

Direct Care Workforce and the NC Community College System Background Information

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If NC is to attract high paying jobs in information technology, manufacturing, and other sectors, the state also needs a reliable direct care workforce that can be employed in home based, community based, and residential care settings. Yet paradoxically, as the labor market prospects improve, the shortage and turnover for these direct care workers has become more acute as some of its best workers jump at the opportunity to take better paying jobs in other sectors. At the same time, many of our highly skilled workers often curtail their own participation in the labor force--or withdraw entirely-- in order to provide hands on care for their aging relatives, because they can't find or arrange for someone who has right the mix of skill and compassion and are flexible and reliable enough to supplement a primary caregiver.

Caregiving needs to be recognized for the value it actually brings to care recipients and their families—especially those family members who are providing unpaid care and are thereby limited to the extent of their labor force participation. Some of the work that paid direct care workers do – like providing care for individuals with dementia and/or with complex care needs – demands not only very specific skills but also requires establishing and maintaining longer term trusting relationships with individual service recipients and families. Further, the rapidly evolving development of new technologies to monitor and assist people with long term care needs will not likely displace these workers but might well make their labor more productive while requiring more ongoing training and education to acquire additional skills. Yet the current skills of these workers are not recognized or rewarded across the sector by third-party payers. This leads to inadequate wages and few promotional opportunities, resulting in extremely high turnover especially among frontline workers. This fact is part of a larger problem that all kinds of caregiving is substantially undervalued.

The North Carolina Community College System has a broad focus on occupational development, an extensive geographic reach, and a strong reputation for competence and innovation. We believe that the leadership of the System should be in a key position to highlight how upgrading the long term care workforce will improve life not only for these workers and their employers, but for all NC citizens. North Carolina's Community College system can likely play a key role in implementing specific workforce improvements through the development of programs that can impart skills, certify the value of those skills, and articulate career ladders for those engaged with the colleges. Further, over the last two decades, with demonstration grants from a variety of state, federal, and philanthropic sources, North Carolina has been a national leader in developing innovative solutions to address some direct care workforce issues; several of these projects have involved the participation of various community colleges around the state. Hence, we have not only a platform from which to launch new initiatives, but more importantly a shared history of stakeholder trust and collaboration. Extending and building on these efforts could demonstrate to communities, employers, and others that educating and adequately paying a competent, compassionate, and reliable direct care workforce will provide substantial and wide ranging benefits to a variety of stakeholders, and to North Carolina as a state.

Despite widespread and longstanding recognition that our population is aging, too few have recognized that we are in the midst of a workforce crisis that will only worsen unless we do something about it. It has been a decade since the publication of *Retooling for An Aging America* by the National Academy of Medicine, which highlighted this issue. Those of us engaged with the Eldercare Workforce Alliance are planning activities to commemorate this national recognition of the value of elder care work, and to proactively engage communities in planning for the coming decade to stem the workforce crisis.