



## SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

### Research Bulletin

## A Changed Role for PSWs: Enter Community Care Workers

January 2, 2023

For too long PSWs have been treated like second class citizens in Ontario, forced to work in predominantly corporate controlled institutional conditions where assembly line care has been the norm because of staffing shortages and high resident to staff ratios - bad for staff and terrible for residents. It is difficult to imagine a more dehumanizing work environment (Hapsari et al, 2022). Is it any wonder PSWs have left the sector in droves?

### Two Factor Explanation for Lack of Worker Retention in Long-Term Care

Workers mass exiting their profession is never just about money. It often has more to do with motivation and hygiene factors as Frederick Herzberg, an American organizational psychologist identified decades ago. He pointed out that “motivators encourage job satisfaction and hygiene factors prevent job dissatisfaction” (Kurt, 2021).

Motivation factors include “achievement, recognition, and advancement” that build employee contentment and promote growth. Hygiene factors have to do with pay grade, workplace policy and relationships with peers. Both have to be present and positive to ensure a happy, productive workforce that wants to stay.

Both are lacking in Ontario’s long-term care system where the best PSWs who care about their work and speak up, advocating for residents are often undermined or face workplace consequences for their efforts (Peesker, 2021). At best they have been marginalized and excluded from workplace decision making for years, and their input tends not to be valued even in the care planning process (Hoogeveen, 2016).

Instead of recognizing the best PSW’s commitment and promoting them to more senior positions where they can mentor other PSWs, they may find themselves without a job - especially in the absence of effective whistleblower protection. This creates a culture of secrecy and fear in long-term care institutions – where PSWs are afraid to speak up about even the worst conditions (Payne, 2020).

Hygiene factors are also often absent. They are not paid well for difficult work. Workplace policies and job descriptions tend to be restrictive and create monotonous, pressured work situations, and professional growth is not encouraged. Speaking with any PSW about their work often leads to identification of all of these factors as reasons why they either have left or are contemplating leaving. They are stigmatized as much as those for whom they care (Johnson & Wilson, 2019).

Any competent manager should be aware of these factors. Which raises the question – how many effective and competent managers are there in long-term care who value their employees, want them to experience purpose, growth, and respect in the work they do, and are willing to reward them financially and with promotions for doing good work?

### **Could PSW Roles Change Along with SSAO’s Proposed Transformation of the Long-Term Care System?**

Not only are PSWs often dehumanized along with those they serve in this system, but their actual roles may also be a problem. Within institutions, roles tend to be restricted because of institutional routine. Residents have to be gotten up, dressed, taken to the dining room or fed in their rooms, changed, and repeat until bedtime. Replacing institutions with in-home and community-based residential care could address this problem for workers as well as residents. Professionals working in community-based accommodations could have expanded roles and take part in all aspects of caring for elders and people with disabilities on much lower staff to resident ratios.

In Seniors for Social Action Ontario’s quest to seek transformation of a long-term care system from one dominated by institutions to one that puts in-home and community care first, we can’t forget the professionals providing the support. They deserve full-time work, benefits, fair pay and more respect. They also deserve to have their work recognized as a profession, have their own Code of Ethics, and belong to a professional College. Their work could be much more varied and humanized. Along with better in-home and community-based care could come a broader, more interesting role for PSWs.

### **Israel Figures It Out**

In a landmark study university researchers in Israel actually listened to direct care workers in developing and implementing a new training program (Ben-Harush et al, 2020). In doing so they may have come up with an elegant solution for the rest of the world – turn PSWs into Community Care Workers (CCWs). Redefine their role so that it encourages relationship building and involvement in the community, not just personal care. Encourage CCWs to pay close attention to elders' strengths, preferences, and needs. Promote collaboration between CCWs and those receiving care so that they can plan activities together designed to improve elders’ well-being, and promote continued inclusion in the community, while also providing needed personal care.

Imagine the difference in job and client satisfaction as CCW’s become allies to elders, form relationships with them, and promote their full citizenship and continued integration within the larger community. Working in smaller non-profit residential settings with much lower staff to resident ratios would serve to promote a broader role of this nature for a new class of professionals – community care workers.

Israel’s is a program that attempts to address the current shortage of paid long-term carers by creating an elder care profession (Ben-Harush et al, 2020).

An idea whose time has finally come? Ontario should have a serious look at this option.

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