

Executive Summary

STEP UP NOW for Better Jobs and Better Care: The Evaluation of a Workforce Intervention for Direct Care Workers

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Overview

Direct care workers provide an estimated 70 to 80 percent of the paid hands-on long term care and personal assistance for Americans who are elderly, chronically ill or live with disabilities. Direct care worker refers to a category of workers in various long-term care settings who are the frontline workers on care teams. Their jobs are largely characterized by low pay, few benefits, heavy workloads and high levels of turnover. Common job titles for these workers include nursing assistants, nurse aides, in-home aides and personal care aides. In North Carolina, where this study was conducted, turnover rates of direct care workers in nursing homes have averaged approximately 100 percent per year over the last few years. A program called WIN A STEP UP was developed as one way to address these problems. The main aim of this study was to conduct an evaluation of WIN A STEP UP.

The WIN A STEP UP Program

WIN A STEP UP is an ongoing workforce development intervention aimed at improving the working situation of nursing assistants in North Carolina's nursing homes. The program is a partnership between the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services and the University of North Carolina Institute on Aging. After a successful pilot phase, which ended in 2001, WIN A STEP UP began its operational phase in North Carolina's nursing homes with

funding directed through the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services from civil monetary penalties. Currently in its fifth year of operation, the program includes a 33-hour curriculum that focuses on clinical and interpersonal topics such as infection control, team work and dementia care.

The program requires commitments from the nursing assistants, the nursing home and the program staff. The nursing assistant agrees to attend the classes and remain employed at the facility for an agreed upon amount of time. The facility agrees to commit staff time to completing the program and distribute a retention bonus or wage increase to nursing assistants who complete the program. The program provides the curriculum, educational incentives to nursing assistants (\$70 per class) and a \$75 retention bonus to successful participants. To improve relationships between the nurse supervisor and the nursing assistants, the latest enhancement to the program is supplementary training for nursing assistant supervisors. *Coaching Supervision* is a two-day training developed by the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute. The program is designed to teach nurse supervisors active listening and problem-solving skills as well as to foster an environment of mutual respect.

Study Design

Eight nursing homes on the WIN A STEP UP waiting list were selected to participate in the program. Ten nursing homes, matching the organizational size, labor market characteristics and management style of the eight participating homes, were recruited to serve as the comparison sites.

The responses of the nursing assistants participating in the study were compared with two control groups; other nursing assistants who worked in the same facility and nursing assistants who worked in a comparison nursing home.

Data were collected from several sources to assess the six main outcomes of the intervention program:

- **Interviews with managers:** At each participating and comparison site, interviews were conducted prior to the start of the intervention (baseline), three months after program completion and six months after completion. Two managers were recruited at each site (usually the WIN A STEP UP trainer and an administrator) and, where possible, the same individuals were interviewed before and after the program. At baseline, managers were asked to assess the relationships between managers and staff, and to describe their organizational culture and structure. At follow-up, managers were asked to describe any major changes that had occurred between the study points and to give an assessment of the success of the program.
- **Organizational data:** Staff from the eight participating and ten comparison nursing homes were asked to complete the organizational management survey at baseline and three-month follow-up. One-hundred percent of participating and comparison nursing homes completed the surveys. This survey measured turnover, organizational structure, and wages and benefits.

- **Nursing Assistant Working Conditions Survey and Nursing Assistant Perceived Quality of Care Survey:** Nursing assistants at the pilot and comparison nursing homes were surveyed at baseline and at three-month follow-up (after completion of WIN A STEP UP training). Ninety-seven percent of the participating site nursing assistants completed the baseline survey, 81 percent completed the follow-up survey. The comparison sites had a response rate of 93 percent at baseline and a 75 percent response rate at follow-up. These surveys focused on job quality, supervisor support and perceived quality of care.
- **Nursing Assistant Performance Measures:** In this survey, supervisors of nursing assistants were asked to evaluate individual nursing assistants on their clinical and interpersonal skills. The surveys were conducted at baseline and at three-month follow-up. At study sites, performance measures were completed on the participating nursing assistants by 68 supervisors. At each comparison site, performance measures were completed on a randomly drawn sample of ten nursing assistants.
- **Coaching Supervision Participant Survey:** This survey included questions on the participants' impression of the *Coaching Supervision* training. Licensed staff members who participated in the training were recruited to complete this survey at each participating site. Overall, a 74 percent response rate was attained.

Major Findings

The results of this evaluation are most easily summarized by grouping the results into six areas:

- Overall assessment of the program's success
- Assessment of program's impact on turnover
- Changes in job performance
- Changes in perceived quality of care and perceived job quality
- Assessment of the impact of *Coaching Supervision*
- Assessment of program impact beyond participants

Managers report program success.

Managers at seven of the eight participating sites reported that they would repeat the program as is. In general, managers felt that the WIN A STEP UP program had an impact in two main areas; increased job satisfaction/morale and improved quality of care. They described participating nursing assistants as more confident and proud, and reported that they felt more rewarded. The managers also reported that the nursing assistants had stronger clinical skills and knowledge.

Turnover of managers, as well the nursing assistants, continues to be the greatest challenge for both program implementation and program evaluation.

When participating nursing assistants were compared to the controls, no statistically significant difference was observed between the two groups in the number of nursing assistants who remained employed from baseline to three months after the intervention. However, when the qualitative data were examined, the adverse circumstances of two participating sites stood out.

The first site experienced heavy turnover after one of the participants displayed animosity towards the administrator and convinced about half of her fellow participants to quit their jobs. The second participating site experienced turnover of the WIN A STEP UP trainer not once, but twice. (Two major disruptions in the implementation of the program make this second participating facility unique.) If these two participating sites and their comparison sites are held from the analysis, there is a modest yet significant difference between the percentage of participants (5 percent) and the percentage of comparison site controls (13 percent) leaving within three months of the completion of the program. In these analyses, no significant difference in turnover was detected between nursing assistant participants and participating site controls.

The evaluation showed improved job performance of program participants.

The study team developed a rigorous measure of job performance using supervisory ratings of nursing assistants' performance of activities based on the specific learning objectives and content of the WIN A STEP UP curriculum. Four skills were measured; nursing care, supportive leadership, communication and resident-focused care. At baseline, no significant differences between participants and controls were detected on any of the four skills. Between baseline and the three-month follow-up, participants showed significant improvement in both nursing care and supportive leadership compared to the controls. No significant changes were found in communication or resident-focused care over the same time period.

The evaluation showed improved job quality and quality of care.

A measure of team care quality improved significantly more for participants than for controls between baseline and follow-up. A few measures of job quality also showed significant change. For example, perceived financial rewards significantly improved for program participants when compared to the nursing assistants in the comparison sites. Perceived financial rewards was not significantly different between the program participants and the control nursing assistants at participating sites. This may indicate positive changes in wage-setting practices at participating sites—a situation calling for further investigation. Also, nursing assistants' rating of perceived career rewards improved for participants when compared to all non-participants, suggesting that the program strengthens participants' views of care work as a career rather than “just a job.”

The improvement in perceived quality of team care is likely attributable, in part, to the impact of coaching supervision.

Coaching Supervision, a two-day training developed by the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute for improving the supervisory and active listening skills of long-term care nurses, was added to the WIN A STEP UP program in tandem to the evaluation study. The feedback was immediately good and this component is now a standard feature of the WIN A STEP UP program. This is the first programmatic element to reach beyond nursing assistants and solidify the team of nurses and nursing assistants as they provide care to residents.

While there are some promising results that indicate the diffusion of the program benefits, WIN A STEP UP seems to have its greatest impact on program participants and not necessarily on participating sites.

Using overall turnover rates, participating sites did better on average in the three-month window following program completion. During the three months after program completion, turnover for

all nursing assistants at comparison sites increased by 10 percent, while it declined slightly, by 2 percent at participating sites.

Given our results, the study team plans to conduct a systematic assessment of how these program benefits can reach beyond participants at participating sites using data gathered through this evaluation. Some of the questions to be considered include: Is it possible to saturate supervisors at one site with *Coaching Supervision* training? What are the strategies available to do this given program resources? Can the WIN A STEP UP curriculum and program be improved by increasing the percentage of participants per participating site?

Practical Implications

Efforts like WIN A STEP UP can produce desirable effects, including positive feedback from management, modest improvement in turnover, improved quality of nursing care and supportive leadership, improved morale and perceived financial and career rewards among participants. Our findings also offer insight into what the barriers were to implementation and what factors assisted in implementation. Knowing these may be of use to program planners interested in working to improve the situation of direct care workers in nursing homes and beyond.

The WIN A STEP UP program appears to have a marked impact on the work situation of program participants, with some evidence that it had an effect on improving the work situation of other participating site nursing assistants. There is also some evidence that this program improves quality of care for residents in participating sites. These benefits provide substantial incentive for workplaces and program planners to invest in WIN A STEP UP-like interventions.

Unfortunately, despite the positive results of the evaluation, the program appears to have only a modest impact on turnover at the organizational level. Given the enormity of the challenge of improving direct care worker retention, a program such as WIN A STEP UP may only offer a small step in the right direction. The logical next steps for addressing direct care workers retention challenges require integrating and sustaining programs like WIN A STEP UP into the continuing education and compensation systems for entire staffs of facilities, connecting the program with formal educational institutions and building WIN A STEP UP-like programs into larger policy initiatives.

Policy Implications

Public policy initiatives aimed at improving the organization as a whole and its culture of work, such as the North Carolina New Organizational Vision Award (NC NOVA), have the potential to greatly increase the efficacy of WIN A STEP UP and WIN A STEP UP-like programs. The NC NOVA initiative, funded as a demonstration project under Better Jobs Better Care, works to reward facilities for workplace enhancement in four domains; supportive workplaces, training, balanced workloads and career development. By rewarding facilities that are innovative in these domains, NC NOVA places an industry-wide premium on the creation of positive, supportive work experiences for direct care workers.

WIN A STEP UP, particularly with the addition of *Coaching Supervision*, is one way to begin that creation process. The potential exists, when state-wide programs like NC NOVA are in place, to then raise the floor for direct care workers in terms of compensation and working situations by harnessing the relationship between NC NOVA designations, competitive long-term care markets and Medicaid reimbursement structures. With both these programs in place in North Carolina, the state will serve as testing ground for whether these strategies can have a sustained impact on the both stability and job quality for this workforce.

STEP UP NOW stands for Supporting Training, Education and Payment for Upgrading Performance of Nurse Aides and Other Workers. This project was developed to broaden the scope of WIN A STEP UP by rigorously evaluating a range of program outcomes and assessing the feasibility of developing similar programs in other long term care settings. WIN A STEP UP stands for Workforce Improvement for Nursing Assistants: Supporting Training, Education, and Payment for Upgrading Performance

Better Jobs Better Care is a four-year \$15.5 million research and demonstration program, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Atlantic Philanthropies. Its goal is to achieve changes in long-term care policy and practice that help reduce high vacancy and turnover rates among direct care workers in long-term care and contribute to improved workforce quality. Technical assistance is provided in partnership with the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute (PHI).

Better Jobs Better Care is directed and managed by the Institute for the Future of Aging Services (IFAS), American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (AAHSA). For more information about Better Jobs Better Care, contact Robyn Stone at (202) 508-1206, rstone@aahsa.org or visit www.bjbc.org.