Coalition of Advocates Seeks Solutions to Caregiver Workforce Shortage

“Jobs that Care.”

“Make a Difference.”

Those are the headlines emblazoned on social media posts, radio ads and the sides of New Jersey buses, as part of a new marketing campaign highlighting the emotional rewards of working in what’s known as the “direct-care workforce”.



The ads were launched in recent weeks by the NJ Department of Human Services – along with a website titled Jobs that Care New Jersey – to promote training and job opportunities for home health aides, personal care aides, nurse aides, and other direct-support professionals.

The marketing blitz is just one of a host of strategies being touted by the Essential Jobs, Essential Care New Jersey Coalition, a group of 60-plus organizations and individuals that assembled two years ago to address one of the state’s most worrisome workforce shortages.

In coming years, New Jersey and the nation will need far more direct-care workers than ever before, as the baby boom generation continues to age into their 70s, 80s and beyond. Yet, nursing homes, assisted living residences, home-health agencies and other care providers have long struggled to recruit and retain workers - even before the pandemic prompted legions to leave this undercompensated field for jobs with fewer physical and emotional demands.

“The pandemic made it clear that we need to strengthen our efforts to support and grow the direct-care workforce,” said Dr. Cathy Rowe, executive director of New Jersey Advocates for Aging Well, one of three organizations that helps lead the coalition. “We need policies and practices that value the essential role that these workers play in our society.”

NJAAW leads the coalition in partnership with PHI, a national organization devoted to research and advocacy on direct-care workforce expansion efforts and the NJ Health Care Quality Institute. Leaders have enlisted a diverse array of coalition participants, a list that includes academic institutes, non-profits, elder-care providers, industry groups and advocacy organizations, including Age-Friendly North Jersey.

The coalition has been working since 2022 to identify the changes needed – both big and small – to make direct-care jobs more attractive to new workers and more secure for those who want to remain in caregiving roles that they find fulfilling.

Increasing compensation is a central goal and is tied to increasing Medicaid and other insurance reimbursements for care provided at home, or in community and institutional settings, as well as other industry reforms highlighted in this recent report from the New Jersey Task Force on Long-Term Care Quality and Safety. Transparency is also essential to ensure higher reimbursement rates are passed on to the workers themselves.

As the coalition works to enlist more allies and develop the sustained advocacy movement needed to gain traction on those more difficult-to-achieve changes, it has also compiled recommendations for remedying other factors that also contribute to the shortage of workers.

Its three main priorities are to increase the pipeline of new direct-care workers, to expand access to training and to create a standard licensing for all direct-care workers by putting regulatory authority for them under one state agency.

Right now, home care workers are licensed by the Division of Consumer Affairs Board of Nursing while the Department of Health oversees workers in nursing home and institutional settings – which makes it hard for trained workers to switch to other settings if they desire such a change.

The coalition also launched a survey this spring to collect more data about New Jersey's 108,000 direct-care workers to help educate the policymakers and the populace as a whole about the hurdles many workers face to entering and staying in the field.

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Rather than limiting advocacy to the halls of Trenton, coalition leaders are trying to enlist community leaders and aging advocates at the local level to join the movement.

"There is definitely a role for age-friendly community leaders to play in raising public awareness of the policies and practices that keeps this workforce from being treated as the essential workers they are," Rowe said. "For residents to be able to age-in-place, we need to ensure that those with care needs can receive the support they need in their homes and communities – and to do that, our state needs a large and well-supported caregiving workforce."

Click here to sign up for the coalition's meetings and monthly news updates.

To learn more about this initiative, including data, reports on the issue, progress made so far in NJ and examples from other states, go to https://lp.constantcontactpages.com/cu/nCYUJ7x