

**Iowa CareGivers
Report on Survey and Focus Group Discussions
For IHHS Contract
June 2023**

Back in 1998, Iowa CareGivers conducted a first of its kind survey of Certified Nursing Assistants asking them about what they needed to support the retention of those in the field, a needs assessment. At that time, it seemed novel to ask those questions directly to direct care workers.

Although the purpose of that 1998 study was to devise non-compensation related interventions, the role of short staffing and inadequate wages and benefits could not be underestimated in relation to the turnover problem. For example: Approximately 57% of CNA's said they had considered leaving their current job. • Of those, 36% gave short staffing as the main reason, followed by wage and benefits (33%). • Similarly, when asked what could be done to help them do their job better, the top recommendations were more staff (27%) and better wages/benefits (23%). Other items they indicated were needed to do their job better were more appreciation and respect and better relationships with supervisors and co-workers. And finally, other factors affecting their job satisfaction included that their input was not valued, education and training needed to be improved, injuries were an issue, and supplies and equipment were inadequate.

Those needs are expressed again in the surveys and focus group discussions of today, however the issues are exacerbated due to the pandemic. Burnout is real and it is based upon the stress that comes with working short staffed, earning low pay and inadequate benefits, and not feeling respected or valued in the workplace.

These challenges, along with many others reported by DCWs and others, have a profound impact on the DCWs themselves; their families and communities; employers; older Iowans, veterans, and individuals with disabilities needing care or support; family caregivers; the business communities; and Iowa overall! It is important that we continue to ask those with direct experience and impact what can be done to address these DCW recruitment and retention challenges.

Iowa CareGivers (IC), as part of its state contract, was charged with conducting a survey of direct care workers (DCW) to better understand impacts of COVID-19 on the DCW profession, as well as explore strategies to enhance current recruitment and retention efforts. The survey was developed with input from the department and disseminated electronically to 26,971 direct care workers from the following lists: Active CNAs from the Department of Inspections and Appeals, CNAs from the No Employment/Inactive List from Department of Inspections and Appeals, and the direct care workers from the Iowa CareGivers database. The first email dissemination resulted in a 39.3% open rate, with a second request email resulting in a 36.3%

open rate. The survey was closed and completed in February 2023 with 421 respondents. A few highlights are below and the full report of responses is attached.

“We broke our health care workers during the pandemic and I fear people will not want to go into the health care because they saw the terrible conditions during the pandemic.” (DCW survey respondent).

- 72% worked continuously during the pandemic.
- 23% left employment during the pandemic, with 16% returning to the field
- 46% of those who left the field listed short staffing as one reason for leaving.
- 30% of those who left listed low wages as a reason for leaving.
- 29% plan to retire or leave the field in the next five years.
- 40% said job satisfaction is worse than before the pandemic.
- 43% are also family caregivers, with 45% of those indicating they have no outside help for those family caregiving responsibilities.
- 68% said staff shortages are worse now than before the pandemic.
- 62% of those who left said they would return with better pay.
- 67% received a raise during the pandemic.
- 30% did not receive a raise since 2019 and 3% didn't know if they received a raise. (note: 2021 Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) Labor Market Information reported the wages for Certified Nurse Aides, Home Care Aides, and Personal Care Aides have remained stagnant and certainly not kept up with the cost of living increases.)
- 70% did not receive hazard pay.
- 24% did receive hazard pay.
- 6% didn't know if they received hazard pay.
- 64% did not receive a bonus during the pandemic.
- 31% indicated they did receive a bonus during the pandemic.
- 76% said they were interested in advanced education in health care.
- 36% received a bivalent booster.
- 19% plan to get the bivalent booster.
- 44% do not plan to get the bivalent booster.

Note: The number of respondents varies per question based upon survey skip patterns and relativity to the respondents. For numbers reflected in the percentages, please refer to the full report attached.

In follow-up to the survey, two focus groups of direct care workers were conducted to gain more in-depth insight and to gather stories of direct care worker experiences. Discussion questions were developed by the department, with input from Iowa CareGivers. Department staff conducted the focus group discussions, with observation from Iowa CareGivers staff. To ensure greater accessibility for direct care workers to participate, one focus group was held virtually,

while the other was held in-person. Both focus group discussions were completed in May 2023 with a total of 10 direct care workers participating. Represented in the focus groups were those currently working in the field and those who have left the field, those serving both rural and urban communities, various health and care settings such as home care, nursing home, hospice, disability communities, and veterans' home.

Some key themes from the focus group discussions are as follows:

- The relationships and connections with the residents/clients is what DCWs love most about their work. They often become like family. Bringing joy, care, and dignity to the lives of others is important to them.
- DCWs often feel that most of the appreciation for their work comes from their residents/clients.
 - "I feel that it's more the residents that appreciate us most. It's the residents who thank us or wonder where we are. The residents are nice to us and they ask how our day is and ask questions about our personal life. They miss us when we are not there. That's how I know that I am appreciated."
- What could employers do to make direct care workers feel valued? The overwhelming response was to take time to listen to them. Seek their input. Ask what could be done to help. Acknowledge concerns. Ask their opinions on cares or changes in residents.
 - "The administration needs to take the time to listen to DCWs and our concerns. Take the time to really listen to us and ask what we're experiencing and what we are feeling and take the time to hear us and acknowledge that they are listening. They may not be able to do anything about the situation at the present time- they used to have listening sessions and heard our stories and what it is like and what we are going through, and that just stopped and discontinued. The lack of listening impacts you negatively because they are not hearing you."
- Being thanked personally by employers, better communication, and building a more cohesive team environment were all things mentioned to help DCWs feel appreciated as well.
- Working short-staffed is the top reason that many of these DCWs feel burned out. Many are working extra so that shifts are covered and care is continued for their residents. Direct care work is both physically and mentally draining. DCWs are just tired and overworked. Some even mentioned compassion fatigue, where they are just burned out on caring.
- Challenges with recruitment and retention are universal in direct care and it impacts everyone.
- In the discussions around the impact of COVID, the direct care workers focused on the impact it had on their residents/clients, not the impact it had on themselves. They were more concerned about keeping their residents safe and about the impact that isolation and depression had on their residents and families.

You can find more in-depth notes from the focus group discussions attached. The department and Iowa CareGivers will be developing Direct Care Worker Story Cards to highlight the personal experiences of direct care workers that show their commitment to their profession and to those Iowans they provide services for.

Attachments:

- Final DCW Survey Report (421 respondents)
- Notes from both focus group sessions
- Recordings from both focus group sessions