

## Long-term care facilities work hard to reduce staff turnover

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Reducing and managing employee turnover is critical in many industries, but particularly in long-term senior living facilities in which residents develop relationships with employees who learn their needs and preferences.

Senior living centers range from the traditional nursing home to independent, assisted living centers and independent living facilities. Turnover rates in such facilities have traditionally been high, with some estimates indicating employee turnover could cost long-term care facilities billions of dollars each year. Industry insiders say high turnover can also negatively impact the care seniors receive in such facilities.

Watermark Retirement Communities National Director of Recruitment Debbie Penn says turnover is “always a concern,” but particularly so in an industry that relies heavily on skilled nurses, caregivers and housekeepers to work with seniors who often have significant memory and medical issues.

“It’s really, really critical to have a consistency of care for seniors,” Penn said of why turnover is a concern. “Seniors tend to get attached to the staff that work with them, they get comfortable, they get used to the staff that works with them, and the staff get attached and comfortable with the residents.”

Julie Venti, director of employee relations at Episcopal SeniorLife Communities, says a strong workforce is critical to offering quality programs and services for seniors. Venti said the health care market is competitive, especially for nurses, certified nursing assistants and personal care aides, so it is especially important for organizations to be thoughtful in recruitment and retention efforts.

Venti said the senior care industry is unique because it’s the business of helping people, and it’s not enough to simply hire someone to do a job or complete tasks. She said organizations must seek out employees who truly care for and understand seniors.

“Recruiting for high quality, caring individuals is a continual challenge,” Venti said. “Geriatrics is often an overlooked field, and we have therefore spent a great deal of outreach communicating the personal and professional benefits of working with the elderly. This is why it is extra important that once we find the caring individuals, we do everything in our power to retain them.”

Turnover is an industry-wide concern, according to Lisa Ippolito, regional director of DePaul Adult Care Communities, who said employee retention is vital and provides continuity of care for residents.

“Having staff who are familiar with a resident’s needs provides comfort and peace of mind for both residents and their families,” Ippolito said.

Venti said the average turnover rate in New York is about 33 percent in long-term care facilities. She said ESLC strives to maintain a much higher retention rate and is continually evaluating efforts to maintain a strong workforce. Caregiving is a challenging job, Venti said, and in addition to compensation, burnout, long hours and physical demands can contribute to higher turnover rates.

Turnover can impact the quality of life for residents, Venti said, adding caregivers develop strong relationships with residents and peers. Venti said new staff members need to forge relationships with residents and learn the likes, dislikes and needs of seniors as well as the expectations of supervisors and peers.

“A high level of turnover does not allow for those relationships to grow and ultimately results in decreased quality of care, resident satisfaction and morale, and an increase in stress for both staff and residents,” Venti said. “The effects of turnover in senior care are especially disruptive. Turnover in any industry is expensive, but in senior care the impact is much deeper than just on the bottom line.”

Consistent staffing is important across the board, Penn said, ranging from the nurses providing care to the person who serves them in the dining room. Though turnover can impact each part of a senior living facilities’ operations, Penn said with a nursing shortage at the national level organizations must do everything in their power to keep solid nurses.

“Nursing and caregivers, medication technicians—these are the people there seems to be higher demand for and less qualified people who can perform these jobs,” Penn said. “If you get good nurses and good caregivers you do what you can to retain them.”

Penn said Watermark, which owns and operates more than 50 retirement communities in more than 20 states across the nation, looks at the nontangible cost of turnover as well and noted residents can feel as if they’re losing a friend or family member when staff members leave a facility.

“We really try to also not just look at the monetary cost of turnover, which does impact our communities, but the intangibles are even more important—the relationships, what residents might perceive as a loss of a friend, trying to get used to somebody new, what impact having new people have on the day-to-day operations,” Penn said. “So a lot goes into the thought process of how critical it is to keep your staff happy and retain them.”

Despite retention efforts, employee turnover is something every facility and organization must deal with at times. Replacing employees can be an expensive endeavor, with employers taking the time to identify potential replacements, conducting interviews throughout the hiring process and training new employees who may be less productive for some time.

Ippolito said turnover rates have gone down in the last two years, but turnover rates were still reported at 31.71 percent in 2017. When turnover inevitably occurs, Ippolito said DePaul provides an extended orientation for new employees, taking training to “the next level” while focusing on person-centered care, empathy and sensitivity.

Trust and familiarity between residents and caregivers is essential, according to Ippolito, who said consistency in staffing makes the transitions of the day easier on residents, especially those who may be memory impaired.

“Longtime employees are invaluable for their constant presence and comprehension of resident needs,” Ippolito said. “Long-term employees benefit not only the residents and family members but new employees as well. Experienced staff understand the challenges they may be facing and it’s vital to a superior onboarding.”

Across the health care and senior living industries, more highly compensated positions tend to experience less turnover. Ippolito said at the caregiver level, individuals may often see the position as a job rather than a career path and employees may leave for small hourly wage increases or for jobs where the workload is less. Staff in the dietary departments also tend to have high turnover rates, Ippolito said, as staff are often students working part time as a pre-college or college job.

Turnover at ESLC is highest among direct caregivers, such as nurses, personal care aides and certified nursing assistants, Venti said. At ESLC, employing and retaining caring staff is “a core strategic initiative,” Venti said, noting the organization invests in its workforce by offering leadership development and staff education, wages that meet or exceed industry standards and meaningful fringe benefits.

“Our success as an organization is dependent upon a caring, engaged and competent workforce,” Venti said. “We can only meet our customers’ expectations—and cater to their individual needs and desires—if recruitment, development and retention of our workforce are high priorities.”

DePaul focuses on reducing turnover by providing training and staff development opportunities, Ippolito said, adding the company’s family-centered environment fosters a sense of belonging. DePaul also provides retention bonuses, which is a common device in nursing to retain employees.

Venti said ESLC offers competitive wages and benefits; affordable health care insurance; a 401(k) matching program; company-supported life insurance; generous, earned time off; tuition reimbursement programs; and more. She said the company also encourages a healthy work and life balance.

The culture of a company can be equally as critical as pay in the industry, Penn said, noting part of Watermark’s success in retaining employees can be attributed to its culture.

“We have a really, really strong culture of training, promotions from within and maintaining high staff to resident ratios,” Penn said. “First and foremost it’s having a good, solid culture and creating communities where people not only want to live as residents but where people want to work, and that’s a culture of respect.”

Penn said the company conducts employee surveys on occasion, and salary is never at the top of the list of why individuals stay or leave the company. She said it’s more about how people are treated, the opportunities for growth and recognition for their work.

“We really try very hard to care about the people who work with us as much as we want them to care about the people they take care of,” Penn said.