

The Retention Specialist Program

Program Overview

America's long-term care system is in a state of crisis. A major cause of this crisis is a staffing shortage of unprecedented proportions. The decreasing labor pool and competition from other industries have made staying fully staffed a continual challenge for long-term care providers across the spectrum of services. Long-term care also experiences high rates of job dissatisfaction, burnout and employee turnover. This pattern is occurring at a time when long-term care facilities and agencies are caring for people with increasingly complex and time-consuming medical needs and additional federal and state funding cuts are looming. Thus, creative new employee development and retention programs are needed that truly *work and are cost effective*.

The Retention Specialist Program, developed by a team of researchers from the Cornell Institute for Translational Research on Aging (CITRA), is a promising model designed to respond to this challenge. Specifically, this project recommends the designation of a trained retention specialist who has both the expertise and the ongoing support to systematically address problems of low job satisfaction and resulting turnover in a nursing home or other long-term care organization. The project provides in-depth training and a portfolio of resources to the retention specialists who are charged with diagnosing and addressing retention problems. The retention specialists also received specially designed forms that enabled them to identify their retention challenges and track the implementation of the program.

Program Model

The hallmark of this model is that a staff person from each facility be designated as a retention specialist. This individual receives tools to address their retention needs. These tools included an [Organizational Assessment](#) tool that is aimed at helping to identify some of the factors associated with staff retention. Retention Specialists are encouraged to take a leadership role in developing and sustaining a core of caring, committed staff and act as a "retention advocate," serving as the key internal consultant regarding retention programs. They are encouraged to create and follow a [Retention Plan](#) to identify and track key retention goals.

Retention specialists are encouraged to implement a range of evidence-based strategies aimed at building a stable, high-quality workforce. The training includes the introduction of possible intervention strategies such as peer mentoring, career ladders, communication training, recognition and supervision.

Evaluation Results

The Retention Specialist Program was initially implemented in 16 facilities, rigorously evaluated, and found to be effective in several major areas. First, **turnover declined** in the facilities that implemented the program, in comparison to 16 facilities that did not. In addition, the retention specialist program had a **positive effect on general perceptions of the nursing home** and specifically on CNAs' assessment of efforts in the facility in the areas of training and attempts to retain staff. A more detailed summary of the evaluation results can be found in the [Retention Specialist Executive Summary](#).