

CSIU offers course to train new direct care workers

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MILTON — The Central Susquehanna Intermediate Unit, in an effort to elevate the Valley's home care worker shortage, is offering potential caregivers its Direct Care Workers Heroes program.

The DCW Heroes program, online and self-paced, can lead to professional caregiver certificates in areas including CPR, dementia, mental health and diversity and inclusion.

The program at the Milton-based CSIU is an online, self-paced professional caregiver certificate course. Incumbent home care workers can earn certificates in CPR, dementia, mental health, equity, diversity and inclusion.

"The past two years have been hard for home health care," said Linda Walker, health care education coordinator. "The question is how to move ahead? Virtualization is the new normal. Workers are required to use advanced virtual technology: Tiger Text, DocuSign, and Zoom. The CSIU offers a hands-on Digital Literacy Program for adults lacking these technological skills in order to compete in this digital world."

Currently, they are developing a training course for the prevention of falls. The Heroes program also offers industry-recognized credential training, including OSHA Bloodborne and Airborne Pathogens training certifications for health care workers.

"DCW Heroes assists individuals who want to enter into a health care career and incumbent health care workers that want to build skills and knowledge," said Kerri Kubalak, DCW Heroes program manager. "The program offers both a professional care worker online training as well as supports a career pathway to a certified nurse aide. Career coaches provide support to individuals in the program through training and then gaining health care employment, including home health aides and certified nursing assistants. Career coaches assist individuals after employment with retaining that employment by assisting with barriers that otherwise would cause employment issues such as transportation and child care, by connecting participants with outside agency referrals and connections."

Through the CSIU Healthcare Advisory Team, DCW Heroes can provide health care industry information, collaborate and work through current health care workforce barriers with local health care employers, training

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Photo by Justin Strawser/The Daily Item



providers and agency partners. Through this team, they are able to keep up-to-date on current issues and legislation and collaborate on solutions, said Kubalak.

Walker said employers are turning clients away because of the staffing shortage.

"Employers creatively advertise sign-on bonuses and wages that are unsustainable to the agency in an attempt to draw in prospective employees," said Walker. "Caregivers travel between clients. A reliable means of transportation is a must. Many job seekers don't own a vehicle or must share with another family member. The price of gas is another challenge for these potential employees."

Kubalak said employers struggle currently with recruitment and retention of quality health care employees.

"Turnover rates are high in entry level health care and employers are unable to fill their open positions," she said. "There are limited training opportunities for home health aides which limit skills, quality of care and the opportunity for advancement."

Home care employees have always struggled with non-sustainable living wages, insufficient training, limited advancement opportunities, and a general lack of respect and recognition, said Walker.

"The pandemic compounded this struggle," she said. "These stressed workers were enticed into primarily, the fast-food industry, where salaries are substantially higher, there are fewer responsibilities, and increased opportunities for advancement."

Kubalak said while wages pre-COVID were comparable to food service and retail, the other industries have increased their starting wages during the

pandemic while home health has not seen this same increase.

"Many individuals cannot take time off work in order to attend training and work towards their CNAs where wages are slightly higher," said Kubalak. "During COVID, certified nurse aide training programs were shut down and unable to hold classes causing an increase in the shortage. While some classes are up and running they are often put on hold mid-class due to COVID or COVID-related issues. There is also a shortage of nurse aide instructors which limits classes and class availability."

Walker said Medicaid reimbursement rates to home health agencies are low.

"Homecare agencies are being forced into making some hard decisions," she said. "As Medicaid compensation remains inadequate, wages remain low. People who would thrive in their homes with the assistance of a professional caregiver are being denied admission and are placed in costly, and many times, inappropriate health care settings. Home care employees' wages need to be competitive with other industries."

Staying on top of legislation affecting the home care industry, becoming an active member of a state professional association, and understanding and communicating with the person responsible for funding decisions in Pennsylvania. All of these are crucial to solving the problem, along with educating the public on the importance these employees play in the health care system, said Walker.

"An increase in starting wages would attract individuals to enter health care and assist in retaining those already working in the industry," said Kubalak. "In addition, support for programs

and funding that help individuals with gaining valuable training in entry-level health care and assisting them with barriers to employment."

RuthAnn Helfrick, the Health Occupation Careers Instructor at Northumberland County Career and Technology Center in Coal Township, said the curriculum includes Nursing Assisting, Medical Assisting and a small portion for Dental Assisting.

"I try to prepare my student for entry-level positions such as home health aides, nursing assistants primarily in a hospital setting — my program is not certified by the state — as well as prep them for post-secondary education," said Helfrick. "When they complete my program they will have a home health certificate, be certified in CPR and first aid, I also can offer a medical assistant certification and an ECG (electrocardiogram) technician certification."

The reasons for shortages for in-home workers is not an easy answer, said Helfrick.

"It could be due to the wages they earn which are usually much lower than working in a long-term care facility or hospital, the travel may be a deterrent or just the responsibility of caring for someone in their home without other care provider support," said Helfrick.

Helfrick said in the last few years she was trying to find home health to find care for a family member and was turned down by several agencies because they didn't have any staff that would drive to the Elysburg area.

"Overall we are seeing a shortage in all areas of health care at this time, and I don't know the reason why. It's a very rewarding career though," she said.

Provided photo

Selinsgrove-based BAYADA Pediatrics client Cole is held by his nurse Jennifer Landros.

Bayada Home Health pediatric director: Lack of awareness driving shortage

Suzanne Purcell, the Director of BAYADA Home Health Care Snyder County Pediatric office in Selinsgrove, said the shortage of home care workers is not a new trend and can be largely attributed to a general lack of awareness.

"Many nursing students are unfamiliar with opportunities associated with private duty nursing and are not exposed to the field during their training," said Purcell. "The low awareness of private duty nursing correlates to a sheer lack of applicants. Additionally, reimbursement rates are higher for nursing jobs in hospitals and long-term care facilities, making these opportunities more attractive than home care positions. This trend has worsened throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; however, we are not the only ones struggling with recruitment. Hospitals and other healthcare facilities are experiencing shortages as well. Once we get home care nurses through the BAYADA door they realize that it's a great place to work."

COVID fatigue is real and has certainly impacted BAYADA home care staff, said Purcell.

"Many of our aides and nurses working for the Snyder County Pediatrics office are moms with families," she said. "With the rising COVID rates and schools returning to remote learning, these employees have had to take a step back to care for their own families. Working outside of the home during such a tumultuous time has resulted in burnout for skilled aides and nurses. Additionally, the 'Great Resignation' has also impacted the nursing industry. Many aides and private duty nurses are making career changes and

looking for opportunities with higher wages."

With shortages, family needs, unfortunately, go unmet, she said.

"Many of our families rely on the care our nurses provide for their children to allow them the opportunity to sleep, work a full-time job, and function as a family unit," said Purcell. "When there is no nurse to cover a shift, it forces family caregivers to stay home from work or stay up all night to provide necessary care. This can result in added stress, exhaustion, and an interruption of 'normalcy' which negatively impacts the family unit. Additionally, having private duty nurses and home care aides in the home helps keep clients healthier, reducing the rate of re-hospitalizations. They can thrive within their own environment."

The solution is to create greater awareness of private duty home care nursing said Purcell.

"It's important to introduce nursing students to the field's opportunities and share the tremendous benefits which include work-life balance, flexible scheduling, industry-leading training, and the chance to form close relationships with clients and their families," said Purcell. "Additionally, we need to be attracting nursing students right out of school — that's where our Nurse Residency Program comes into play. Through our program, home care private duty nurses have a chance to receive hands-on training, leading to growth opportunities and the chance to develop specialties and expand their skillset."

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