



Three ways home care agencies can improve staff satisfaction and retention

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Finding and keeping direct-care workers is the greatest challenge home care providers face. When you consider that there is a 65% turnover rate for personal care aides, a double-digit nurse turnover rate and a low unemployment rate, you can appreciate that the challenge is not overstated.

The long-term trends point to labor shortages being a persistent challenge, as well. Roughly 10,000 baby boomers turn 65 each day, according to the Pew Research Center. To meet rising demand for care services among seniors, the number of home health and personal care aides in the United States will need to grow by more than 40% from 2016 to 2026, according to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). The top 10 fastest growing occupations will add 1.6 million jobs during this period. Home health aides and personal care aides represent almost 75% of these jobs.

Many agencies, who can afford to, will try to bolster retention by offering higher wages and attractive benefits, yet past and present industry efforts demonstrate that reducing turnover is not entirely about money. Often, improved retention rates come as a result of providers doing a better job of listening to their employees, while helping them find new, rewarding ways to succeed in difficult roles.

The best retention efforts also make sure workers are free to do what they love: care for people. Top executives from [Amedisys](#), [Bayada Home Health Care](#) and other leading organizations have touted their retention programs as essential contributors to their companies' financial performance in public filings and interviews. These programs emphasize the importance of serving their caregivers well, rather than just using compensation as a tool to attract and keep their staff.

[Studies](#) show that agencies most likely to keep workers achieve high staff satisfaction ratings by making staff feel comfortable, confident and appreciated in innovative ways. Here are three proven ways for boosting staff satisfaction and improving retention.



1. Explicitly include safety procedures in your support plans for remote workers

Working as a remote caregiver – whether an aide, clinician, or supervisor in the field – means facing safety challenges that office employees don't have to worry about. An aide, for example, may often work in unfamiliar surroundings, spending the majority of his or her day away from co-workers and the support of an office environment. This type of work also means juggling a changing schedule that often includes providing care outside of traditional work hours.

Personal safety concerns, if left unaddressed, can cause employees to leave an agency. Agencies can take measures to make staff feel safe, looked after and protected.

"Technology helps us to see caregivers' locations to react quickly to potential safety issues," says Pete Davies, vice president and chief information officer for Hospice and Palliative Care Charlotte Region (HPCCR), the largest freestanding not-for-profit hospice organization in the Carolinas. With real-time alerts, secure messaging and GPS tracking, CellTrak helps providers offer safety and support to staff in the field, including remote or rural areas.

"From a safety perspective, it's certainly an excellent tool," Davies says. "Believe me, you drive through Pisgah National Forest and have no signal, but we're still able to see where [a caregiver's device] is."

What does 'safety' mean?

To keep workers, home care providers need to make sure their employees feel safe on the job. Here are six common safety issues that can be addressed with real-time visibility of direct-care workers:

1. **Medical emergencies:** being able to locate workers quickly and precisely during a health crisis
2. **Car trouble:** assisting workers when an engine problem or flat tire leaves them stranded in a remote location
3. **Navigating unfamiliar neighborhoods:** making sure caregivers know where they're going, even when they're unfamiliar with their surroundings
4. **Weather-related emergencies:** providing near real-time alerts to avoid severe weather or natural disasters
5. **Staying safe in the home:** being able to support workers by letting them know about pets and other potential hazards inside their patients' homes
6. **Responding to threats:** improving readiness procedures for threats for rapid response to potentially violent situations



In rare instances, HPCCR has used CellTrak to locate missing employees or individuals who fail to show up for their scheduled appointments. That includes one recent case when an employee hadn't shown up for work and couldn't be reached over the phone after repeated attempts. Ultimately, HPCCR used CellTrak to find the employee in need of help.

"The staff member was certainly in need of help, and we were able to get it to him," Davies said. "It would have been difficult to do that if he hadn't been using the app."

Besides alerting providers when staff are in dangerous situations or are experiencing unforeseen problems, GPS-linked solutions like CellTrak – which draws its navigation information from Google Maps – can also optimize travel routes and help workers avoid poor roadway conditions.

HPCCR, which operates in both North Carolina and South Carolina, has a daily census of about 800. Its total staff is just shy of 600 workers. Founded in 1978, the company has been using CellTrak since 2014.

"[Tech-based solutions] give you the extra benefit of knowing where all of your staff members are assigned and being able to push that information down to ... team managers, clinical care coordinators and team assistants," Davies says. "There's a much larger pool of people who can see where staff physically are, and that keeps everybody informed and connected."



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– **Hayley Gleason** Interim Executive Director at Home Care Aide Council

2. Give caregivers more time to deliver care

For many people, the decision to become a direct-care worker is all about providing care and helping people stay in their homes as they age or recover from illness.


“The thing that drives people into the field of home care is the opportunity to become a caregiver, to help individuals stay in their homes and live happy lives,” says Hayley Gleason, interim executive director of the Massachusetts-based Home Care Aide Council. “When that no longer becomes the focus, it demoralizes people.”

Tech-based solutions can keep employees focused on caregiving by helping them manage time and avoid inefficiencies through the power of automation. For example, Graceworks at Home – an Ohio-based non-profit organization that offers residential and personal services to older adults throughout Ohio, Indiana and Kentucky – was able to go completely paperless after implementing technology that automated paperwork. Previously, caregivers in the field had to keep paper point-of-care and travel notes, then fill out forms, and then drive the forms to the office. Office staff had to manually enter all of this information. This sort of time savings immediately boosts satisfaction, and – for Graceworks at Home – also increased the retention rate by 20%.

“Anything that can help workers continue their focus on caregiving will really help with retention,” says Gleason.

CellTrak and its time-management capabilities has been shown to create as much as 76% time savings per caregiver. HPCCR was able to increase nursing assistants per day by about 20%, according to Davies.

“It certainly enabled us to ‘trim some fat’ in a few places,” says Davies.



Graceworks at Home used CellTrak to improve efficiency and productivity and **increase employee retention by 20%**

BY THE NUMBERS:

Market Factors Make Retention Critical

Largely due to the immense physical and emotional toll associated with providing home care, industry-wide turnover is high. In the private-duty space, specifically, the turnover rate was nearly 67% in 2017, according to research group Home Care Pulse.

Taking steps to nurture employee satisfaction and, in turn, reverse the turnover trend, needs to be a priority for in-home care providers, experts argue, especially as demand for caregivers increases as baby boomers age.

“What home care agencies are seeing is, unfortunately, just the tip of the iceberg,” says Hayley Gleason, interim executive director of the Massachusetts-based Home Care Aide Council. “The people that you bring in, you’ve absolutely got to keep. It costs thousands of dollars to hire and train a new aide. If you turn over 35% to more than 65% of your caregivers in a year, those costs add up. The national price tag for turnover is about \$4.1 billion.”

The improving U.S. economy also makes retention all the more important, experts say. As the economy improves, typically, the unemployment rate falls and fewer people become active job seekers. The jobless rate for the first time in nearly two decades fell to a seasonally adjusted 3.8% in May 2018, according to DOL.

According to AARP, about 88% of home health and personal care aides are female. To complicate matters further, it appears fewer women are entering the labor force, at least compared to the levels witnessed in the 1990s. Even a small dip in women entering the workforce can have a profound effect on an agency’s ability to find workers.

More than a dozen states increased their minimum wages at the onset of 2018, according to the Economic Policy Institute. More states are expected to do the same in light of the national Fight for \$15 movement. For providers, the sweeping wage hikes mean prospective caregivers have a greater variety of employment choices to pick from, including jobs that are less demanding than positions associated with in-home care.



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3. Engage employees to ensure that they feel they are part of the team

Employers must foster a sense of community among a decentralized workforce. If caregivers come into the office once a week or once a month, it's hard to feel like a part of the organization. Providing a regular means to share both announcements and two-way communication is essential.

"I really try to talk to home care agencies about figuring out how they can better support their workers and provide opportunities to have what I call 'touch points,'" Gleason says. "As often as you can, figure out ways to 'touch' employees – whether through a phone call, email, notification or in-person – and increase interaction you have with workers."

HPCCR introduced CellTrak to about 50 nursing assistants (CNAs) working in the field when it began using the software in 2014. That number has grown to more than 70 CNAs because of positive feedback, Davies, who joined the company in 2003, says.

The first full year after HPCCR started using CellTrak, its turnover rate for CNAs was 39%, according to Davies. That plummeted to just 7% by 2016 and has held steady ever since, he says.

"It's really given them the ability to ... know all they need to know when they enter a home," Davies says. "They're not walking into a home where a patient has recently passed away because somebody didn't call them."

TURNOVER RATE 82% Decrease

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Source: HPCCR



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Engaging workers also means paying them on time. That is another aspect of management that tech-based solutions can help improve, as paperwork, by nature, tends to delay most processes.

As recently as 2015, it wasn't unusual for in-home care providers to pay workers more than minimum wage. State-level minimum wage laws mean more competitive alternatives, so it has become all the more important to pay workers promptly.

The true cost of turnover

Every time a home care provider sees an employee leave, its bottom line takes a hit. The cycle starts again — with money diverted into new recruitment initiatives, human resources are allocated to onboarding rather than retention programs, and quality of care suffers. In a value-based world, turnover also affects highly-visible ratings and the ability to attract new business.

The cost of turnover per employee in the direct-care industry is about \$3,500, according to Better Jobs Better Care. Other estimates put that figure closer to \$10,000, depending on the job function and size of the organization.

Still, the true cost of turnover is likely even higher. The additional associated costs to consider are: threatened contract renewals, providers struggling to repair disrupted relationships with clients and current staff members becoming overworked—which can lead to a downward spiral of consistent turnover.

To address this issue, home care companies can leverage tech-based solutions to improve worker safety, manage time efficiently and better communicate with employees.

"Some of the [turnover challenges] are just inherent in the job," says Gleason. "The job itself is a difficult one and, in some ways, there's nothing we can do about it. ... But there are certainly some things we can change to improve job satisfaction and, in turn, improve retention."

Appendix

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