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Health Care

Workforce issues plague home care firms

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Given the choice, most people would prefer to stay home as they age or when recovering from a surgery.

That's fine with insurers and government payers, who agree that it costs less to provide caregivers in the home than in a nursing home or hospital.

But as demand for home care grows, the number of individuals who choose to work or stay in the field simply isn't keeping pace. That has led to challenges for families and home-care businesses.

How bad is it? According to the Home Care Association of New York State, unfilled positions reached double digits: 17 percent of home health aide (HHA) and personal care aide jobs, 20.6 percent of nursing jobs and 20.7 percent of therapist jobs remain unfilled.

The result is a lack of access for people who need care most.

The report shows that 28.25 percent to 38.95 percent of a provider's potential or actual case admissions are delayed or hindered by labor shortages in home care.

"Our data shows that some of the shortages that exist are having an impact on starting care; hospitals' need to discharge patients; and agencies not being able to always admit the patient or be able to provide services in a timely basis," said Roger Noyes, a spokesman for the state association.

Besides a general shortage of workers, companies said the state's minimum wage changes make it



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Clarice Hart, an RN checks up Lawrence Hughes in his South Buffalo home.

more difficult to bring someone in for a labor-intensive, emotionally draining job when people realize they can make comparable salaries working at a fast-food restaurant.

"As a home-care company, we have always been on the higher end, especially for HHA and CNAs (certified nursing assistants), which are all pretty well compensated," said Joyce Markiewicz, CEO of Catholic Health Home Care Services.

The total number of workers dropped from about 500 in 2016 to 335 last year.

"What we are seeing with the changes in minimum wage law is our true competitors now for that workforce are places like Aldi, other grocery stores and even fast-food restaurants," she said.

Despite strong demand, the business has to control its growth because there simply aren't enough workers.

A few years ago, the agency would bring in 100 to 140 new home health aides a year, many of whom came through its training programs. Fewer than half that number were hired last year, and the agency has difficulty even filling the training classes.

"We turn business away every single day," Markiewicz said. "We don't seem to have difficulty related to therapies like PT, OT — those positions we can fill pretty readily. But R.N.s and HHAs (home health aides), that's a whole other story."

To combat the problem, Catholic Health Home Care is exploring residency programs with area colleges and creating pilot programs to give nurses different kinds of training and experience to better prepare them for home care.

On the personal-care side, the company offers transportation via Uber through a grant.

Employment has remained relatively flat, about 850, at Kaleida Health's Visiting Nursing Association of Western New York, though it has become a lot more difficult to find home health aides, said CEO Judy Baumgartner.

Still, the company has fewer aides than it did three years ago because of broader workforce issues around minimum wage and competition for entry-level personnel, she said.

In response, the VNA is collaborating with other agencies on a subcontract basis to supplement its own nursing care.

"We have been able to meet the needs of our patients by really collaborating with those other agencies," Baumgartner said. "Or we will work with them to supplement, using their personal-care aides or their companion aides."

The difficulty on the nursing and health professional side has more to do with nursing shortages and an aging workforce, she said.

In response, the VNA has partnered with more local nursing schools for clinical rotations. That led to an increase from 100 to 150 students coming through and learning about opportunities to work in home care.

"It's been great being able to create that greater awareness and appreciation for the nursing care being done in the community and in the home," Baumgartner said.

Aftercare Nursing Services saw the total FTE count for personal care and home care services increase from 250 in 2016 to 393 last year.

But the Cheektowaga-based company faces similar workforce challenges when it comes to getting employees who show up on time and follow the rules.

"We find we can attract enough people but find some challenges working against trends in the workforce with people who tend not to call or show up for work, or they show up late," said Cathleen Sheehy, director of HR.

She does open interviews every day and advertises on college campuses to draw future health care workers.

Michelle Kuna, operations director, said the ultimate goal is finding someone early in their career who wants to get into hands-on care.

"We try to focus in on people who have that caring attitude and they're looking in the health care field to grow further," Kuna said, "so they understand what's involved moving forward."

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