment of those needing their services.

The Home Care Worker Co-operative Model is one that should be carefully considered if the Ontario government truly wants to recruit and retain a respected, skilled Home Care workforce.

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