

OPINION

Workforce retention strategies that benefit all in the care economy

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“Unions, researchers, policymakers, and special commissions have long argued for such workforce retention strategies. They recognized that the conditions of work are the conditions of care ... and of avoiding labour shortages.”

We’re losing workers in Care Economy jobs. The fix has nothing to do with more “choice” for people who can afford to pay for care and is more transformative than merely better wages and benefits.

The secret sauce? A new commitment to collaboration, both in the workplace and in public policy.

The latest report documenting the crisis in the care labour force, this time from the [Ontario College of Nurses](#), points to the dramatic changes needed in working conditions if people are going to stay in the difficult, stressful jobs in our hospitals, long term care homes and child care centres.

It’s a completely achievable task. Ask Jennifer who works with a Unifor-represented long-term-care home in southwestern Ontario that is not only encouraging workers to stay; it’s doing it in ways that save money.

Here’s where this workplace starts doing things differently.

As the result of a hard rethink on the part of management in collaboration with the local union, they’ve adopted a practice of weekly union-management meetings to discuss what needs to be done and how it should be done, solving problems as they arise, not awaiting a crisis. They also meet weekly with the entire team to consider resident needs. This team approach makes all the difference in workloads, care and morale.

One fruit of this collaboration: workers have been offered full-time jobs, bucking the trend to part-time positions and relying on temporary staffing agencies. Contrary to the myth that women don’t want full-time jobs, the overwhelming majority rushed to take up the opportunity.

Workers also have predictable shifts, a hugely contentious issue in care economy jobs. They know their schedule six weeks in advance and have every second weekend off. They can actually make plans with their family and friends. And they can trade a shift with another worker if, for example, they need to take their mother to the doctor.

Staff are happier now and more likely to stay. Lower turnover and higher job satisfaction equals more continuity in care. And getting to know the residents they care for as well as their co-workers improves the quality of care.

The employer wins too because it actually costs them less. Less in overtime pay, less in turnover and retraining costs and virtually no money going to exorbitant temp agency fees.

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While this particular collaboration does not solve all the problems of stressful, heavy workloads, it makes a big difference. It's a humane and cost-effective fix for a problem unfolding in most long-term care homes, and in the rest of the care economy for that matter.

What will it take to develop and implement a serious workforce strategy in Care Economy sectors like health care, long term care and child care? And who should be responsible for making that happen?

We propose that the Ontario government immediately establish a permanent Care Economy Workforce Strategy sectoral roundtable. It should include unions, employers, researchers, and people who use the service. It should identify strategies and provide the supports and resources to scale up promising ideas.

But this is not just a provincial/territorial issue. We desperately need a cross-Canada workforce strategy for the Care Economy that can address national issues, such as immigration, credentials and data collection. This could also provide a forum to share experiences and identify standards for equitable workplace practices that form the basis for federal funding agreements.

While allowing for some different arrangements with Quebec, the funding agreements with provinces and territories would make such transfers conditional on the enforcement of these standards, informed by an annual Monitoring and Assessment Report.

There is a fix for keeping our Care Economy workforce. It requires talking, listening and working together.

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