

Focusing on What Works

The Green House Project's
Workforce Task Force

Fall 2021 Report



SMALL SOLUTIONS, BIG IMPACT

Leaders and frontline caregivers in the long-term care space don't need another report to tell them about the workforce crisis.

Nearly two years into a pandemic that took a disproportionate toll on residents and staffers in nursing homes and other communal care settings, the problems - sky-high turnover, shrinking pools of available labor, steadily increasing levels of burnout - are all too common.

To find answers, The Green House Project convened a task force of frontline caregivers and leaders from its network of adopters. The goal was simple: sharing **real workforce solutions** that have created concrete progress at communities across the country.

While the answers culled from the task force meeting may not solve every workforce issue, they represent tangible actions that providers can take today when tackling the very real challenge of keeping their facilities fully staffed - and their employees **engaged and satisfied** with their jobs.

MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING ... BUT IT HELPS



While it's true that wages alone aren't enough to entice many workers to join the eldercare sector and stay for good, raising pay rates certainly can't hurt, and many task force members reported **increasing pay** to keep pace with other employers in a tight labor market.

If that's not feasible, or if higher wages fail to bring more qualified applicants in the door, get creative. Some task force members implemented **tuition payment programs** that provide student debt relief in exchange for staying on the job for a set period of time. This can work either retroactively for employees who have already received a degree or certification, or proactively for dedicated workers who want to take the next step in their career journeys.

One organization even offered to **fully assume workers' student debt** for the duration of their employment, a powerful motivator for both attracting new workers and retaining top talent.

Others invested in payroll systems that offer **more frequent paycheck options** - up to daily in some cases - to set their workplaces apart from competitors in the market. Even if your organization can't compete on wages with every other local employer, providing that seemingly small benefit can provide a huge and unique advantage.

USE THE VOICES OF YOUR MOST DEDICATED STAFFERS

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Many task force members described a similar experience around retention: a small core group of workers stays within the organization for the long haul, while a larger cohort of short-timers cycles in and out frequently. While every company will experience some level of churn, those long-tenured employees represent a **frequently untapped recruitment and retention resource**.

One task force member empowered a core group of veteran employees to **serve as mentors** for new employees, throwing out the typical classroom-style, didactic orientation in favor of hands-on education within Green House homes. Not only do new employees receive a more engaging welcome to the community, but they have a chance to hear directly about the upsides of the job from the people who have stayed with the organization the longest. Another member built a mentorship program into its “**career ladder**” system, in which new workers are given a clear path toward professional development and institutional advancement.

Despite the differences in structure, the message was the same across respondents: Let your most dedicated employees **speak for the organization** whenever possible.

ALWAYS LISTEN TO WORKERS' NEEDS

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For one task force member, the idea to adopt a daily-pay option came directly from a listening session with frontline caregivers. In the fog of COVID and a workforce crunch that long predated the pandemic, it's easy to get lost in big-picture thinking about retention and career development strategies at the expense of actually **addressing the day-to-day concerns** that frontline caregivers face.

The importance of flexibility - and investing in the technology to make it happen - also came from conversations with workers. One task force member realized that their organization's workforce was almost entirely under the age of 30, meaning that the payroll system had to facilitate scheduling changes and sick time requests easily, and even sometimes automatically, through **apps and online portals**.

Providers can't lose sight of the fact that for many frontline caregivers, the work is more than just a job; **it's a calling**. Sometimes religious or spiritual, sometimes based on personal experience, and often a mixture of both, the pull to care for elders is a motivation that goes beyond a mere vocation for many of the best employees in the sector. **Fulfilling their needs** so that they can continue to practice their craft is a vital investment in both stable staffing and resident wellbeing.

BOTTOM LINE: YOU HAVE THE TOOLS



Every provider wants a silver bullet to fix staffing shortages, but it's clear that there's no single lever to pull to instantly create a stronger workforce. The good news, however, is that organizations already have many of the tools they need already on hand to make a difference.

The varied experiences of the task force members showed that as long as leadership remains plugged into the needs and concerns of their frontline staff - and remains willing to employ novel ways to address those needs and concerns - organizations can take meaningful steps forward on hiring, training, and retention.

Top Takeaways

- **Get creative** with monetary incentives in addition to wages, specifically by focusing on top worker pain points such as student debt and long gaps between paychecks.
- Let your most dedicated workers **tell your organization's story** for you.
- Above all else, **listen** to what frontline caregivers really want; it may not be what you think they do.