Surviving the Perfect Storm: Home Health Care Nursing Shortage

The challenge of recruiting, engaging and retaining nurses has reached critical proportions. Longer life spans, combined with aging baby boomers, will double the population of Americans aged 65 years or older during the next 25 years. This means increased demand for services from about 72 million Americans. To make matters worse, there is an ongoing shortage of nurses and bottlenecks in nursing education. Thus, home healthcare agencies need to have a plan to manage the high demand for scarce nursing resources that is not expected to ease anytime soon. Moreover, a host of strategies, from sign-on and stay bonuses to the appeal of flexibility and autonomy have done little to reduce typical turnover rates of 20% or more.

The question then becomes how can home health care agencies survive the storm?

Technology: The Port In The Storm

As the nursing shortage continues, home health agencies offering their nurses tools and resources to make their jobs easier will have a recruiting advantage. In today’s digitized and mobilized world, successfully implemented technology can create a positive impact on the care delivery process and nurse recruitment.

Software solutions exclusively designed for home health care that streamline workflow for caregivers and reduce the traditional burden of “paperwork” and recordkeeping can dramatically change your work environment and the way nurses view their jobs. Technology tools that allow nurses to work smarter, not harder, can promote greater patient interaction.

Shifting the balance between patient care and administration can add significantly to employee engagement and job satisfaction. It can also drive better compliance with clinical and payer documentation requirements at the point-of-care to ensure maximum reimbursement speed and value. The right technology can support your business, your staff and will offer you a clear competitive advantage.
The Sinking Ship

From an aging population to wider access to health care and high health care employment, a number of trends have put a substantial strain on the talent pipeline in the nursing profession. Consider these facts:

- 75 million Baby Boomers are driving increased demand for health care services.
- The Affordable Care Act has ushered into the health care marketplace millions of newly insured consumers.
- Health care employment has been projected to increase 28% from 2.71 million in 2012 to 3.24 million in 2022, representing approximately 5 million new jobs.

Further complicating the supply dilemma is the inability of nursing schools to replenish supply at a rate that would compensate for the alarming facts that 15% of newly minted RNs quit after 15 months on the job and 55% of nurses have already celebrated their 50th birthday.

The “graying” of the health care workforce is, in some ways, a benefit to the home health care industry. As nurses get older, many opt out of higher-paying jobs in hospital settings and switch to home health care employment. Among the enticements:

- Greater flexibility to control their hours of work, especially appealing for those who find themselves in the “sandwich” generation, caring for both children and aging parents
- Fewer hours overall
- Elimination of shift work
- Autonomy and the opportunity for more independent work
- Less stress
- Less physical demand

That is all good news. However, while home health care is initially an attractive alternative to hospital work, many nurses who make the switch encounter unanticipated challenges in their new jobs.

Searching For A Lifeboat - Why Home Health Care Struggles To Engage Nurses

Despite all the positives of home care employment, one of the common complaints is the burden of paperwork and recordkeeping. These complaints are frequently shared on social media and in nursing discussion boards and forums. The following examples are found on allnurses.com:
• “It seems like most of the job is paperwork.”
• “Charting takes forever and you are usually not paid to do it?!?”
• “Admission charting will make you rethink your entire nursing career.”

The reality is most nurses view their profession more as a calling to help others than simply a way to make a living. While most jobs have an administrative component, the requirements to document in home health can be overwhelming and detract from job satisfaction, especially without the right tools to support the process.

In The Eye Of The Storm - The Cost Of Turnover

When job frustrations rise and satisfaction plummets, up to 1 in 5 home health nurses quit. Replacing them can take anywhere from three weeks to four months, depending on geography and market conditions. While the cost to replace a single exiting nurse can vary, again depending upon location, estimates place the average cost between $21,000 to $31,000. It is unclear whether those estimates represent true cost or only surface costs.

Turnover carries both direct and indirect costs. As noted in a Home Health and Hospice Care Nurse Staffing Study by the Texas Center for Nursing Workforce Studies, direct costs relate to human resources issues, such as off-boarding administration, recruitment and replacement hire activities and fill-in staffing. Less obvious but no less costly are the negative impacts to staff morale, productivity and performance, which can lead to the potential for adverse clinical outcomes and diminished quality of patient care. Beyond these challenges is an inability to adequately cover new referrals, which will stifle growth.

Clearly, recruiting and retention challenges can be major obstacles for growth. Employers with the most engaged and satisfied workers often offer special incentives to the workforce. In Fortune's “Great Place to Work” coverage of health care employers, employee perks included everything from discounted gym memberships, chair massages, pet picture contests and ugly tie days. Others offer no-interest loans, concierge services to accommodate personal errands and dinner to go. Many of the tactics of these top-tier organizations would be out of reach for home health care companies, either due to cost or simply the logistics of a remote workforce.

Strategies to attract and keep the skilled nurses needed to deliver patient care in a home care setting tend to fall along more traditional lines, running the gamut from paid vacation, sick time and flexible scheduling to health insurance, bonuses and employee recognition. While these all are good practices for retention, the work itself, especially the burden of documentation can weigh on home health nurses, and job dissatisfaction comes from having insufficient or poor quality tools to accomplish this necessary task.

Skies Are Clearing - Make It Easier To Do The Job

Making it easier for home health RNs to do their job could be the hidden key to more successful home health care recruiting and retention. One of the cultural shocks for nurses who move from a hospital setting to a home health setting can be a lack of sophistication in technology. Some find themselves shifting from automated, mobilized technology to complex electronic recordkeeping procedures and in some cases even returning to manual paper processes.
When you automate, simplify and streamline a confusing, time-consuming, labor-intensive process, you create a recruiting and retention tool that facilitates a better patient experience.

**Tying The Anchor - The Power Of Point-Of-Care Automation**

Beyond providing care, caregivers are equally responsible for documenting the care they provide. The best documentation systems are intuitive, user-friendly and guide the caregiver through every step to ensure nothing is missed.

When evaluating home health and hospice business software, look for powerful documentation systems that put every documentation form needed at the caregiver’s fingertips, while providing the utmost in privacy and security. Beyond a versatile dashboard and an easy-to-navigate structure, the system should provide clear direction, prompting the caregiver to capture exactly the data required for every situation.

With the right tool at hand, nurses will see an immediate boost in productivity that can very effectively ameliorate one of the biggest sources of caregiver frustration. Automation streamlines workflow in a number of ways. For example:

- No need to search for the appropriate forms (just select the visit type and all necessary documents are immediately accessible)
- Faster form completion with fewer clicks
- Automatic updates reflect the latest changes in clinical standards and CMS guidelines
- Seamless flow of information from one caregiver to another
- Greater consistency in care (based upon best practice)
- Action-based timelines and alerts
- Quick access to risk trends and emergent events
- Indexed care protocols for easy reference

**After The Storm, Comes Calm - From Recruiting And Retention To Reimbursement**

Beyond recruiting and retention woes, every home care organization copes with the ongoing challenge of how to protect and expand razor-thin margins. Problems with high turnover and higher-cost staffing can cut deeply, halving already-low margins of 5% to 7%.

The advent of value-based purchasing models, MCO plan management and ACO/hospital transitions in care models complicates things further. Given the complexity and volume of payer requirements, a key requirement for caregivers is to have the ability to create payer-specific compliance rules. Software can proactively prompt nurses to document along the appropriate treatment path.

Otherwise, the agency puts at risk between 5% and 30% of their entitled reimbursement in uncollected or delayed payments. As Medicare and Medicaid systems move towards managed care models with community contracts and longer pay cycles, it becomes even more critical for agencies to tighten the accuracy and timeliness of their scheduling and billing procedures.
The key to maximizing profitability is a well-refined process that is highly automated to minimize time to complete and reduce the incidence of errors. Documentation mistakes are a problem that occurs frequently when caregivers perform charting duties after they have left the patient and must rely more on memory.

When home care professionals have the right software tools to discharge their duties more effectively and efficiently at the point of care, you ensure faster, more accurate documentation and enhanced compliance, which has a direct impact on the speed and value of reimbursements. No longer will those reimbursements be chipped away by the higher operating costs that accompany higher turnover. Patients will be assured of outstanding care from engaged and enthusiastic nurses when you use technology to transform overwhelming clinical and payer documentation requirements into a routine complement to the most satisfying part of any nurse’s job helping those in need.

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