



## Certified nursing assistants the backbone of local health care industry

For four years, Abby Leston's workdays have been marked by stress and strain. She spends months growing closer to her residents, learning their physical and emotional needs and about their lives before knowing basic nursing and Rehabilitation Center.



Abby Leston

They observe holidays together, celebrating against a backdrop of interlocking sleeping machines and flashing signs. They go to know their families and friends. They laugh together and, occasionally, cry together.

And then, all of a sudden, Leston will switch, helms, as those for whom she has fought so hard always face and do.



Doug Strickland

"Many of them I consider to be like my family," said the certified nursing assistant. "It gets intensely heartbreaking if their condition changes."

CNA's such as Leston are on the front line of patient care on the U.S. long-term care facilities and provide essential care to those who need residents' food, clean and — above all — safety.



Becky Bellows

But the fast-paced, high-stress and low-paying work environment takes its toll. Many CNA's are leaving the profession for other careers. Some are becoming a licensed practical nurse or other health care professionals.

"The education they need to be paid a million dollars a day," said Rebecca Williams, a registered nurse and CNA instructor at Northeast Wisconsin Community College.



Doug Strickland

"It's a hard job," she added. "And it's a job for a younger person. If you can make the same amount of money at McDonald's, you're not going to take care of somebody's body fluids."

Just days away from her 21st birthday, Leston already is one of the most experienced CNA's at Enclave. Even, she will take her first step becoming a licensed practical nurse on her way to becoming a registered nurse.



Doug Strickland

While care center administrators are supportive of CNA's being career initiative — many offer tuition reimbursement programs — it essentially guarantees a near constant workforce shortage.

"I honestly did not know that the staffing costs for CNA's everywhere," said Leston. "It's not just one nursing home and one hospital."



Doug Strickland

The job if education are the compensation and turns the conditions. CNA's are the backbone through which modern health care is delivered.

The workers feed, bathe, dress, groom and make patients. More than half of CNA's networks work either in nursing homes or assisted living homes for the elderly, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



Doug Strickland

"You do everything from getting people up in the morning, doing their hair and getting them dressed, bathing them, feeding them," said Paul McHenry, a CNA from DuSable, Ill., who works at DuSable. "You help them with their physical therapy."

CNA's don't just help with physical needs.



Doug Strickland

"A lot of people enjoy talking with the CNA's because the CNA's are the allies that are with them all the time," McHenry said. "It's kind of good to have a relationship with your nurses."

Doug Strickland lives at Enclave Manor. He said the great CNA's make a less-than-pleasant change of setting easier to stomach.



Doug Strickland

"For other very much be independent," he said. "But you come to the point where you rely on them for things you need to be able to take care of yourself. They don't make you feel bad about the situation you're in."

In fact, having as young as 18 can earn their certified nursing assistant certification, which is a pre-requisite to many other health care careers.



Doug Strickland

In fact, CNA's are training to attend more than 70 hours of classes and complete 30 hours of clinical work. This combination and practical exams courses by the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals.

From there, they are free to work with residents of care facilities and in certain hospital settings.



Doug Strickland

It's not for everyone.

"I'd tell you, honestly, I could never do their job. I could never do it," said Strickland.

At long-term care facilities, CNA's are on duty 24 hours per day. They work on holidays and weekends, tending to residents who may struggle to get up as simple as moving from a bed to a chair.



Doug Strickland

For example, Leston has managed dual roles as a student and CNA throughout almost her entire tenure.

"I have to plan my days," she said. "I have to plan when I eat, when I go to pretty much everything."

Another challenge is the existing nature of the work. Michele Healy, executive director of DuSable Rehabilitation and long-term care center, said updated regulations from the U.S. Centers for Medicare Services mean new ways CNA's have to interact with patients.



Doug Strickland

Behind low pay and frustration in specific circumstances, are some who feel that care centers where a full-time patient has gotten out of bed.

As options for treating the nearly 40 million patients with dementia with behavior issues or emotional health concerns are being used in long-term care facilities. At the same time, administrators are encouraged to reduce the amount of antipsychotic medications distributed to patients.

"You have to find new approaches, how health approaches to help the patients," Healy said.

### Making the cut

When students enter the CNA program at MCC, instructors write lists including those to be removed from the program.

Doree Danks, operations director and student services coach at MCC, said prospective CNA's are treated to a "class of reality" right away. Business partners from care facilities meet with students to help them understand what to expect.

"They talk about hours and expectations and basic types of residents they're going to work with," Danks said. "We try to get from day one, they know what they're getting into."

Students also must undergo a two-step tuberculosis test and background checks. This has weed out applicants who, even if they were certified, would be unemployable.

"We don't want to expose our vulnerable population to people who are going to bring the flu," Danks said.

Classroom time is spent learning procedures, she said to most residents into a single problem or four to have other signs, such as blood pressure. Eventually, students move into "clinics," during which they work in a real care setting with real patients.

Cassie Seard started training after hearing about the job from family members and friends. But she initially was doubtful about whether she had made the right decision.

"I didn't think I was going to be ready," she said. "After doing the class, I don't think I'd be able to deal with it."

But her initial impression of MetroCare Health Services in Dubuque helped her realize that she was on the correct path.

"It was a relief to be able to do it," Seard said. "I can handle it. Being around these people, the residents, they make your days that much better. You work in there, and they're bringing and they're happy to see you. It just reassures me that I'm in the right field."

Long-term care facilities have seen countless recruits come and go. It is easy to tell who has the chops.

"You're going to know pretty quick whether they're really out for it or not, whether they're going to enjoy it or not," she said.

Getting CNA's into care facilities is experience their first real job. They don't know they are the best people because from long term care, where the staff really care about the people," she said. "It's not like back in the '90s when they got set in their clinics, doctors or therapists, used on them."

### The next step

With more than 30 years as a CNA, Wang is retiring in the next few months. She has spent decades in the direct-care field, working with residents about drastic career shifts.

She learned the trade after being less than thrilled with care that her grandmother received at a facility. Wang thought she could do better.

"I got the helping hands," she said. "I think we're all in this world to help each other. I enjoy working with people. I enjoy talking with them."

But for many — such as Leston — a shift as a CNA is a precursor to career as a full-fledged nurse.

"I wanted to be on the next step and use more skills," she said.

Wang said the job itself to be seen as a viable long-term work option. If a CNA gets a job in a hospital, he or she could expect good benefits and relatively good pay.

"I'm in, for a long time, there was kind of career CNA's, if you will — people that enjoyed working with patients and working at the level they were working without furthering their education," she said. "For a long time, it was a fairly stable job."

Now, the number of student CNA's is "rising the skies," he said.

But many officials aren't convinced that CNA's frequently are short-term jobs. Working around school schedules, the hospital becomes a sort of training ground for future nurses.

Lester, who's only now CNA's as a potential homegrown nurse.

"We can get them as an RN working the floor, so they can just kind of work that way," Lester said. "It's more useful to watch the CNA's give in their mind."

While long-term care facilities are "designed" to have nursing assistants who have realized their "true calling," it does serve as a foundation for strong nurses, according to Lester.

"This is the backbone, and you understand," she said. "And I think it makes for more compassionate nurses, if they were CNA's."

### Why do it

A CNA job description typically focus on the physical needs of a patient or resident. But after they spend a few days on the job, they realize there is so much more to it.

A certified nursing assistant is a person's rock, emotionally and physically. They offer an emotional bond friends and caregivers could not give.

"It's hard for CNA's to watch their patients struggle and die. But they know they made a difference, Maddy said.

"When they pass away, you know they're not suffering anymore," she said. "And you know you're the person who has given them the best care in their last moments."

The bonds that can form are so strong, even seeing residents leave under happy circumstances can be difficult.

"It's bittersweet when somebody you like gets discharged," said Leston. "It's like, 'It's nice you, but don't get disappointed!'"

"It's not just the residents.

"We also have to be there as kind of a shoulder for the families, too," said Wang. "The families are seeing the changes that loved ones. They're not behaving the way they have their entire lives."

"You always have to be there to say, 'It's OK.'"

Every CNA at some point will have to console a family member distraught over the decision to move a loved one to a care facility, according to Williams. And when that time comes, it's the CNA's job to reassure them.

"OK, but it needs to be here," she recalled telling family members.

"We're going to do the day-to-day things for you. We're going to take him and make him clean. We're going to bring the family paper in and set and meet with him. When you have that special doctor that has been your doctor, you bring it in. We're going to make sure he gets it."

"We're going to do the things you need us to do."

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