

LTC facilities continue battle for workers

Those in the long-term care industry know their job is vastly different than working in a bank, store or warehouse.

An LTC employee not only needs to possess the necessary skills but a high level of compassion and the right temperament to perform the job. Finding this combination is not easy, and it is currently compounded by a low unemployment rate in the United States and fierce competition for workers.

Administrators need to identify and understand their facility's labor needs and the needs of the residents to determine staffing patterns to ensure the safety and continuity of care for residents and the safety of personnel.

Judy Roepke, manager of Apostolic Lutheran Home for the Aged in Calumet, Mich., has the regular challenge of staffing her facility, as well as finding personnel who want to live in an area that receives 300 inches of snow each year. All of her employees are part time and many are available to pick up extra hours when needed.

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Her burden is eased slightly because local jobs in the area are limited. However, many of the local residents with advanced education or CNA training travel 12 miles south to Houghton for expanded job opportunities, higher salaries and benefits that compensate for the travel.



Ann Helminen applies some eye drops to Ruth Lapert at Apostolic Lutheran Home for the Aged in Calumet, Mich.

Janice Eldridge, owner and administrator of Alice Haus and Josephine Haus in Rhineland, Wis., said almost half of her employees are single mothers which makes scheduling difficult. Also, several staff members struggle with completing their GED, as well as making financial ends meet and dealing with social and home situations.

Eldridge is able to pay employees a bit more than competitors but can only offer limited benefits. Larger employers are able to offer a variety of health plan choices (including an HMO) at an employee cost of \$40 to \$50 per month; Janice is able to cover only 25 percent of \$200 to \$300 per month for health coverage.

The unemployment rate in her area is low so there are fewer people willing to seek work in LTC. One of her biggest competitors is a pet mail-order supply company that offers better insurance coverage, a competitive salary and bonuses.

Because Rhineland is in a growth pattern, it is difficult to retain employees. She competes against the resort and casino industry, as well as retailers Home Depot, Wal-Mart and Shopko. A Menards store is currently under construction.

Eldridge also struggles with what she calls the "gypsy generation." People are moving more often than previous generations, she said. ■

Requirements challenge many long-term care job candidates

Long-term care facility administrators need to take extra steps to establish the education and skills required for the job functions when looking at staffing positions. Many of the candidates do not possess high school diplomas, and if the facility is small, the caregivers must multi-task many skills.

Job skills needed include house-cleaning, cooking, kitchen preparations, medication assistance, activities aide skills, personal care, homemaking skills and peacemaker. In larger facilities, several people fill out the roles of assisting residents in their daily needs.

“It takes a special type of person to work with the elderly,” said Judy Roepke, manager of Apostolic Lutheran Home for the Aged, Calumet, Mich. “The residents come before any of their other duties (such as cleaning, laundry and other jobs). If a resident needs something, they are to drop what they’re doing and take care of the resident.”

When meeting with job candidates, she stresses the need to prioritize and effectively meet the challenges of dealing with the many moods and personalities of the residents.

Janice Eldridge, assisted-living owner and administrator of Alice Haus and Josephine Haus in Rhinelander, Wis., looks for employees who are able to multi-task but realize their main duty is to give care to the elderly.

“It involves being able to stay on task and on schedule yet give the frail, probably demented, elderly person time,” she said. “They have to have a respect for the law or codes. They have to learn to do certain things in a certain way like medications have to be done in a certain way.”

It is helpful if the person is flexible, able to deal with the

unexpected and remains calm in any situation.

Although filling job vacancies might not be easy, there are some steps to make the process more efficient. To start, determine the appropriate source to fill specific job vacancies.

Hiring and training a new employee is expensive. Promoting from within can be an advantage for the facility as well as the employee. It provides career mobility and decreases the time for employee orientation. It also can be a tool to raise employee satisfaction and morale.

Develop a list of internal candidates who could be considered for the position. Take note if any of the candidates have expressed an interest in the role. Have they shown the potential for advancement? Do they have the skills to perform the job duties?

External candidates offer the opportunity for growth of new ideas. There are a variety of ways to locate external job candidates.

Roepke uses word of mouth, church connections, resident relatives, and “Michigan Works,” similar to a country unemployment agency, to look for new employees.

Eldridge has used the local paper and goes to area health fairs. Other options include the local school, community and alumni organizations, business associates, clients, area professional organizations and acquaintances.

Getting referrals from existing employees is another source. Consider offering a referral bonus if an employee’s candidate is hired and remains employed for a specific period of time. Also, consider advertising in the local “Welcome Wagon,” movie theater, Internet and direct mail or holding an open house. ■

Flu vaccine delay won’t affect industry

A delay in the production of this season’s flu vaccine shouldn’t be a problem for residents of long-term care facilities.

By the end of October, only 64 percent of the vaccine will be available for distribution, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. By year end, the balance of the vaccine should be available.

This won’t be a problem for most residents of long-term care facilities because a priority for vaccination is being given to persons 65 years of age and older, as well as younger persons suffering from chronic diseases such as heart, lung or diabetes. Those with priority status will receive vaccinations in September and October.

The production delay is being attributed to a variety of factors, including: the short time frame manufacturers have to produce the vaccine (vaccine strain components are selected only 8 to 10 months before manufacturing); the reduction of licensed manufacturers in the United States from four to three; a delay in the completion of additional manufacturing facilities; and the difficulty in growing one of the strains selected this year.

This year’s trivalent influenza vaccine will include A/Moscow/10/99-like (H3N2), A/New Caledonia/20/99-like (H1N1) and B/Sichuan/379/99-like antigens. These strains were chosen as they are representative of currently circulating influenza A and B viruses and for their growth properties in manufacturing. ■

'Accepting first warm body can be extremely costly'

To hire the "best qualified" means you have to do your homework. Review the employment application, complete an in-depth interview, verify military status, employment history and references, analyze credentials and perform background checks and driver's history, if applicable.

Because of recent regulation and litigation, LTC facilities must perform additional candidate screening compared to employers in other industries. Many facilities are using forms they have developed for the employment screening and hiring process. This is a good practice because it provides consistency of information asked of all candidates and creates a pattern for analysis of the information. This technique also allows the employer to focus on specific topics, promotes the use of open-ended questions and keeps the questions legal.

The employment application should provide the applicant's employment history, academics and professional achievement. Areas that require further

clarification would be gaps in employment, current unemployment, unusually low salary level and reasons indicated for leaving former employers.

"Red flag" areas are unanswered questions or an unsigned application. Special attention should be paid if the criminal conviction question is blank. If the person is in school, find out if they are full time or part time and what impact this will have on scheduling.

Once you get a candidate to the interview stage, it is essential to outline the job responsibilities, identify the knowledge, skills and functions required and evaluate the applicant's personal characteristics. Pay close attention to attitude and work ethic.

Janice Eldridge, owner and administrator of Alice Haus and Josephine Haus in Rhinelander, Wis., looks for a care giving spirit.

"If they've got that care giving attitude, we could teach them," she said. "Attitude is harder to groom so that's probably the

centerpiece around what we're looking for (in hiring someone)."

Part of her application process includes having the applicant answer a few questions in writing to determine communication skills.

Eldridge's No. 1 rule is to be selective in the hiring choice. "Accepting the first warm body can be extremely costly in the long run," she said.

Once a candidate has been selected, send the person an offer of employment. In the letter, include the required job qualifications and responsibilities along with the job title, hours and salary. Identify the date of initial employment and dates of orientation.

Eldridge is always looking for new employees and continues to interview on a regular basis while keeping an open file of applicants.

This practice has given her an excellent core of candidates when the need arises, and following her own rules has provided her with a competent and resourceful staff. ■

Simple steps drastically reduce food borne illnesses

September is National Food Safety Education Month. This year's theme is "Be Cool . . . Chill Out . . . Refrigerate Promptly." For educational activities, brochures, fact sheets and games, check out www.foodsafety.gov/~fsg/fs-mon01.html.

Prevent food borne illness and be prepared for the holidays. The holidays are a very social time with many traditional and special foods served. The United States Food and Drug

Administration recommends following the below safety rules to prevent illness:

- Clean: Wash your hands and food surfaces often (knives, countertops and cutting boards) to prevent bacteria from being spread.
- Separate: Prevent cross contamination of bacteria. Keep raw meats, poultry and seafood away from ready-to-eat foods.

- Cook: Cook and serve food at their proper temperature. Be sure to cook it long enough and hot enough to kill harmful bacteria.
- Chill: Refrigerate food quickly and keep cold foods cold to prevent harmful bacteria from growing and multiplying.

When in doubt, call your local health authority or access the FDA food safety Web site: www.fda.foodsafety.gov. ■

Employee Benefits Liability Insurance

As the nation's unemployment rate continues close to historical lows, many long-term care facilities are having problems hiring and retaining quality employees. Employee turnover is an expensive and time-consuming issue.

Each new employee must be enrolled in the Social Security program and offered all benefit programs you have available.

In addition to the information needed for new employees, you also have the task of updating data of current employees. Examples include changing a beneficiary, adding a new dependent, changing a home address and many more.

With the increase in employee turnover, along with all of the other demands of a facility, an error in your benefit plan program can happen. Mistakes can include not enrolling an employee in a 401(k) plan, the health plan or Social Security. Although some of these errors can easily be corrected, some can be costly. If the employee was not included in the 401(k), and the market had record returns, the facility might be liable for any potential

investment that employee could have made, putting a financial strain on the facility.

A fiduciary liability policy might protect you from some claims that can occur. A broader way to protect your facility is through employee benefits liability coverage. This is a relatively inexpensive coverage you can add to your current insurance policy.

The advantage of employee benefits liability coverage over fiduciary liability coverage is it applies to plans outside the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA).

The following are some plans covered under employee benefits liability coverage:

- Group life
- Accident
- Health or disability insurance
- Social Security
- Pension plans
- 401(k) plans
- Savings plans

It is important the coverage you choose applies to the type of benefit programs you offer your employees.

Employee benefits liability coverage can ease the financial

strain and possibly help reduce the emotional tension between the facility and your employee by paying if an error in the benefit program occurs. ■

Test your knowledge

1. T F To prevent food-borne illness, FDA recommends to clean, separate, cook and chill foods.
2. T F Vaccine strains are selected 12 months before production.
3. T F There is no shortage of the flu vaccine for 2001-2002 flu season.
4. T F Employee benefits liability coverage includes only accident and Social Security.
5. T F Criminal background and reference checks are recommended for screening potential employees.

1-T, 2-F, 3-F, 4-F, 5-T
Quiz Answers:



Long-Term Care Connection is designed to be a resource tool for the owners, operators and employees of long-term care facilities. Topics including insurance, risk management, health, safety and employment will be covered in the quarterly publication.

For more information on receiving *Long-Term Care Connection*, or to submit a comment or story idea, please call Karen Osman at 1-800-554-2642, Extension 4459, or send her an e-mail at kosman@churchmutual.com.

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