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Women Are the Backbone of American Caregiving

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Despite significant changes over the last 30 years in women's roles at home and in the workplace, America continues to rely almost exclusively on the labor of women to provide care and support to its aging population: The vast majority of family caregivers are mothers, daughters and sisters. Additionally, 90% of the paid caregiving workforce—particularly the home health aides, personal care aides and nursing assistants who provide 80% of the paid hands-on care for elders—are female.

New research from Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute (PHI) shows that not only are these workers female, but compared to the female workforce as a whole, our caregiving system increasingly relies on older women to care for the very old. In 2008, 22.1% of direct-care workers were reported to be ages 55 and older, compared to 18% of women in the civilian workforce overall. Personal-care workers were even older, with nearly 30% being ages 55 and older.

A FAST-GROWING OCCUPATION

Direct care is America's second fastest-growing occupation. By 2018, the nation will need 4.3 million workers to care for elders and people with disabilities. To put this in perspective, nationwide there soon will be more direct-care workers than schoolteachers for all of America's K–12 classrooms.

As the workforce expands, its demographics will shift as well. First, not enough younger female workers are entering the workforce to fill the growing demand for caregivers. In the decade of 2008 to 2018, 850,000 females ages 25–54 will join the workforce, while there is a demand for an additional 1.1 million new direct-care workers.

Another element to consider is that today's workers, just like the population overall, are getting older. Consequently, by the year 2018, direct-care workers over the age of 55 will increase from 22% to 30% of the workforce. This means that by 2018, at least 1.2 million older females will be providing direct-care services.

OLDER WORKERS ARE HOMECARE PROVIDERS

Homecare is the fastest-growing sector of eldercare services. Of the 1.1 million new direct-care positions projected by year 2018, more than 375,000 will be held by personal-care workers and 460,000 by home health aides. Notably, older workers already are more heavily concentrated in these homecare positions.

In 2008, of direct-care workers ages 55 and older, nearly 40% worked in homecare settings, while more than half of younger workers (ages 15–24) were employed in nursing care facilities and hospitals. This may be because older workers have the experience necessary to feel comfortable in homecare settings where supervision is minimal. Homecare also offers more flexibility to mothers and grandmothers with caregiving responsibilities at home.

Although homecare work offers workers greater independence, it is more often part-time

employment and, overall, provides less income than facility-based positions. Personal-care workers earn, on average, \$12,000 annually as compared to \$20,000 for nursing assistants. These wages are insufficient for most workers, leaving them struggling with poverty and reliant on public benefits to meet the needs of their families; PHI research shows 40% of direct-care workers' households rely on public benefits.

CAREGIVING POSES CHALLENGES, OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES

Without enough younger women entering the workforce to fill the demand for direct-care workers, attracting older workers is one strategy for addressing an impending "care gap." Yet the incentives to become a homecare worker and stick with the occupation are few.

Caregiving wages are low, the jobs rarely come with benefits and it is hard work that leaves workers vulnerable to injury and illness. The PHI research has found that nursing assistants, for example, have the highest rate of occupational injury in the country. Though data on homecare workers are not currently available, rates of injury for workers in homecare settings are likely to be even higher, since these workers do not have assistance with lifting and transferring clients.

There is, however, an answer: Through better training, support and a fresh look at the job design of homecare workers, older women can play increasingly valuable roles in the health-care system.

Now that healthcare reform is expanding to 95% of the population, policymakers must turn their attention to addressing the caregiving needs of America's elders. Redesigning direct-care jobs to tap the full potential of 4 million caregivers is the next step toward making our healthcare system more cost-effective and responsive to the needs of America's families. Designed thoughtfully and implemented well, direct-care occupations can provide not only quality care, but also quality jobs for hundreds of thousands of older Americans. ❖

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