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DC Long Term Care Coalition Report Highlights Severe Workforce Shortages

Washington, D.C. – December 11th, 2024 – The DC Long Term Care Coalition has released its sixth Workforce Survey, which reveals alarming trends in the availability of direct care workers and nurses across the long-term care sector. Compiled in collaboration with organizations representing employers, labor, and prominent organizations such as AARP, DC Appleseed, and Capitol Hill Village, the findings underscore the urgent need for reforms to address workforce shortages that continue to impact seniors and people with disabilities in the District.

The survey reveals that a shortage of qualified direct care workers and nurses persists, driven by low wages, poor job quality, and regulatory barriers. All respondents but one reported being unable to fill all shifts without relying on agency staff and asking staff to work overtime. A quarter of respondents described staffing shortages as moderate while nearly 30% described them as high. Staffing shortages are creating a chain reaction of events that ends with DC's most vulnerable residents not being able to obtain the care they need and deserve. Medicaid providers have been particularly affected, with more than 80% reporting that they were unable to serve a client due to staffing issues.

Among key findings, the survey documents:

- Low pay and poor job quality continue to drive the worker shortage. Despite some incremental increases in wages, wages for entry-level direct care workers still are not adequate to meet the cost of living in the DC metro area and are not competitive with other similar jobs, including those that require less skill and training.
- Workers are continuing to leave their jobs for other jobs that pay more and provide better benefits.
- There are not enough new workers to meet current demand and those workers who remain are working harder and longer.

Shellon Thompson, a CNA, shared:

"I often work 16 hour days and my income is still not enough to cover my basic living expenses in DC. On top of that, my line of work puts me in dangerous situations where my patients have random outbursts of aggression and violence due to their deteriorating mental capacity. We are in a constant state of burnout and something must change."

In addition to the shortage of workers, regulatory barriers such as lengthy licensing processes and testing delays, as well as lack of access to affordable training, were also identified as drivers. The Coalition has noted that in 2019, DC had eight schools that were approved to offer home health aide training. Today we only have two!

Marla Lahat, Executive Director of Home Care Partners, a licensed DC home care agency, shared:

“When we post a job for a home health aide, we receive responses from dozens of interested applicants who want to do this critical work and many have personal experience providing care for an older neighbor or relative. Unfortunately, very few applicants hold the license needed and there aren’t robust training programs where we can direct them. I’m deeply concerned about the pipeline of direct care workers in DC.”

This year, under the leadership of Chairwoman Christina Henderson, the DC Council unanimously enacted the Certified Nurse Assistant Amendment Act that includes an additional wage increase and other major regulatory reforms. The DC Coalition on Long Term Care is calling upon Mayor Bowser to take bold action and to implement this legislation, fund the wage increase, and expedite needed regulatory reforms.

“DC is not supporting the infrastructure to attract and train new workers, and is not moving quickly enough to reduce regulatory barriers that make it harder for qualified workers from neighboring jurisdictions to work in DC,” notes Claudia Schlosberg, the Chair of the Coalition’s Workforce Development Committee. “With a growing shortage of workers and a growing aging population, the need to build capacity and support the direct care workforce can no longer be ignored.”

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