

# Safety in Numbers

*By Steven L. Dawson*

Most of our frail and elderly loved ones, those living in nine out of ten nursing homes across the country, are at risk of receiving less than “minimally necessary” care due to inadequate staffing levels—this from a report released to Congress in April by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). CMS should know, for it is the federal agency that helps pay for three out of four nursing home residents in the U.S., about \$40 billion of taxpayer dollars each year.

The report documents that the typical nursing home resident should receive between 2.8 and 3.2 hours of care each day from a certified nursing assistant. Nursing assistants are the “front-line” staff of long-term care who bathe, feed, toilet, or help transfer this country’s 1.6 million nursing home residents.

Yet more than 90 percent of all nursing homes studied failed to meet that nursing aide staff-to-resident ratio—a level of safety that the report warns is “minimally necessary to provide all needed care,” and below which residents are at risk of higher rates of bedsores, dehydration, and weight loss.

The report further states that between 181,000 and 310,000 additional nursing aides would have to be hired to meet the minimum standards, adding to the approximately 700,000 aides now employed in long-term care facilities.

More easily said than done: Nursing homes across the country are already having serious trouble attracting and keeping front-line staff. According to the American Health Care Association, nearly 12 percent of all certified nursing home aide positions are empty, and turnover now exceeds 78 percent per year—that means that three out of every four aides do not last a full year within the typical nursing facility.

Why are direct-care staff so hard to find and then so hard to keep? The work is challenging and the pay is poor, with a median income of just \$13,287 per year. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 18 percent of all nursing home aides return home to families living in poverty, while 13 percent must rely on food stamps—more than twice the national average. And in a bitter irony, even though nursing home aides serve our nation’s health care system, more than one in four has no access to health insurance.

How can we increase the ratio of staff to residents when we cannot even find and keep our current nursing home staff? For one answer, look no further than your nearest airport security guard.

Faced with precisely the same problem of poorly paid “front-line” security staff—with dangerously high annual turnover rates exceeding 126 percent—the U.S. Transportation Security Administration just last month started to turn poverty-level,

dead-end jobs into high-paying jobs with benefits. Currently averaging approximately \$12,000 per year, these workers will soon be paid a starting annual salary of \$32,000, plus health and pension benefits, and provided additional training and opportunities for career advancement.

Strange, isn't it? When our own security is threatened, we make certain that those in whose hands we place our safety are provided decent, stable jobs. If the logic is self-evident—to ensure high-quality service, you must provide high-quality jobs—why does that same logic fail the workers to whom we entrust our loved ones?

“Homeland security” can have many meanings, certainly one of which is the right to be safe and secure when being cared for within a U.S. nursing home. As surely as September 11<sup>th</sup> awakened us to our vulnerability from without, the report to Congress on dangerously low staffing ratios should awaken the American public to our vulnerability within.

Nearly 100,000 Americans have already signed on to petition being circulated by the National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform (NCCNHR), which demands that Congress pass legislation to ensure adequate staffing in nursing homes. On May 9, NCCNHR presented the petition at a Congressional hearing on nursing home staffing, sponsored by Senator Charles Grassley (R-IA) and Representative Henry Waxman (D-CA).

The petitioners are raising their voices, letting policymakers know that they understand that quality nursing home care is a public policy issue. Nursing homes must be required to hire sufficient numbers of staff to care for residents; but Medicare and Medicaid must also provide sufficient reimbursement to enable providers to raise wages, improve training, and attract high-quality staff.

We must respond to the nursing home staffing crisis with the same passion, commitment and public resources that we have dedicated to protecting our citizens from terrorist attacks. We have demanded high-quality “front-line” jobs to provide security within our nation's airports; we must do the same for the frail, elderly and those living with disabilities in our nation's nursing homes.



~ **Steven L. Dawson** is President of the Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute of the South Bronx, which hosts the National Clearinghouse on the Direct Care Workforce [www.directcareclearinghouse.org](http://www.directcareclearinghouse.org).

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