

Caring About Caregivers

Reducing Turnover of Frontline Health Care Workers in South Central Wisconsin

Executive Summary

Caring About Caregivers focuses on frontline caregivers in nursing homes in the South Central Wisconsin region. This report is a follow-up to our 1999 report, *Improving Retention of Frontline Caregivers in Dane County*, extending the earlier investigation to a six-county area that includes Columbia, Dane, Dodge, Jefferson, Marquette, and Sauk Counties.

South Central Wisconsin is home to more than 10,000 frontline caregivers in nursing homes, home health agencies, and other sectors of the region's diverse and dynamic health care industry. In this report, we rely on data for the region's nursing homes to investigate the challenges and correlates of turnover among frontline caregivers.

The Local Turnover Crisis

Turnover of frontline caregivers is commonly identified as a crisis by the region's nursing homes. Our analysis of data for nursing homes in the region from the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) shows the significance of the problem. Of the 34 homes in our sample, fully 18 have turnover of frontline caregivers exceeding 60 percent annually. Many homes have turnover of over 100 percent, and a few facilities actually post turnover of over 200 percent. Turnover at these extreme levels is a crisis. The workers who stay on the job are challenged by short staffing, and lack of knowledge among co-workers who enter the endlessly revolving door. Facilities are strapped just trying to keep the door revolving. And, most important, clients face the bewildering experience of constantly changing caregivers. Turnover is a problem that touches the entire industry.

It is important to note that, while turnover is high in the region, in some homes it is quite a bit lower than in others. Obviously, turnover is not simply a fact of life. Some facilities are finding ways to keep staff.

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Center on Wisconsin Strategy
University of Wisconsin-Madison
1180 Observatory Drive
Room 7122
Madison, WI 53706

TEL: 608.263.3889
FAX: 608.262.9046
E-MAIL: cows-info@cows.org
WEBSITE: www.cows.org or
www.jobswithafuture.org

Frontline Caregiver Turnover, Wages, RN Turnover, and Quality of Care in South Central Wisconsin Nursing Homes, Fiscal Year 2000

Frontline Caregiver Turnover Rate	Average Hourly Frontline Caregiver Wage	Average Turnover of Full-Time RNs	Average Number of Complaints	Average Number of Violations	Average Number of Deficiencies
High (> or = 60%)	\$10.86	42%	3.5	1.7	20.8
Low (0-59%)	\$11.80	23%	2.4	0.2	9.4

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Turnover's Relationship to Wages, Work Environment, and Quality of Care

Our analysis investigates correlates of turnover (see table). We find that:

1. *Low-turnover nursing homes provide frontline caregivers with higher wages.*

The average wage of frontline caregivers in the region's low-turnover nursing homes is about \$1 per hour higher than the average wage in the region's high-turnover homes. While we know that wages do not entirely determine turnover (there are exceptions on both sides), it is an important correlate.

2. *High frontline turnover nursing homes have higher turnover of RN staff.*

Facilities that have high turnover of frontline caregivers also have high turnover among their RN staff. This is unsurprising, perhaps, but important. Volatility in caregiving staff is stressful at all levels of the organization. High turnover of RNs disturbs and disrupts frontline staff routines. Volatility of frontline caregiving staff makes RN work more difficult. Very likely, these tend to be reinforcing problems within organizations.

3. *High-turnover nursing homes post a lower quality of care.*

This result is perhaps most important and dramatically demonstrates what many in the industry already believe. Frontline caregivers are the eyes and ears of health care organizations. High turnover disrupts the ability of frontline caregivers to provide and promote quality care. High-turnover facilities in the region post lower quality care as measured by complaints, violations, and deficiencies documented by the DHFS Bureau of Quality Assurance.

High-Road Strategies for Retention

If we want to build strong quality of care in the region, we should begin to pay attention to methods for improving the quality of jobs for the region's caregivers. Below are some retention strategies highlighted in the report:

- *Increase wages.* Link compensation to knowledge and experience.
- *Improve benefits.* Provide affordable health insurance.
- *Increase training.* Provide adequate orientation for new staff and support ongoing training for long-term staff.
- *Ensure safety and reliable schedules.* Provide balanced and safe workloads that offer full-time employment while not overworking employees.
- *Create career ladders.* Provide frontline caregivers with opportunities for career growth within the organization as well as across the continuum of long-term care services.
- *Enhance support networks.* Improve RN supervision and encourage two-way communication at staff meetings.
- *Give greater respect and recognition.* Establish company-wide recognition programs that reward frontline caregivers for dedication and high quality of care.

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For more information, contact JWF Director Tracey Meek at (608) 265-9667 or tmeek@cows.org.