

Job Satisfaction and Intent to Remain on the Job among Direct Care Professionals in Nursing Homes

Research Brief



About This Report

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About the LTSS Center

The LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston conducts research to help our nation address the challenges and seize the opportunities associated with a growing older population. LeadingAge and the University of Massachusetts Boston established the LTSS Center in 2017. We strive to conduct studies and evaluations that will serve as a foundation for government and provider action to improve quality of care and quality of life for the most vulnerable older Americans. The LTSS Center maintains offices in Washington, DC and Boston, MA.

For more information, visit LTSSCenter.org.

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Key Takeaways

Direct care professionals working in nursing homes have faced a variety of challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including increased workloads, understaffing, and the emotional burden of caring for residents facing COVID-related isolation, illness, and death. During the height of the pandemic, direct care professionals navigated their increasingly demanding jobs while also struggling with challenges outside the workplace, including separation from family members, personal needs, family demands, and financial hardship.

Faced with these and other challenges, some direct care professionals made the decision to leave their jobs. But others chose to stay. Researchers at the LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston used data captured by the WeCare Connect™ employee engagement and management system to analyze the factors associated with a direct care professional's job satisfaction and intent to remain on the job. Key findings include:

- ➔ **Importance of Job Satisfaction:** After accounting for workplace characteristics, pandemic-related work stress, and pandemic-related employer supports, the only factor directly associated with intent to remain on the job was higher job satisfaction.
- ➔ **Contributors to Job Satisfaction:** Direct care professionals with higher job satisfaction rates reported that their organizations provided high-quality communication and that they felt prepared to care for residents with COVID-19. High-quality communication and feeling prepared reduced the negative impact of work-related stress on job satisfaction. Direct care professionals who had more optimal relationships with their supervisors, felt appreciated for the job they do by their employer, and worked at nursing homes with lower COVID-19 resident infection rates also reported higher job satisfaction, despite experiencing pandemic-related work stressors such as increased workload demands and understaffing.
- ➔ **Support for Direct Care Professionals:** Most direct care professionals reported feeling appreciated for the job they do (76%) and comfortable and safe at work (92%). They also gave high marks to the quality of their relationship with their supervisor.
- ➔ **Implications:** Findings from this research reinforce the importance of implementing high-quality communication with direct care professionals, helping these professionals feel prepared to care for residents, and developing quality relationships between supervisors and direct care professionals. It is also important that nursing homes address factors—including understaffing and increased workload—associated with staffing shortages.

Introduction

An estimated 527,500 direct care professionals provide the vast majority of hands-on assistance to older adults and people with disabilities in nursing home settings.¹ Since 2020, these caregivers have been working on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic, making sure vulnerable populations receive the services they need during this unprecedented health crisis.

Prior to the pandemic, direct care professionals faced a variety of challenges related to their jobs, including low wages, inadequate training, lack of opportunities for career advancement, and the physical and emotionally demanding nature of their work.^{2,3} These caregivers have encountered additional challenges since the pandemic began:



Stressful, pandemic-related *work challenges* include:

- ➡ Increased workload demands.
- ➡ Understaffing.
- ➡ The emotional burden of caring for residents facing significant isolation, illness, and death.

Competing, pandemic-related *external challenges* include:

- ➡ Separation from family members.
- ➡ Personal needs and family demands.
- ➡ Financial hardship.^{2,4}

Considering the stresses that direct care professionals have encountered since 2020, it comes as no surprise that their mental health has been negatively impacted during the pandemic.⁵⁻⁷

COVID-19 also prompted an increase in the turnover and staff shortages that were already prevalent in nursing homes before the pandemic.⁸⁻¹² A June 2021 survey by the American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living found that 94% of nursing home providers reported experiencing a shortage of staff.⁹ Staff shortages in nursing homes impact quality of care, resident outcomes, and staff well-being.¹³⁻¹⁵

It is important to understand the factors associated with turnover in nursing homes, particularly during the highly stressful COVID-19 pandemic. Job satisfaction is one of those factors.

Consistently, higher job satisfaction has been shown to be associated with both decreased likelihood of intent to leave the job and actual turnover among nursing assistants working in the field of long-term services and supports (LTSS).¹⁶⁻¹⁹

About The Research

The LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston conducted two studies to assess factors associated with job satisfaction and intent to remain on the job among direct care professionals. Researchers carried out their analyses using data captured by WeCare Connect™ from direct care professionals, also referred to as aides or nursing assistants, in nursing homes.

WeCare Connect™ is an employee engagement and management system created by Wellspring Lutheran Services, a Michigan-based LeadingAge member. The WeCare Connect™ system helps 165 organizations with more than 1,200 locations around the country solicit regular feedback from their employees. Employee responses to an online battery of questions help employers better understand staff challenges with onboarding, training, supervisor relationships, job fit, job satisfaction, expectations, and the physical and organizational environment.



During May 2020, WeCare Connect™ added several pandemic-related questions, created by LTSS Center researchers, to its employee interview battery. This research brief presents what LTSS Center researchers learned after analyzing the responses to those questions from employees participating in the WeCare Connect™ employee interview battery.

Study One

During Study One, researchers examined the interrelationships between:

- ➔ Overall work-related stress experienced by direct care professionals during the pandemic.
- ➔ Quality of employer communication around COVID-19.
- ➔ Direct care professionals' job satisfaction, intent to remain on the job, and perceived preparedness to care for residents with COVID-19.²⁰

The Study One sample included 809 direct care professionals who were employed in nursing homes in May 2020.

Study Two

During Study Two, researchers sought to determine if organizational factors and stresses were associated with job satisfaction among direct care professionals. Researchers analyzed responses from a sub-sample of participants in the first study. The sub-sample included 402 direct care professionals who were employed in nursing homes during May 2020.²¹

Study Findings

Study One: Direct Care Professionals and Intent to Remain on the Job

Direct care professionals who were employed in large nursing homes of 100 or more beds, and direct care professionals with longer job tenure, were more likely to report their intention to remain on the job. When accounting for nursing home size and job tenure, the only factor directly associated with intent to remain on the job was higher job satisfaction. Pandemic-related work stress, quality of communication, and preparedness were not directly associated with intent to remain on the job. Specifically:

- ➔ Direct care professionals with higher job satisfaction rates reported receiving high-quality communication from their organizations and feeling prepared to care for residents with COVID-19.
- ➔ Direct care professionals who had higher levels of pandemic-related work stress reported lower rates of job satisfaction.
- ➔ When direct care professionals gave high ratings to the quality of communication and their preparedness, the negative impact of COVID-19 work-related stress on job satisfaction was reduced.

Study Two: Direct Care Professionals and Job Satisfaction

Study Two explored additional factors that may contribute to job satisfaction among direct care professionals. Direct care professionals reported an average job satisfaction rating of 4.2 on a scale of one to five, with higher scores representing higher levels of job satisfaction.

COVID-19 Work-Related Stressors and Job Satisfaction: Direct care professionals in Study Two identified these top work-related challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- ➔ Understaffing (40%).
- ➔ Increased risk of COVID-19 transmission to and from residents (28%).
- ➔ Increased workload demands (28%).

Two of these COVID-19 work-related stressors—specifically, increased workload demands and understaffing—were significantly associated with lower rates of job satisfaction.

“Direct care professionals with higher job satisfaction rates reported receiving high-quality communication from their organizations and feeling prepared to care for residents with COVID-19.”

Organizational Factors and Job Satisfaction: Employment at a for-profit nursing home and shorter job tenure were associated with lower job satisfaction. After controlling for those two variables, the study found that the following factors were associated with higher rates of job satisfaction:

- ➔ *Feeling appreciated for the job they do*, reported by 76% of direct care professionals.
- ➔ *Receiving better support from supervisors.* The average rating score for the quality of supervisor support was 16.8 on a scale of four to 20, with higher scores representing higher levels of supervisor support. The four-item scale asked direct care professionals to rate the quality of guidance and leadership they received from the supervisor, frequency of supervisory feedback, their level of comfort going to the supervisor with a problem, and how well the supervisor assists direct care professionals who have questions or concerns.

Additionally, lower resident COVID-19 infection rates were significantly associated with higher ratings of job satisfaction.

Supporting Direct Care Professionals During Stressful Work Times

COVID-19 has increased the visibility of the direct care professional workforce among policymakers, providers, and the public. The studies discussed in this research brief provide practical insights that providers of aging services can use to support direct care professionals in nursing homes during health emergencies like the coronavirus pandemic. This support could enhance the delivery of high-quality care for nursing home residents and could strengthen the direct care professional workforce.

Communication and Preparation

Findings from the two research studies reinforced the importance of implementing high-quality communication with direct care professionals and helping them feel prepared to care for residents. To address these two key needs, nursing home leaders should:

- ➔ Provide competency-based training on infection control and prevention practices so direct care professionals can be better prepared to manage large-scale pathogenic threats like COVID-19.
- ➔ Provide direct care professionals with additional training and education on how to care for residents or patients during a pandemic or other health emergency.
- ➔ Be as transparent as possible about the state of the organization during a pandemic.
- ➔ Develop clear protocols for communicating with staff through multiple channels.
- ➔ Develop in-service training that strengthens a nurse manager's knowledge and competencies related to the provision of clear and consistent communication.

“The nurse manager has an important role in leading and providing guidance to direct care professionals.”

Supervision

The nurse manager has an important role in leading and providing guidance to direct care professionals. Yet, research suggests that nurse managers lack the preparation and resources they need to effectively build supportive supervisory relationships with direct care professionals.²² LTSS providers can use the following strategies to support nurse managers:²²⁻²⁴

- ➔ Clearly define the role of the nurse manager.
- ➔ Collaborate with nurses, researchers, and members of academia to define the management competencies and training that can help nurse managers effectively guide and manage direct care professionals. To fulfill their role, nurse managers need interpersonal, clinical, organizational, and management skills.
- ➔ Create meaningful clinical placements for nursing students.
- ➔ Address the nursing structures, organizational structures, behaviors, and practices that could influence the supervisory performance of nurse managers.

Staffing

It is important that nursing home leaders address the understaffing and increased workload that results from staffing shortages. This can be accomplished by:

- ➔ Staggering shifts and allowing direct care professionals to work flexible hours.
- ➔ Strengthening the pipeline of direct care professionals. Vacant positions can be filled through recruitment efforts that are targeted to nontraditional workers, including high school students, displaced workers, and older people who want or need to work past retirement.
- ➔ Working with policymakers to explore immigration policies that could expand the labor pool for LTSS jobs by increasing the number of foreign-born individuals who can work in the United States.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on direct care professionals employed by nursing homes. These professionals cared for residents while facing their own stresses, both on the job and at home.

Research findings from Study One show that direct care professionals who reported high quality of communication and perceived preparedness to care for residents with COVID-19 had higher job satisfaction rates, despite high levels of work stress. These job satisfaction rates, in turn, were associated with intent to remain on the job.



Study Two showed that job satisfaction levels also were influenced by the ability of supervisors to develop quality relationships with direct care professionals, and for care settings to show appreciation for the work of direct care professionals, minimize staffing shortages, and ease the burdens on direct care professionals. These findings led researchers to conclude that nursing homes could take steps to reduce turnover by providing appropriate staff training in the care of residents, always providing transparent communication to employees, developing effective nurse managers, providing organizational supports, and reducing staffing shortages.

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