

Lives of all Iowans impacted by direct care workforce

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(Photo: File photo)

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Let's imagine for a moment that the mid-term election is over, and one of the two leading candidates for governor — Gov. Kim Reynolds and Democratic challenger Fred Hubbell — is elected and sworn in. Imagine now that this is an excerpt from the newly elected governor's State of the State

Address:

"The direct care workforce makes up one of the largest and highest demand segments of Iowa's workforce. This predominantly female workforce earns between \$9 and \$13.50 an hour, and an estimated 25% lack health care coverage. They provide 70-80% of the direct hands-on care and support to Iowans of all ages and abilities. They work in the homes of individuals served, nursing homes, hospitals, hospices, assisted living and retirement communities, adult day centers, mental health centers, and other locations. And despite the importance of their services to our state, some are also forced to rely on publicly funded programs such as the HAWK-I children's insurance program and child care subsidies; and because about 50% have no retirement benefits, they will rely on Social Security benefits alone based on lower incomes and many will become dependent on Medicaid in their later years. This is not good policy!

"While it is one of the largest workforces, it's not large enough to meet the demands of a growing aging population and the preferred in-home and community-based supports. Employers describe the desperate and dire circumstances of being unable to fill job vacancies, an aging workforce, and large numbers of future retirements.

"The need for this vital workforce will not be ignored on my watch because there is too much at stake. Without this workforce Iowans can't access services and face poor quality of care or supports; the thousands of those already in the field for the right reasons are working short-staffed, burn out and leave; health care employers can't operate and provide the services their communities need, and in extreme cases are forced out of business; family caregivers are forced to cut back hours at work or give up their jobs, placing their own financial and retirement security at risk; the business community experiences a reduction in productivity when they lose good employees to family caregiving.

"My administration will place a high priority on direct care workforce issues and will work across the aisle to implement solutions to recruitment and retention challenges. DCWs will not be left behind and will be included in all health workforce initiatives. I will ensure family and paid caregivers' voices are heard by assembling a Caregiver Advisory Council. I will also lead on eliminating the subtle societal norms that "keep this workforce down at heel," such as viewing the workforce as "entry level" even if they've worked in the field for more than 20 years.

"I will implement sound policy. The first piece of legislation that I sign will be a comprehensive direct care workforce bill and the needed resources to bring nationally recognized work, currently devastated by dramatic budget cuts, to scale. There is no need to continue to study these issues. We are in a crisis and it is time to act and invest. The bill will 1) identify and implement strategies to increase DCW compensation; 2) create competency-based educational standards that are portable across work setting or population served; 3) provide opportunities to grow within the field or become a licensed nurse or other health professional; 4) expand the Iowa Direct Care Worker registry to maintain the credentials of not only CNAs in nursing homes but all who work in direct care so they can move freely between work settings; and 5) restore funding to the DCW recruitment and retention initiatives demonstrated to have a positive impact on this workforce. I vow to listen to and respect the direct care workforce and those who are impacted by what they do."

This is what the next governor needs to say and do, and making it known to voters before Nov. 6 might result in a win.

Di Findley is the executive director of Iowa CareGivers.