

# A Mission Called Care



From left:  
Dolores Miller  
Connie Kreider  
Tammy Dunlap

“We began our group with a simple goal in mind: to make it more pleasant to come to work. Our main focus is our residents. If we’re not happy, they’re not happy.”

*Tammy Dunlap,  
CARE president*

Pennsylvania has the second largest population of retired and aging seniors in the United States, trailing only Florida. In the next ten years there will be an explosion of baby boomers who, at some point, will require assistance. And there’s an alarming shortage of caregivers to meet that need.

Until recently, however, the 94,000 plus direct care workers have been struggling to acquire the respect, pay, and benefits necessary to attract new frontline workers and retain those already in the field.

Since April 2003, a dynamic group from Lititz-based Luther Acres Manor in Lancaster County has been working to overcome this challenge. They have formed an association named CARE. According to

President Tammy Dunlap, she and two other nursing assistants at Luther Acres first met to grapple with a multitude of frustrations, from “lack of training, respect, and money, to ‘working short’” ...and seeing the distressing effects on their residents, a huge priority for these dedicated women. Dunlap was joined by Dolores Miller, vice president, Connie Kreider, treasurer, and recently, Karen Blough, corresponding secretary. CARE currently has about 40 members. Luther Acres administrator, Joseph Mraz, has supported the initiative from the beginning, putting them in touch with the Institute for Caregiver Education, Inc. (ICE) in Chambersburg. ICE helped them apply for a \$50,000 grant, which they received from the Pennsylvania Intra-Governmental Council on Long Term Care. Project Director Betty Frandsen, R.N., N.H.A., of ICE is working closely with CARE leaders to guide the process and develop by-laws for the organization. Others from the Institute provide meeting and newsletter recommendations, as well as important behind-the-scenes assistance regarding the group’s outreach and growth. The grant is administered by the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging. Mark Davis of Philadelphia-based Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute also serves as a consultant to CARE as part of the grant.

### Getting To the Core

CARE is a pilot project, with Lancaster County as the model. Their mission: Caregivers coming together to enhance the quality of lives for our patients and residents by enriching our profession.

Dunlap explains what the nursing assistants are up against. “They go through a 75-hour training program in which the focus is limited to learning the basic tasks of the job. These include helping a client to get up and out of bed, walk them, bathe, dress, and take vital signs. What you get after completing this short course is a certificate. All this means is that your name is added to the Nurse Aide Registry by the commonwealth. They even took the word ‘certified’ off the I.D. badge because technically we are not ‘certified.’” She continues, “We were frustrated. But instead of complaining we relied on the administration to fix things. But there was only so much they could do. We began our group with a simple goal in mind: to make it more pleasant to come to work. Our main focus is our residents. If we’re not happy, they’re not happy.” She describes the futility of keeping people in the profession. It’s not strictly about the money,

according to Dunlap. “If we had the additional training, the money would follow.”

“Turnover is large,” she adds. “We are the ones dealing with the residents. We’re the hands and eyes of the nurses. But we get the least respect and make the least money. We can tell a resident’s in pain just by looking at them. But we can’t give them medication. We have to wait for a nurse to come in and give it, then leave. But they’re overworked too.”

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## Goals of CARE

**OFFER** support to all DCWs

**NETWORK** to attract people to the profession

**RETAIN** those already in it

**EXTEND** training

**IMPROVE** the professional image

**RAISE** wages



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According to Dunlap, the association has made tangible progress in several areas:

They've set up an office; designed a web site; and they're publishing a newsletter, for which Dunlap cites the contributions of Susan Heilman, R.N., Luther Acres Manor staff development advisor. CARE is reaching out to high schools, educating students about the benefits of a career as a nursing assistant. They emphasize the emotional fulfillment and spiritual rewards of the work. They point out the practical aspect of direct care work as a good stepping stone "to see if nursing's for them before they spend the money," according to Dunlap.



### CARE Equals Confidence

Asked how CARE plans to remedy the Catch-22 (you can't advance until you get more training and you can't get more training until you advance), Dunlap is confident. "We want to see the hours of training increase, to include courses on digestive and neurological systems, and psychological/social aspects of the aging. That would be a start." Right now, the rudimentary training a nursing assistant receives is not even realistic. For example, Dunlap points out, training focuses on applying a gamut of the Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) as it applies to one patient; when "in reality, you step right into a situation where you must care for eight or nine patients."

CARE is getting help with the crucial issue of education from the Institute for

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Caregiver Education. ICE has provided CARE with several training programs including: The Career Development Series, a 26-hour course that includes 13 topics such as stress and time management, team building, care of residents with dementia and disabilities; a Leadership Development Series; and the Nurse Assistant Specialist for Elders Series, with 84-hours of clinical training beyond the basic 75-hour nurses aide course, mentioned above. Small segments of all three courses will be included in the newsletter and provided as educational programs at future association meetings.

On May 8, 2004, at Armstrong Manor in Lancaster County, CARE will have completed a big kickoff to educate the public about their profession and their association. Invitations were sent to 1,200 nursing assistants in the county as well as public officials, state representatives and healthcare officials.

It's now a year since CARE was organized. With its formal grant ending in June 2004, officers are developing a plan to sustain the association for the future. What emerges from a short conversation with these professionals is not the arduous workload; rather, it is their deep concern for the welfare of each patient/resident. "Our clients are 'walking history books,'" says Connie Kreider, treasurer. The association will always be focused on improving the lives of nursing assistants. But they are driven by a passionate regard for the people they care for every day. That's why they chose this career. **FC**

*CARE meets the second Wednesday of every month from 2:30-4:30 p.m., and the last Thursday from 6-8 p.m. at the Mublenberg Lodge of Luther Acres Manor. There are currently no dues for membership and all direct care workers are welcome, whether you work in a nursing home, home care, or adult day services. You do not have to be an employee of Luther Acres Manor. For more information, contact Tammy Dunlap at 626-6884 ext. 684.*



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