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Home Care in Maine:

The Worker's Experience

by Sandra S. Butler

Sandra Butler presents findings from her study of home care aides, which was aimed at understanding the high rate worker of turnover. The study found that low wages, lack of mileage reimbursement and job benefits, and inconsistent and unreliable hours were key factors in workers' decisions to leave the field.

Most elders needing assistance to live independently receive that help from family members and friends, sometimes referred to as “informal caregivers.” But for a variety of reasons—including smaller families, higher divorce rates, and increasing numbers of women in the workforce—these informal caregivers are less available than in the past and may not be able to supply all the assistance needed to allow elders to remain at home for as long as possible. This is a particular problem in Maine since children often leave the state in search of better employment opportunities. Not only are informal caregivers in ever shorter supply, but home care workers, sometimes called “formal caregivers,” are not always adequately available either, in part due to high rates of turnover resulting from poor compensation. Addressing this care gap as baby boomers move into their elder years will be a crucial factor in whether current efforts to promote aging-in-place succeed.

In Maine, the title for home care aides is “personal support specialist” (PSS). In 2008, I began a longitudinal study examining the experiences of PSS workers in Maine and the factors that contribute to job turnover. For 18 months, our research team followed a sample of 261 PSS workers caring for elders and people with disabilities in communities located in every county in the state. Just over one-third (n = 90) of these workers terminated their employment over that year-and-a-half period. Through mail surveys and telephone interviews we learned that low wages (with an average wage of \$9.05 per hour in 2009), lack of mileage reimbursement and job benefits, and inconsistent and unreliable hours were key factors in workers' decisions to leave the field. We also learned that many were sorry to abandon the work they loved and the clients to whom they felt

devoted and that younger workers were more likely to terminate than older ones. The life situation and job experiences of one of the older workers in our study, Eleanor (not her real name) who was 65 in 2008, illustrate many of the common elements of home care workers throughout Maine.

Eleanor, a high school graduate, lived in Androscoggin County. She was married and had raised four children. She began working in the woolen mills in her early 30s, but decided to return to school in her mid-40s to become a certified nursing assistant. For 10 years, she worked in a residential home for disabled children before she moved into home care work, which she had been doing for 10 years at the time our study began. She often struggled to get enough hours, and sometimes worked for more than one agency in order to have more clients.

When asked what appealed to her about being a PSS, Eleanor said, “I always believed in the ‘Golden Rule,’ that some day I may be in their shoes, and I would want somebody like myself to take care of me.” She said the satisfaction and appreciation she received from her clients, “the smiles on their faces,” made her want to stay in this line of work. Although Eleanor received Social Security, she relied on her wages from home care “as like a back-up to help pay bills.”

In addition to caring for clients, Eleanor had spent many years caring for her husband at home until his needs became too severe and he needed to be moved to a nursing facility. She visited him as often as possible. To make ends meet, Eleanor shared her small home with her daughter, son-in-law, and brother-in-law. Even so, she reported, it was hard to make the rent payment each month, and she noted that the cost of groceries had

been increasing while her Social Security and wages remained stagnant.

Eleanor wished she received more pay, mileage reimbursement, and recognition for her home care work. She knew she went above and beyond for her clients and would have liked to receive credit for that: “whether it be a certificate for \$5 or \$10 for gas, or a place to go out to eat. Something!” But compared to younger workers, Eleanor was less reliant on the insecure hours and low wages of home care work, given her monthly Social Security check—low as it was—and thus could remain in the field, ever hopeful of being assigned enough clients who did not live too far from her, given that mileage was not reimbursed.

Low compensation has consequences. Nationwide, nearly three out of five home care workers live in households that receive public assistance (PHI 2015). Raising wages for home care aides would reduce expenditures on public support programs. In Maine, increasing the wages of direct care workers is one part of the KeepMEHome initiative introduced by House Speaker Mark Eves. In this country, we undervalue caring work, a shortsighted approach with consequences. It means dedicated workers such as Eleanor can barely pay their bills, and it leaves frail elders in our communities with less consistent care as workers are forced to leave the work they love for jobs with higher pay. 🐉

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Sandra S. Butler is a professor and the coordinator of the master's degree program in social work at the University of Maine. Her research has focused primarily on women's financial security across the lifespan and successful aging, particularly in rural environments. She is the author of

Middle-aged Female and Homeless (1994), and coeditor of *Gerontological Social Work in Small Towns and Rural Communities* (2003) and *Shut-Out: Low Income Mothers and Higher Education* (2004) and more than 50 articles and book chapters.