

Better Training Will Improve the Health of Homecare Aides & Their Clients

Jing Zhang, PhD, Senior Research Specialist, Marsha Love, MA, MA, Instructor, and Susan Buchanan, MD, MPH, Clinical Associate Professor • Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences

- Homecare aides need revised training curricula that include skills and resources necessary to reduce work-related injuries and health hazards.
- Curricula content should identify best practices and models for caring for older adults.
- Resources for homecare aides are needed to prevent and treat work-related injuries.

What are the issues?

One of every 8 Illinoisans is over age 60. This number will rise to 1 in 5 by 2030. By 2030, Illinois is expected to have a 76% gain in the population aged 65 to 74, an 80% gain in those aged 75 to 84, and a 65% gain in those over 85. Nationally, Census Bureau projections predict continuing increases in the older adult population.

Many older adults prefer staying in their own communities for long-term care. They increasingly rely on homecare aides to meet their care needs. This is especially true among limited English-speaking populations and residents living in outlying areas.

Home health aides and personal care aides, comprising the *homecare aides* occupational sector, rank 3rd and 4th among the fastest growing occupations in the U.S. Employment in this sector is projected to significantly increase by 2026.

Homecare aides experience a range of work-related health risks. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, **work-related injuries among homecare aides are 50% higher than workers employed in the private hospital sector and 70% higher than overall private industry workers.** Lifting injuries to both workers and clients are a major concern. Workers have less access to devices to help clients move than do nursing aides in hospitals and other institutional settings, and many experience musculoskeletal pain.

Homecare aides, especially those who speak limited English, lack sufficient training to effectively communicate with older adults living with dementia, depression, or memory loss. Some homecare aides report needing mental health counseling due to the job stress of caring for these types of patients.

Why is this important?

In-home care is preferred by many older adults, and it is less costly than senior care facilities. Consumers choosing in-home care need workers who are adequately equipped to perform the job safely. **Improved training for homecare aides will help them to protect themselves from work-related injuries and health hazards, while improving quality care to older adults.**

Although homecare aides in Illinois receive 12 hours of annual mandatory training, the training curricula do not adequately address how to prevent work-related health and safety hazards and do not provide workers with sufficient tools and skills to handle challenging situations on the job. To address the high injury rate among homecare aides, mandatory training should educate workers on safe and healthy work practices.

Homecare Workforce Projections

	Employment		Change 2016-26	
	2016	2026	Number*	Percent
Home health aides	911.5	1,342.7	431.2	47.3
Personal care aides	2,016.1	2,793.6	777.6	38.6

*Number in thousands; Source: BLS, US DOL, 2018

However, homecare aides are underpaid and lack benefits. Their mean hourly wage is \$10.40/hour, significantly less than the U.S. average for overall hourly occupations (\$24.24 in 2017). Many are employed on a per diem basis and do not receive paid sick leave, pensions, or health insurance.

What should policymakers do?

The Illinois Department On Aging Should:

1. Identify experts to revise and expand the training curricula. The curricula must:
 - consider the literacy levels, language skills, and diversity of homecare workers.
 - include common health issues, their symptoms and progression among the aging population.
 - include demonstration of and hands-on practice with devices to assist clients and personal protective equipment for workers.
 - include job stress prevention, stress management programs, and resource referrals.
 - meet the needs of both new and experienced homecare aides.
2. Ensure that the employers conduct training in workers' native languages on compensated time and provide adequate work coverage.
3. Explore and develop standards – reviewing those of other states - to protect homecare aides from work-related injuries and ensure that standards are enforced by employers to prevent work-related injuries.
4. Require homecare agencies to provide adequate safety and health protection to workers, such as providing sufficient supplies of masks, gloves, and protective aids and equipment.
5. Identify best practices and models for caring for older adults.
6. Clarify the roles of homecare aides to older adults enrolled in home care programs and their family members to avoid requests to perform strenuous tasks beyond their duties, therefore reducing risk of injuries and illnesses.
7. Provide resources on mobility and assistive devices to clients to decrease need for manual lifting and transferring among homecare aides.
8. Identify and provide resources for homecare aides to prevent and treat work-related injuries, including counseling for job stress prevention and mitigation.

Agencies and organizations

The Illinois Department on Aging should take the lead on implementing these policies. Other agencies and organizations that should be considered to be involved include:

- Illinois Department of Human Services
- Illinois Department of Public Health
- Illinois Medical Association
- Illinois Domestic Workers Coalition
- Healthcare Career Advancement Program
- OSHA, US Department of Labor
- NIOSH, US Department of Health and Human Service
- Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services
- Illinois Public Health Association
- National Association of Social Workers-Illinois Chapter
- Illinois Association for Behavioral Health
- Community organizations and partners
- Labor representatives
- Health and Medicine Policy Research Group

Sources

Aging Illinois Requires Better Intergovernmental Cooperation. UIC Today 2/3:

<https://today.uic.edu/elderly-transportation>

Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), US Department of Labor. Employment Projections, the Fastest Growing Occupations 2018; Table 1.3:

<https://www.bls.gov/emp/home.htm>

Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor Occupational Employment and Wages, 2017:

<https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes399021.htm>

The Role of Ergonomic and Psychosocial Workplace Factors in the Reporting of Back Injuries among U.S. Home Health Aides:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/ajim.22197>

Title 89: Social Services Chapter 11: Department on Aging Part 240 Community Care Program Section 240.1535 In-home Service Staff Position, Qualifications, Training and Responsibilities:

<http://www.ilga.gov/commission/Jcar/admincode/089/089002400015350R.html>

Illinois Safe Patient Handling Law:

<http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/fulltext.asp?name=097-0122>

California standard on ergonomics:

<https://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5110.html>