

Who Will Be the “Carers”?

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The American Dream is alive and well, both here and abroad. For some, the dream may mean simply to live in a country where there are freedoms to live life as one wants. For others, the dream may mean living in a country where prosperity exists through hard work, where quality education is an expectation for all children, and where it is commonplace to be healthy, safe, and to live to an advanced age.

In the United States, with so many people living to an advanced age – thanks in part to medical advances, access to good nutrition, and availability of quality health care, demand is also skyrocketing for people to work in the field of caregiving. The US Department of Labor projects that in the next decade, Home Health Care and Personal Care Aides will be among the fastest growing occupations in the nation. Even without the aging baby boom demographic, nursing homes and other long-term care providers are already experiencing severe shortages of nursing aides.

With nursing home staffing turnover rates reaching an unbelievably high level, the demand for elder care workers is not only growing but is becoming a crisis. And unfortunately, there are inadequate numbers of USA citizens to fill these jobs.

The work is difficult. Individuals with dementia and chronic illnesses may have their days and nights confused, strike out or scream at others, may be incontinent, have difficulty getting in and out of bed, or need help with feeding and dressing. Caregiving is both physically and emotionally challenging. Coupled with low pay, these positions are very difficult to fill. Nursing facilities often offer sign on bonuses, pay referral fees, set up tables in grocery stores, at community colleges, and post openings on the web and are still falling short of meeting their staffing needs.

Who are the present faces of those who provide long-term care services? Approximately 90% are women, mostly between the age of 25 and 54; 50% are minorities; 28% are immigrants, and of those 1 in 5 is undocumented. Ten years from now, there will be more people over the age of 65 than women who typically are their caregivers. This statistic is CRITICAL for this country's long-

term care system. We must find additional ways to identify, recruit, train, and retain qualified and compassionate individuals to work in the elder care field if we are to maintain the quality of life for our mothers, fathers, and all older adults in this country.

With the expected surge of 30 million new patients being able to access the health care with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act expansion, the medical community has the potential to be woefully understaffed. And unfortunately, a dearth of caring professionals has a direct effect on an older adult's vulnerability for exploitation, neglect, and abuse by underground “untrained” professionals and sometimes unfortunately, unscrupulous family members.

However, there is a solution. There are many people from other countries who would graciously take these jobs since qualified American workers already are unavailable or interested in taking them. The USA is seen as the land of opportunity all around the world. Looking overseas to fill some of the vacancies will help to alleviate the impending eldercare crisis. And most importantly, with increased staffing quality of care will improve.

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