

Hicks: State must finally act on direct-care 'disaster'

Lynn Hicks, lhicks@dmreg.com 11 p.m. CST January 10, 2015



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Perhaps this will be the year the Legislature gives some TLC to direct-care workers.

I'm not counting on it. For more than 15 years, advocates for nurse aides, personal care assistants and other workers have warned that a crisis is coming.

Iowa will need 20,000 additional direct-care workers by 2020. As Iowa's aging and disabled population grows, there simply won't be enough people to take care of them.

This is an issue that will affect every Iowan eventually, either directly or to a loved one. So why the lack of urgency?

"We are heading for a disaster," said Norene Mostkoff, president/CEO of HCI Care Services and VNS of Iowa. "There's not enough people going into the pipeline."

Mostkoff's hospice and home-health nonprofit is growing rapidly, but she struggles to find workers. In some rural areas, positions can stay open 90 to 180 days, she said. She pays certified nursing assistants a starting wage of \$13 to \$14 an hour, which is above the average.

Increasing pay and improving benefits must be part of the solution. The average wage for direct-care workers in Iowa is \$11.50 an hour, compared with \$14.40 for all Iowa workers, according to a 2010 study by the Child and Family Policy Center. A quarter of the workers lack health care insurance, ironically.

To top it off, this is a physically and emotionally demanding job. It's no wonder the average annual turnover rate is 64 percent.

The job demands require someone who's part saint, part angel. I should know: I was raised by one.

My mother, Linda Hicks, was an aide at a nursing home for several years. I remember the lousy hours, including overnight shifts. But I learned that it was meaningful, important work. She shared in the joys and sorrows of her patients and their families.

She was fortunate to moved up to an administrative role as a social-services director, earning statewide recognition for her advocacy for residents. Many direct caregivers have little opportunity for advancement.

The situation has gotten so bad that Project Iowa, which provides job training for ex-cons, former drug abusers and other hard-to-employ people, no longer considers certified nursing assistants as an occupation that pays a living wage. Why further risk their opportunities?

There are faint signs of change. The U.S. Department of Labor plans to extend minimum wage and overtime protection to home care workers, recognizing that they are not babysitters. The rule was supposed to go into effect Jan. 1, but a judge issued a temporary restraining order on behalf of the home care and hospice industry.

This problem can't be fixed with a marketing campaign, notes Rob Denson, president of Des Moines Area Community College. In one such effort, "Dirty Jobs" star Mike Rowe advocates for skilled trades occupations, but those are already well-paid jobs.

And, really, enough with the studies. Di Findley, executive director of Iowa CareGivers, said the problem has been well-documented over the past 15 years through "countless task forces, councils, commissions, summits, committees, studies and pilot projects."

Her group is asking lawmakers to create a Health Workforce Center within the Department of Public Health. The center will focus on recruiting and retaining direct care workers, provide opportunities for training and make recommendations on pay, among other strategies.

The caregivers group is asking for an existing appropriation to increase from \$429,775 to \$943,900.

The idea hardly seems enough. But it's a start, and an idea lawmakers should take seriously.

This session, business groups will urge lawmakers to act on the "skills gap" once again, saying Iowa's factories and construction sites can't find the right workers. Ask them for their solutions for another vital part of Iowa's economy. Ask hospitals, the Iowa Health Care Association and other employers what they're prepared to do to address this issue.

It's time to act. Lawmakers must send the message that direct-care workers are valued. Or we all pay the price.

Lynn Hicks is the Register's opinion and lead engagement editor. Follow him on Twitter at @lynhicks

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