

THE NATIONAL
IMPERATIVE TO
IMPROVE NURSING
HOME QUALITY
*Honoring Our
Commitment to
Residents, Families,
and Staff*

Ensuring a Well-Prepared, Empowered, and Appropriately Compensated Workforce

Nearly 1.3 million Americans living in certified nursing homes in the United States rely on health care and support workers for their medical, nursing, and social care. Despite the critical role of the workforce in providing increasingly complex care, such workers are all too often underappreciated, undercompensated, and underprepared. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and amplified long-existing shortcomings in nursing home care, and further highlighted a wide array of workforce-

related weaknesses including inadequate staffing levels, education, training, and compensation.

The National Imperative to Improve Nursing Home Quality: Honoring Our Commitment to Residents, Families, and Staff examines the complex and multifaceted challenges nursing homes currently face and outlines goals and recommendations to improve the overall quality of nursing home care. A key component of improving quality is ensuring nursing home workers are well prepared, empowered, and appropriately compensated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure Competitive Wages and Benefits

Low staff salaries and limited or non-existent benefits have made the nursing home a highly undesirable place of employment. Many nursing home workers earn significantly less than their counterparts in other care settings. Federal and state governments, together with nursing homes, should ensure competitive wages and benefits—including health insurance, child care, and sick pay—for nursing home staff.

Update Staffing Standards and Expertise

Despite persistent calls for increased staffing levels in nursing homes, the same federal regulations have been in place for decades. These standards do not reflect the complex needs of today's nursing home residents. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services

(CMS) should require a minimum of 24/7 on-site, direct-care, registered nurse (RN) coverage; a full-time social worker; and an infection prevention and control specialist at a level sufficient to meet the needs of the nursing home. Research to identify and rigorously test specific minimum and optimum staffing standards for all direct-care staff is needed to inform future staffing requirements

While nursing homes may meet staffing standards, additional expertise is often needed to provide comprehensive care. Nursing home administrators, in consultation with their clinical staff, should establish consulting or employment relationships with qualified licensed clinical social workers at the master's or doctoral level, advanced practice RNs (APRNs), clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, pharmacists, and others. In addition, CMS should create incentives for nursing homes to hire qualified, licensed, clinical social workers at the master's or doctoral level and APRNs.

Empower Certified Nursing Assistants

Certified nursing assistants (CNAs) provide most of the critical hands-on care to nursing home residents, and are key to their well-being and quality of life. Strategies for advancing the role of CNAs include:

- Providing career advancement opportunities and peer mentoring;
- Enabling free, entry-level training and continuing education;
- Covering CNAs' time for completing education and training programs;
- Expanding the role of the CNA; and
- Developing new models of care delivery that take full advantage of the role of the CNA as a member of the interdisciplinary care team.

Strengthen Education and Training

Current requirements for the education and training of nursing home workers are inadequate or non-existent. Minimum education and national competency requirements need to be established for nursing home staff, including nursing home administrators, medical directors, directors of nursing, and directors of social services. Furthermore, all education programs preparing health care professionals should include content related to the care of older adults, preferably with clinical experience in a nursing home. Enhancing the education and training of the entire nursing home workforce will require:

- Annual continuing education training for all nursing home staff;
- Ongoing diversity and inclusion training for all nursing home workers and leadership tailored to the unique community and worker needs;
- Resources and training for family caregivers; and
- Support for the participation of chosen family members as desired.

Improve Data Collection and Research

In addition to increasing the number of more highly trained professionals in nursing homes, detailed and accurate information is needed about the range of professionals working in nursing homes. This will enhance understanding of the expertise, total numbers, and staffing patterns across facilities. Nursing homes should routinely collect and report data regarding baseline demographic information of medical directors, administrators, and directors of nursing; the training, expertise, and staffing patterns of medical directors, APRNs, social workers, physicians, and physician assistants; and the numbers and staffing patterns for all contract and agency staff. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services should fund research on systemic barriers and opportunities to improve the recruitment, training, and advancement of all nursing home workers; and collect gender-, ethnicity-, and race-related outcomes of job quality indicators.

CONCLUSION

High-quality nursing home care can only be delivered with a complete transformation of worker training. Enhanced requirements will further professionalize the nursing home workforce, which, when accompanied by improvements in the working environment, will contribute to the desirability of working in a nursing home. Changes to the culture of nursing homes need to be driven by nursing home leaders to ensure a robust, high-quality workforce that will, in turn, contribute to the delivery of high-quality care.

To download a free copy of the full report and other resources, please visit <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/the-quality-of-care-in-nursing-homes>.

