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Home Care Employment in the Buffalo Region: Opportunities for Improvement

After decades of decline, the Buffalo region has seen renewed investment in recent years, particularly through Governor Cuomo’s “Buffalo Billion” economic development initiative. However, most workforce efforts have focused on building the pipeline into higher-paying careers in manufacturing and health care—leaving the region’s lowest-wage workers in ongoing financial precarity. Chief among these marginalized workers are home care workers, who face few opportunities to build their skills and progress beyond entry-level wages. As a result, Buffalo home care employers are struggling to recruit and retain enough workers to meet growing demand. This raises a timely question: can cooperative development help improve employment in Buffalo’s home care sector? This fact sheet summarizes the findings from PHI’s study of the feasibility of cooperative development and other strategies for: improving job opportunities for Buffalo’s home care workers, addressing the home care workforce crisis, and strengthening access to quality care for those who need it.

By the Numbers: The Buffalo Region’s Home Care Workforce

12,000	87%	37	51%	\$11.67	\$15.8k	59%	56%
Total Workers	Female	Median Age	People of Color	Median Wage	Median Annual Earnings	In or Near Poverty	Rely on Public Assistance

Note: These “By the Numbers” data refer to the Buffalo-Niagara Falls Metropolitan Statistical Area (as defined by the U.S. Census), which includes Erie and Niagara counties. Complete data definitions and citations are available in the full report.

THE HOME CARE WORKFORCE IN THE BUFFALO REGION

Who Are Home Care Workers?

Home care workers provide essential support for older adults and people with disabilities in their homes and communities. The workforce includes *personal care aides*, who provide non-medical assistance with personal care and a range of other daily activities, and *home health aides*, who provide similar assistance but may also perform certain clinical tasks under the supervision of a licensed professional.

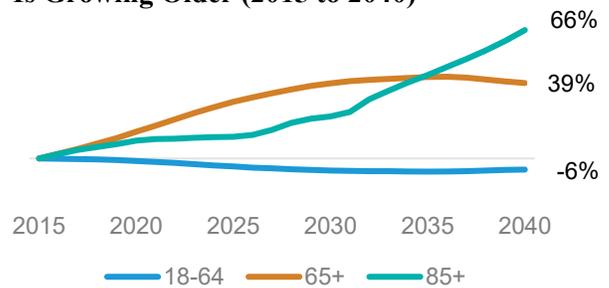
Increasing Need, Growing Demand

With Buffalo’s population growing older (Figure 1) and long-term services and supports shifting from nursing homes to home and community-based settings, demand for home care in the region is growing.

Because of this rising demand, the home care workforce is projected to add over 6,200 new jobs between 2016 and 2026 in Western New York—more new jobs than any other single occupation in the region (Figure 2).

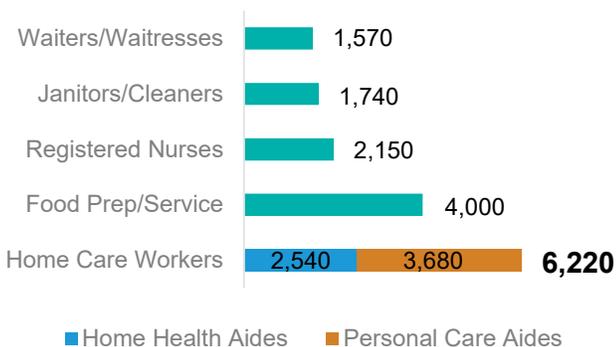
With fewer adults in the labor force and persistent job-quality issues in the sector, stakeholders in the Buffalo region report a growing workforce shortage that is already compromising care quality for older adults and people with disabilities.

Figure 1: The Population of Erie County Is Growing Older (2015 to 2040)



Source: Cornell University Program on Applied Demographics. “New York State Projection Data by County.” <https://pad.human.cornell.edu/counties/projections.cfm>. Accessed 12/18/19.

Figure 2: Among the Top Five Largest-Growing Occupations, Home Care Will Add the Most Jobs in Western New York from 2016 to 2026



Source: NYS Department of Labor. “Long-Term Occupational Employment Projections.” <https://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/lproj.shtm>. Accessed 12/18/19. (Western New York comprises Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie and Niagara Counties. Occupational employment projections are not available at the single county level.)

About This Research

This fact sheet highlights key findings from a mixed-methods feasibility study of cooperative development in the home care sector as a strategy for improving home care jobs in the Buffalo region. The full report—along with similar reports for Rochester, NY, and Detroit, MI—is available at PHInational.org. This research was made possible by generous support from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation.

FINDINGS ON THE FEASIBILITY OF COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT IN HOME CARE

This research found that home care jobs in the Buffalo region are characterized by low wages, insufficient hours, employment-related barriers, limited training, few advancement opportunities, and more—and employers are struggling to address these persistent job-quality challenges while also responding to rapid changes in the sector. But the study also found promising evidence that cooperative business development in the region may be a potential solution—among other worker-focused sectoral strategies—to Buffalo’s home care workforce crisis.

Why Consider Cooperative Development?

A cooperative home care agency offers more than just short-term wages, with annual dividends and other benefits of worker-ownership representing real asset-development opportunities in the long term. The cooperative model also relies on worker-centered employment practices, such as supportive supervision, employment supports, participatory management practices, and opportunities for career advancement. The potential for greater earnings over time and a better supported experience on the job could add significant value to the prospect of home care employment for Buffalo’s job seekers. A cooperative home care agency may therefore be better equipped than other agencies to improve recruitment and retention, creating a stable business to effectively serve the community

However, nationwide, there are only 11 operational home care cooperatives that collectively employ about 2,500 workers and generate \$76.6 million in revenue—a fraction of the industry total. These figures indicate the considerable challenges inherent in launching home care cooperatives and bringing them to scale. In the Buffalo region, the feasibility of creating a new cooperative in the home care sector is further limited by the New York statewide moratorium on new licenses for home care agencies and the contracting limits for managed long-term care plans. These policies mitigate against the entrance of new agencies into the market, suggesting instead the value of converting existing businesses to cooperative ownership and strengthening worker-centered practices across the industry.

THE COOPERATIVE ADVANTAGE IN HOME CARE

By empowering workers as decision-makers, investing in their jobs and careers, and fostering their long-term commitment, a small number of worker-owned home care agencies around the country are fundamentally challenge the industry’s status quo. The results? Wages are consistently higher for workers at these agencies, employment supports are the norm, and turnover is less than half the national average (at 38 percent versus 82 percent).

Source: Kazda, Katrina. 2019. “Quantifying the Cooperative Difference in Home Care.” National Homecare Cooperatives Conference, Dulles, DC, 11/21/19.

Key Resources for Cooperative Development in Buffalo

Cooperation Buffalo is a nonprofit, volunteer-run organization whose mission is to promote economic security through cooperative business ownership. The organization provides training, technical assistance, and business incubation as well as offering loans and hosting a peer-support network. Cooperation Buffalo could be instrumental to the success of a new home care cooperative in the region.

Other business supports in the area include the SUNY Small Business Center, which provides a wide range of consulting services; the Beverly Gray Business Exchange Center, designed to support new and existing minority and women-owned businesses; and Buffalo Niagara SCORE, which is part of a national network dedicated to educating entrepreneurs and helping small businesses start, grow, and succeed.

PROMOTING HOME CARE JOB QUALITY AND CARE QUALITY IN BUFFALO

The following considerations for developing the home care workforce in the Buffalo region arose from this analysis of the home care sector, the labor market, and the feasibility of cooperative development.

Pursue a Cooperative Conversion Strategy

In the context of competition and consolidation in the home care sector, a cooperative conversion—rather than start-up—would best serve market and workforce needs in Buffalo. A field-leading approach would be to consolidate two or more smaller home care agencies into a single worker-owned business.

Implement Worker-Centered Employment Practices

A cooperative home care agency—like any worker-centered agency, regardless of ownership structure—could implement a range of strategies to improve job quality for home care workers.

- **Offer a high-quality training program.** Employer-based training programs offer the best opportunity to integrate prospective workers into the organization’s culture, encourage their commitment, and prepare them to deliver the best quality of care. If an employer-based training program is not feasible, a cooperative agency could partner with a local training program, establishing a clear pathway between certification and job placement and collaborating with the training entity to ensure the curriculum adequately prepares trainees for their role.
- **Target supports to the needs of the labor pool.** Given the challenges faced by Buffalo’s low-income workers, a home care cooperative could focus on: collaborating with community-based organizations that assist with child care or housing; exploring new transportation models, such as a car-leasing program or van service; implementing culturally competent policies to support diversity within the workforce; and partnering with organizations that can reach out to and support immigrant workers in targeted ways.
- **Demonstrate career pathways.** A commitment to creating roles that offer advanced training, new responsibilities, and higher wages to home care workers would help a cooperative agency attract and retain entry-level staff, countering the notion that home care jobs are dead-end jobs. Developing career pathways may also allow the agency to access resources from Buffalo’s regional workforce development system, which values wage and responsibility progression.

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To read the full report, visit: PHInational.org/resource/home-care-cooperative-buffalo/

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