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Low-Cost Strategies for Lessening CNA Turnover in Nursing Homes

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Executive Summary

Turnover Causing Problems

Common problems found throughout many nursing homes cause Certified Nursing Aides (CNA) turnover:

- New nurses' aides do not understand how demanding it can be to work as a CNA.
- CNAs are not being recognized by administrators for the great care they provide for residents.
- CNAs are not entitled to make personal judgments on the type of care residents need.
- Poor communication leads to employee frustration, especially for new CNAs trying to learn the skills needed for the job.
- Poor leadership of administrators leads to poor relationships with employees.

All of these problems cause job dissatisfaction and ultimately lead to CNAs leaving their positions in nursing homes. These problems must be solved. This report provides two types of strategies aimed at solving turnover-causing problems: enhancing support networks and providing respect and recognition (Kiet; Schmidt).

Enhancing Support Networks

The goal of enhancing support networks is to generate more communication in the workplace by creating employee and administration/employee relationships. This support creates a more fulfilling work environment that provides CNAs with an extra incentive to remain working (Center of Wisconsin Strategy 19). The following strategies enhance support networks:

Mentoring or Team Leader Method: In the mentoring method, senior CNAs train new employees the skills they need and introduce them to all the day-to-day rituals of the nursing home (Schmidt). This decreases the level of stress experienced, lessening the chance that they will leave the home because of such detractors (Schmidt). The team leader method is similar to the mentoring method, but differs in that one senior CNA trains all new employees in a specific area of the nursing home, for example, one wing or hallway (Kiet).

Peer Group Method: The peer group method allows workers to create employee networks without intervention from management. The employee group created is given an employee benefit fund, which employees are allowed to manage. This fund can be used to celebrate birthdays, holidays, and other related activities. The fund is also used to

give loans and cash advances to employees with financial need (Schmidt).

Employee and Team Empowerment: Employee empowerment gives workers the rights to provide residents with specialized care and to recommend administrative changes and additions in regards to care. This is important because CNAs work closely with residents and are more aware of care needs (Schmidt). Team empowerment occurs when team leaders of CNAs meet with management and discuss care issues of the CNA staff (Kiet).

Support by Administrators: Administrators create personal relationships with employees and provide help to them whenever it is needed; if CNAs have a problem at home, they should be able to discuss it with administrators. Developing close relationships makes the work environment more pleasurable (Kiet; Schmidt).

Respect and Recognition

Often employees feel like they are unsupported at the job for two reasons: they are not getting recognition for the work they provide and are not respected (Center on Wisconsin Strategy 45). The strategies below focus on making workers feel supported:

Individual Perspective Problem Solving: When dealing with employee problems, administrators must take into consideration that they are dealing with individuals who have different problems and react to different incentives. Management should get to know employees personally so they can better make decisions when dealing with employee problems. Management should also be encouraged to make decisions based on what they feel is the right way to handle an individual worker, not just by adhering to policy (Kiet; Schmidt).

Recognize Worker and Resident Relationships: Nurses' aides and residents become accustomed to each other. So, the longer a CNA provides care for a resident, the more aware an employee becomes of the specialized care required, and the better qualified that employee becomes (National Citizens' Coalition 45). The CNA-resident bond is also rewarding because the aide is getting the reward of providing care for an individual, not just a patient. These bonds should not be broken, though in some cases there is a need for flexibility when CNA/resident personalities do not match. Patients and CNAs should be paired with people who have similar personalities (Kiet; Schmidt).

Special Activities: To keep employees happy and satisfied, administrators can take action and show the nursing home staff that they are recognized and respected for the care that they provide. Potlucks, contests, prizes, and other fun activities tell employees that they are special (Schmidt).

Employee-Sensitive Decisions: Employees are individuals and therefore have feelings that can be hurt. Administrators must be aware of these feelings so that they

do not upset a worker when making a decision that affects caregivers. One way to make sensitive decisions is to get employee input by talking directly to employees about their wishes and concerns about an administrative decision (Kiet; Schmidt).

Low Cost Strategies for Lessening CNA Turnover in Nursing Homes

Introduction

High turnover of Certified Nursing Aides (CNA) is a major problem that plagues nursing homes across the nation – it is extremely costly and can decrease the quality of care residents receive (Center on Wisconsin Strategy 8; Kiet; Schmidt). This is why it is important to reduce turnover. It is a fact that increasing wages and benefits will decrease turnover, but with only so many funds available for nursing homes, increasing wages is often out of the control of local homes (Kiet; Schmidt).

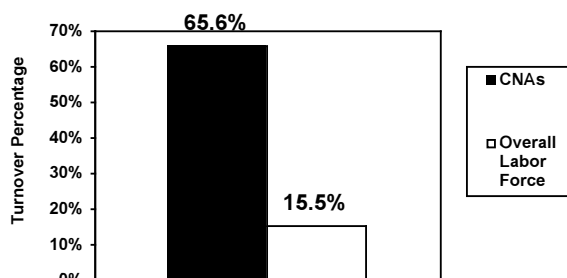
While the nursing home industry can help to solve this problem by advocating for increased state funding to pay for an increase in wages, the local nursing homes can fight turnover by making homes more appealing to nurses' aides (Center on Wisconsin Strategy). A paycheck is not the only thing that people look for in a job; there are also non-monetary benefits like the rewards received from making the life of a resident more pleasant and from developing interpersonal relationships with coworkers. There are many strategies that the administrators at nursing homes may use to increase the non-monetary benefits for nursing aids (Kiet; Schmidt).

In October 2003, The Center of Wisconsin Strategy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison published a report outlining many strategies to reduce turnover in nursing homes. This report will illustrate how two of their low-cost strategies, enhancing support networks and providing respect and recognition, are used in Chesaning Nursing Care Center and Tendercare Saginaw. This report also includes the most prevalent problems that lead to high turnover, the problems that turnover causes, and turnover statistics from the National Citizen's Coalition and the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute.

Why is Turnover in Nursing Homes an Issue?

In 2002, the turnover of Michigan Certified Nursing Aides averaged 65.6 percent. When compared to Michigan's overall labor force turnover rate of 13 to 18 percent, the rate for CNAs is extremely high; see Figure 1.

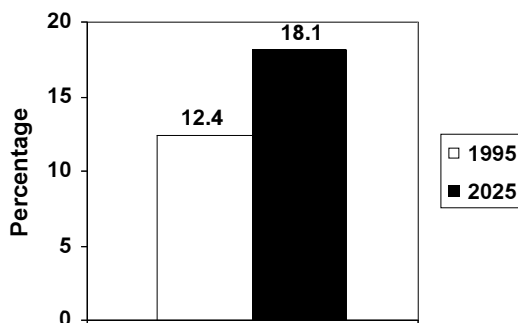
Figure 1: Michigan's CNA vs. Overall Employee Turnover in 2002



Source: Data from the 2002 AHCA Survey of Nursing Home Vacancy and Turnover in Nursing Homes. Cited in Dawson, 2003, p. 19.

Furthermore, the number of elderly Michigan citizens is also increasing rapidly, while the number of citizens of caregiving age is declining. The U.S. Census Bureau has estimated that Michigan's population classified as elderly will increase from 12.4 percent of the population in 1995 to 18.1 in 2025, and Michigan's dependency ratio comparing the number of youth to elderly will increase from 71 elderly for every 100 youth to 80.8 elderly for every 100 youth; see Figures 2 and 3.

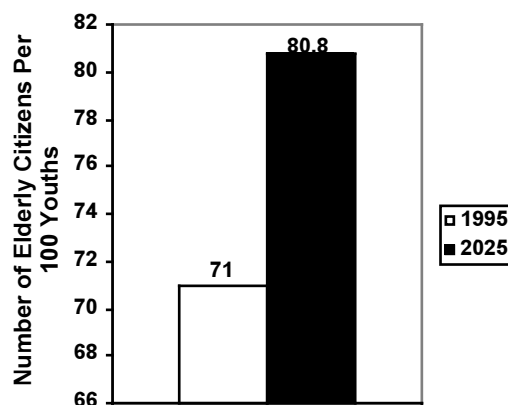
Figure 2: Increased Percentage of Elderly in Population for 1995 and 2025



Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program.

This increasing elderly population is currently in great need of caregivers and will only demand more help in the future. This is a very serious problem considering that nursing homes are already understaffed (Dawson 3). To ensure that there are enough CNAs to take care of residents, turnover must decrease significantly to compensate for these problems.

Figure 3: Michigan's Increasing Dependency Ratio



Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates Program.

CNA Turnover is a Costly Problem

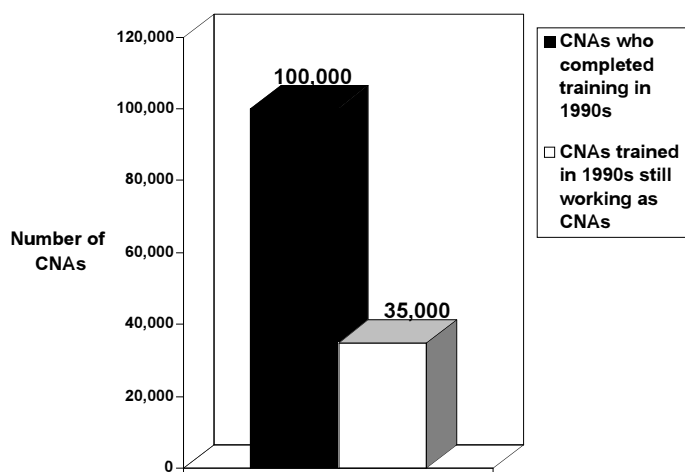
CNA turnover is expensive. Studies have shown that it costs upwards of \$3,000 just to train a new CNA in the Midwest states ("Benefits of Eden Alternative"). Many other costs are associated with employee hiring besides training; hours up front, background checks, full-time employee to manage applications, and paying for physicals are only a few of the costs associated with hiring (Schmidt). The administrator at Chesaning Nursing Care Center, Nick Kiet, said that the cost of replacing a CNA is significant, considering that wages alone paid to the nurses' aide in training can easily exceed \$400. This does not include the wages of the administrators, senior CNAs who train the individual, or any of the other hiring and training costs that accumulate. Reducing turnover will lessen this accumulation of hiring and training costs (Center on Wisconsin Strategy 8).

Non-Monetary Costs of Nursing Aide Turnover: Quality of Care

The quality of care provided in nursing homes is greatly affected by turnover. Residents rely on consistent care from CNAs because, over time, CNAs get to know the residents' specialized care needs. With high turnover, residents receive less consistent care, causing the quality of care to decrease (National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform 15). Employee turnover, an industry-wide problem, also acts as a deterrent to family members of residents; families get suspicious of the quality of care a nursing home provides when it has high CNA turnover, causing families to move residents to different homes (Center on Wisconsin Strategy 15).

High turnover further decreases the quality of care because it causes short-staffing in nursing homes (Center on Wisconsin 16). The Michigan Department of Consumer and Industry Services (MDCIS) reported that since the 1990's, 100,000 individuals have completed training to become CNAs. But of that number, 65,000 no longer work in the healthcare industry; see Figure 4. In addition, it was estimated that as many as 97% of nursing homes in 2002 did not have enough nurses and nurses' aides to provide the care required for residents (National Citizens' Coalition 19). The high turnover rate and the problems that it causes in nursing homes is considered by the industry to be the most significant barrier to improving care (Young).

Figure 4: CNAs Trained in 1990s Who Still Work in the Nursing Home Industry



Source: Data from communications with Rae Ramsdell, MDCIS. Cited in Dawson, 2003, p. 36.

Common Reasons CNAs Leave Nursing Home Positions

After interviewing the administrators at Chesaning Nursing Care Center and Tendercare Saginaw, I organized an extensive list of common problems that cause some nursing homes to have a hard time keeping CNAs. Many of these reasons were also identified as major problems in professional reports by the National Citizen's Coalition and the Paraprofessional Institute. The following are some of the most significant reasons:

Not Understanding the Demands

One of the major causes of nurses' aide turnover is that CNAs do not understand the demands this position entails until they have already started working at the job (Kiet; Schmidt). New nurses' aides need to be informed during the interview process what will be required of them and how difficult it can be to take care of elderly residents (Kiet; Schmidt). They need to know that one minute they will get hugs from residents and other times they may get

kicks and punches (Schmidt).

Lack of Recognition

If employees are not recognized for the excellent work they provide, then it is likely that they will not find the job rewarding. The type of persons who enjoy taking care of the elderly are understanding and kind persons who want to help others. They need to be recognized for this, because they do not work this job for the pay alone, since the pay is low. Nursing homes must make sure employees are recognized in order to insure that the job remains fulfilling (Kiet; Schmidt; Center on Wisconsin Strategy 19).

Lack of Leadership Power

Employees need to have the power to take care of their residents and to make judgments about the care they provide. When the management sets specific guidelines and does not ask for the employees' input for the care of residents, it communicates that CNAs have little importance and can easily be replaced. If an employee does not feel important, then he/she is less likely to find the job rewarding and will move on to something else that may satisfy that need (Kiet; Schmidt).

Poor Communication

Poor communication can cause much frustration for employees, especially for new employees who are not familiar with the work environment in a nursing home. If senior CNAs do not communicate well with new employees, these employees may find the job to be more frustrating than it is worth (Kiet; Schmidt). Randy Schmidt at Tendercare Saginaw referred to this as "Don't Eat Your Young": take care of new CNAs and do not hinder their work performance by failing to teaching them the skills needed for the position.

Poor Supervisor or Administration Relations

Workers do not quit jobs, they quit supervisors (Dawson 31). Poor leadership that does not take into consideration the feelings of employees or acts disrespectful towards them causes poor relations between administration and employees, leading to job dissatisfaction. It is important for supervisors to have quality interactions with employees that motivate and create friendships (Kiet; Schmidt).

Strategies that Address the Problems that Cause CNA Turnover

There are many low-cost strategies that administrators can adopt to help eliminate the problems that lead to high CNA turnover rates. In October of 2003, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison published a report titled *Caring About Caregivers, Reducing Turnover of Frontline Health Care Workers in South Central Wisconsin*, which outlines many

strategies that individual nursing homes can use to lessen turnover rates. Two such strategies may be adopted to lessen turnover in Michigan: enhancing support networks and giving greater respect and recognition to nursing home employees. Chesaning Nursing Care Center and Tender Care Saginaw use multiple strategies.

Enhancing Support Networks

Support networks between coworkers as well as between employees and administrators can help to decrease turnover. Administrators must support CNAs in the care of residents and must encourage two-way communication on how to best care for residents. In addition to this, administrators must create a work environment that encourages close relationships of CNAs, helping to lessen turnover by making the job more fulfilling (Center on Wisconsin Strategy 19). The following are some of the ways Chesaning Nursing Care Center and Tendercare Saginaw enhance support networks:

Mentoring or Team Leader Method: At Tender Care Saginaw, senior CNAs mentor new nurses' aides during training. Mentors take the new CNAs under their wing so that they feel more confident and comfortable. Mentoring is important because it is the little things that cause new CNAs to become uncomfortable and frustrated, the major reasons new nurses' aides leave their jobs. A new employee should be introduced to everyone and be made aware of break periods, when to make coffee, and all other day-to-day rituals (Schmidt).

An example of one of these rituals at Tender Care Saginaw is found with the subgroups that split off during lunch breaks. Without a mentor, new employees can be left out of the groups, causing the workers to feel as if they do not belong. New nurses' assistants with a mentor are automatically invited into these subgroups. This reduces the level of distress experienced by new employees, making new CNAs more likely to stay rather than leave because of such detractors (National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform 45).

Chesaning Nursing Care Center has a similar approach to the mentoring method called the team leader method. Team leaders are assigned to specific areas of the nursing home and help the nurses' aides in that area. When new CNAs start at Chesaning, the team leader will help the new CNAs in their designated area, acting as their mentor.

Both mentoring and the team leader method help to train new CNAs and bring them into the nursing home culture (Kiet; Schmidt).

Peer Group Method: To make employees more closely knit, Tendercare Saginaw started a peer group consisting of CNAs and other employees (Schmidt). This group is controlled solely by employees without intervention from

management – they set their own rules and elect their own officials. They are also given an employee benefit fund that can be used for things such as celebrating birthdays and holidays, to give a fellow employee a loan that can be deducted from his/her paycheck or cash advancements, and other similar activities and expenditures. This method creates a subculture at the nursing home and promotes close friendships, something beyond just a paycheck (Schmidt). Chesaning does not have a peer group like Tendercare, but employees do develop close relationships because of the small nursing home atmosphere (Kiet).

Employee and Team Empowerment: Because CNAs work so closely with residents and get to know them well, they learn what type of special care residents need (Center on Wisconsin Strategy 15). Employee empowerment is important for the reason that it gives CNAs the right to make personal decisions on how to best care for residents as well as the ability to give recommendations to administration in regard to care (Schmidt). This ability to make decisions enables CNAs to play a significant role in the care residents receive, which increases job satisfaction and at the same time increases the quality of care (Schmidt). Giving nurses' aides the ability to make choices causes them to feel like they are really helping to make life more enjoyable for the residents, which is one of the extra benefits people in this field are looking for (Kiet; Schmidt).

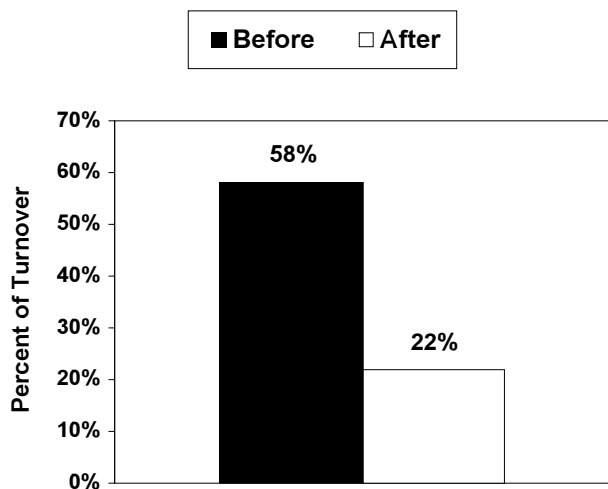
To create team empowerment at Chesaning Nursing Care Center, team leaders and management meet on a regular basis and discuss issues and problems about the care of residents. This has worked very well. Because CNAs know the specific needs of residents, more information can be gathered and this maximizes the level of care for residents. This is advantageous because CNAs feel important when management asks for advice (Kiet).

Support by Administrators: To maintain a pleasurable work environment for CNAs, it is important to develop good relationships between administration and employees (Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute 12). At Chesaning Nursing Care Center, Administrator Nick Kiet provides his employees with what he calls "the mother hen relationship." He helps employees in any way that he can, but is careful not to offer more help than is needed. In the past Mr. Kiet has helped some of his employees go through rehab and dissolve personal, family, and other problems. He also makes sure that if he and an employee are discussing a problem, it is done privately, which helps develop trust (Kiet).

Respect and Recognition

It is important that employees feel supported at work. Often when employees feel that they lack support, it is because of two things: they are not receiving recognition for the work they provide, and they are not respected as individuals (Center on Wisconsin Strategy 19). Support is vital to reducing turnover, which was demonstrated by one south central nursing home that reduced employee turnover by 36% by using respect and recognition strategies; see figure 5 (Dawson 41).

Figure 5: Results of One South Central Michigan Nursing Home's Attempt to Lessen Turnover by Means of Respect and Recognition Strategies



Source: Data reported in *The Beacon* (January 2002, 4). Cited in Dawson, 2003, p. 41.

The following respect and recognition strategies are used by Chesaning Nursing Care Center and Tender Care Saginaw:

Individual Perspective Problem Solving: It is important when dealing with employee problems to take into consideration that employees are individuals who have different problems and react differently to incentives. If management can get to know employees personally, they can become better qualified to handle management decisions regarding problems in the workplace (Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute 12). It is important to encourage managers to take a step back and make decisions based on what they feel is the right way to deal with an individual worker, rather than just going by what is policy (Schmidt).

An example of this can be illustrated when dealing with tardiness. A nurse's aide has worked at a particular nursing home for many years. One morning before work, he/she has car trouble and is late for the first time. Should this employee be written up for being late? Taken on an individual basis, this person should not, because the car trouble may not have been preventable. However, if a manager were to go by the nursing home policy, the nurse's

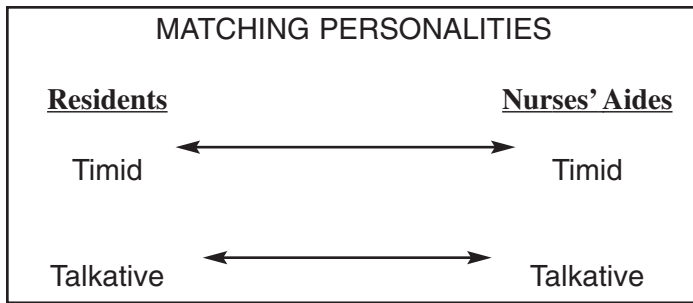
aide would be written up. Management that identifies this as an isolated incidence of tardiness lets this one go. It is important, though, that management makes sure that the employee knows he/she has to be on time on a regular basis or face consequences (Schmidt).

Tendercare Saginaw at one time had problems with worker tardiness with many employees. To help solve this problem, administration provided juice and rolls for two weeks from 6:45 to 7:00. At 7:00, work started and the rolls and juice were put away; if anyone showed up after 7:00, he/she would not be able to get juice and rolls. This demonstrated to employees that they needed to be on time without actually going out and saying it. The breakfast provided was meaningful to employees because they are very busy people and some did not have the time or the money to eat in the morning. The administration at Tendercare knew what incentives CNAs would react to and used these incentives to reduce tardiness. In addition, the cost of juice and rolls was less than the management costs of dealing with write-ups and ended up saving Tendercare money while providing non-monetary benefits to its employees. Tendercare Saginaw continues to provide workers with juice and rolls periodically to reinforce being on time (Schmidt).

Recognize Worker and Resident Relationships: Because nurse's aides and residents become accustomed to each other, it is important to avoid changing which CNAs take care of certain residents. The relationship CNAs and residents have in regards to care is significant because the closer a CNA and a resident are with one another, the more able the CNA is to make sure that the resident gets the best care possible. In short, the longer a CNA is with a resident, the better the care that resident receives (National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform 43).

There is an exception, though, because in some cases CNAs need to be changed. Just because one nurse's aide does not get along with a particular resident, does not mean that the CNA will not get along with another resident and should be asked to leave. Sometimes nurses' aides need to be matched up with residents who have similar personalities. In most cases it is not the best fit to put an outgoing nurse with a resident who is quiet and does not want to be bothered. It is better to put the quiet residents with quiet CNAs and put the outgoing CNAs with residents who enjoy company (see Figure 6). Assigning nurses' aides to match personalities will make both the aides and the residents better off because they are with someone more like themselves (Schmidt).

Figure 6: Matching Personalities of Residents and CNAs Makes Nursing Homes More Enjoyable



Source: Randy Schmidt, Personal Interview. Nov. 2003.

Special Activities: It is important to keep a positive work environment at any business in order to keep employees happy and satisfied. Part of keeping a positive environment is showing employees that they are recognized for their outstanding work (Kiet; Schmidt). Chesaning Nursing Care Center does a number of activities such as pizza and pop at every in-service, potlucks, contests, door prizes, and concert tickets, all of which are intended to do just this. When employees are given concert tickets because of the special care that they provide, the administration shows the employees that they are very important and that all of their hard work has been recognized. They are not just getting concert tickets; they are also getting the recognition that they deserve for being caring CNAs (Kiet).

Employee-Sensitive Decisions: All decisions made by the administration in regard to employees should be made with employee sensitivity in mind (Kiet, Schmidt). One hypothetical situation administrator Randy Schmidt spoke of is whether administration should give all nursing home employees their own parking spots. This sounds like it would be a nice idea; but what if many of the workers do not have cars and instead carpool or take a bus to work? They may feel left out because some employees get their own parking spot while others cannot because they do not have a vehicle. It is important to make sure that employees are given equal treatment and that the feelings of employees are taken into consideration in all decisions (Schmidt).

It sounds simple, but one way to insure that feelings are considered is to ask the employees what they want. Getting this information directly from the source can help in making difficult decisions and insuring job satisfaction. One option is to discuss employee needs during team meetings (Kiet).

Conclusion

Employee turnover is one of the most pressing issues affecting the financial health of nursing homes as well as the quality of care they provide (Young). Based on the success of strategies used by Chesaning Nursing Care Center and Tendercare Saginaw, I conclude that the above strate-

gies will help to lessen turnover for other nursing homes experiencing problems with high turnover.

The low-cost strategies listed in this report will help solve the problems that lead to high turnover while making nursing homes more enjoyable work environments for nurse's aides. These strategies come in two categories:

- **Enhancing Support Networks:** mentoring or team leader method, peer group method, employee and team empowerment, support by administrators
- **Providing Respect and Recognition:** individual perspective problem solving, recognizing worker and resident relationships, providing special activities, making employee sensitive decisions.

Applying these strategies to the everyday running of nursing homes will help to create a more enjoyable working environment and will lower turnover, decrease costs, and increase the quality of care.

Recommendation

I recommend that the above strategies for reducing CNA turnover should be used in combination for best results. One type of strategy that I would recommend as a starting point, though, is the respect and recognition strategy.

I believe respect and recognition strategies are the best starting point to lessen turnover because both Administrator Nick Kiet of Chesaning Nursing Care Center and Administrator Randy Schmidt of Tendercare Saginaw stressed their importance. Using these strategies, they have personalized the working environments of their homes for individual workers, constructing an understanding and warm working environment. In addition, other nursing homes have also reduced turnover using strategies that respect and recognize employees (Dawson 41).

This strategy creates an atmosphere that respects people as individuals and recognizes workers' achievements, giving CNAs an incentive to remain at a nursing home, rather than working a job that is less demanding or stressful (Kiet; Schmidt). If a nursing home creates a more positive, accepting environment, that home will reduce turnover.

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