

Certified nurse aides in short supply Local training offered for state certification

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Without certified nurse aides, patient care at hospitals and nursing homes would unravel.

"We would really be hurting," said Marie Eaton, a licensed practical nurse at St. Vincent Healthcare. "We really depend on our CNAs a lot."

Often overlooked and arguably underpaid, certified nurse aides, or CNAs, are the backbone of inpatient care.

They perform some of the most intimate caregiver duties, such as helping people eat, bathe and use the bathroom.

They also check vital signs, change bedding and help move immobilized patients.

"To us, they are the single most important resource we have," said Kent Burgess, president and chief executive officer at St. John's Lutheran Ministries. "CNAs are the heart of our ministry."

And there aren't enough of them.

There are almost 40 open CNA positions between St. John's, the region's largest long-term care facility, and the city's two hospitals. In total, the three facilities employ about 475 of the aides.

In hopes of reducing its vacancy and turnover rates, St. Vincent Healthcare started a CNA training program. It joined similar courses at St. John's and the Career Center and is already improving the hospital's CNA retention rate.

"It costs money every time someone quits," said Lily Meyer, a registered nurse who, with Eaton, teaches the course.

The intensive training fuels aides' confidence and helps them feel like the integral part of the care system that they are, Meyer said.

"Traditionally, aides are the bottom of the totem pole," she said. "I always tell them it's the bottom of the totem pole that holds the rest up."

Students in the St. Vincent program are hired as hospital employees and train for 120 hours over three weeks. At course end, they take a state exam to become certified. Those who pass are guaranteed jobs.

Of the 29 people to successfully complete the course in its first year, 24 still work at the hospital, Meyer said.

That's a 17 percent turnover rate - significantly lower than rates at other facilities.

Turnover is typically higher at nursing homes, where the bulk of CNAs work, than it is at hospitals.

At St. John's, the rate is 50 percent. Low by industry standards - it is as high as 120 percent at some nursing facilities - it is still higher than recruiters would like, administrator Mike Follett said.

In nursing homes, aides spend more time with patients than anyone else and usually are paid less than anyone else, Follett said.

"The pay is not high," Follett said. "The work is not glamorous. It's physically demanding. There's an emotional toll."

St. John's has tried to revolutionize the role of its CNAs by offering aides who opt for extra training more money and a new job title.

Those who undergo the additional 160 hours of training become elder sharaths and care for residents in the St. John's cottage-style residences. The facility has 31 sharaths and was training 30 more this week.

"The CNA is the foundation of long-term care," Follett said. "We're trying to reinvent the CNA position into the sharath position. ... Hopefully it elevates the position to a position of greater esteem in society."

CNAs who pass the state test remain certified as long as they are employed as aides, said Jo Sturdevant, who operates the Montana Nurse Aid Registry in Helena.

Montana has nearly 9,400 active CNAs and home health aides, Sturdevant said. Home health aides are CNAs who completed 16 extra hours of training.

"It just takes a special kind of person to do the work they do," Sturdevant said. "It's very hard work, and it's not appreciated half the time."

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