

# Tompkins targets more nursing aides for aging population

Annual turnover 71 percent

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All her life, Sheri Whitley has cared for others, and loves doing so. After 20 years as a bookkeeper, the foster mom finally packed it in to pursue her dream job of being a nursing aide.

Long hours, low pay and loaded responsibilities? Sheri prefers to focus on the rewarding relationships, encouraging environment and spiritual satisfaction.

"It's not all easy. If you look at it as just a job, it can be very hard. You're on the move for the whole eight hours, and sometimes you're up and down 10 times during your lunch break," she said. "But I'm following my passion. It's a beautiful environment to work in and the residents are just darling."

As the population ages and the number of elderly U.S. residents is set to increase 104 percent by 2030, people like Sheri will become increasingly valuable. Unfortunately, there are not enough Sheris to go around.

There's a national shortage of long-term caregivers, and it is felt in Tompkins County.

Lisa Holmes, director of the county's Office for the Aging, said local facilities are finding it difficult to recruit and retain staff, and that this presents quality-of-care issues for frail seniors.

One of the problems locally is a lack of a central organization providing aide certification training.

Long-term care facilities must instead do their own in-house training, a process that is often time and money intensive. The loss of one certified nursing assistant is the equivalent of about \$2,500 in recruitment and training costs, Holmes said. Recruits for other agencies must either wait months to be slotted into training sessions or go out of county for more regularly held sessions.

"This is a very large-scale issue and a tough nut to crack, so we tried to focus on finding some local solutions, and I feel like we did," Holmes told county legislators at a recent Health and Human Services Committee meeting.

Last year, her office partnered with BOCES, Tompkins Workforce NY and several other agencies to offer training sessions, some hosted at Cayuga Ridge, utilizing two grants, one for

\$20,000 and the other for \$50,000. Those have continued, and produced dozens of graduates thus far.

"Any time that we can help ourselves and the community to fill the pool of potential quality workers, we do it," said Cayuga Ridge director Pat Deptula.

The Health Planning Council also produced a guide for careers in caring, describing positions, outlining training requirements and listing local employers.

At Longview on Bella Vista Drive in Ithaca, the search is on for resident aides, who require special training to be able to provide medication management in addition to basic care of residents in the adult care facility. Whitley just completed her training, which took two months. Marilyn Strassberg, director of resident services, is hoping to augment her staff of 10 aides with an additional five as the complex readies to open a new wing with 32 more assisted-living beds.

Strassberg said her facility would benefit if foundation courses were offered in the community, as many of the basic skills required are common to all health care workers, such as bathing patients and transporting them safely, and it might help attract people into the profession. Fortunately, her site has had a relatively low turnover rate, thanks in part to an attractive benefits package, Strassberg said.

But that seems to be the exception, as most who enter the field do not last long.

Annual turnover rate for certified nursing assistants is 71 percent, and 91 percent of nursing homes admit to not having adequate staff to provide basic care, Holmes quoted from a report by the Institute of Medicine.

Another study determined that up to 60 percent of home health aides leave after less than a year on the job, a number which reaches as high as 90 percent within two years, she said.

Holmes said academics at Cornell University and the Ithaca College Gerontology Institute are helping to tackle the problem by training staff within local agencies to address workplace issues proven to affect retention.

She also hopes to more widely adapt a consumer-directed home care program offered through Medicaid, which would allow friends and family of elderly people to be trained and reimbursed for their care.

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