



Policy Brief: Direct Care Workers The Backbone of Iowa's Evolving Term Care System

Many Iowans are faced with the challenges of disability and aging. The fastest growing segment of the population is those over the age of 85, those who will be the most in need of long term care. Consumers are demanding choice and options in who provides care and how it is delivered. Care needs of residents in Iowa's nursing facilities have increased, and long term care providers face challenges in the recruitment and retention of Direct Care Workers (DCWs). Need, demand, and economics are converging forcing Iowa to reexamine the readiness of its long term care system.

Iowa relies primarily on nursing facilities for the provision of long term care. Recent long term care redesign conversations are centered on creating system balance between institutional and expanding options for community based long term care. A more balanced system would provide for increased consumer choice, distribute demand along a continuum commensurate with need, and be more cost effective.

DCWs are the backbone of the long term care delivery system. DCWs are Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs), Home Care Aides (HCAs), Personal Attendants (PAs) and others who are the front line caregivers in nursing homes, assisted living and residential care facilities, adult day centers, and in homes – those places where people live and receive assistance or care. They provide care to elders and to adults and children with disabilities. Critical to the success of redesign efforts are Direct Care Workers.

In June 2004, Iowa Caregivers Association (ICA), AARP Iowa, and Office of the Long Term Care Ombudsmen convened four public forums throughout the state on issues related to the increasing demand for Direct Care Workers, problems of recruitment and retention, and the implications of these issues for the on-going debate over the future of long term care. The purpose was to solicit input from consumers, workers, and providers on their views of the issues and the values they consider most important in the long term care system design. Stakeholder feedback showed remarkable consensus and centered on three themes: respect, safety, and fairness.

Respect, Safety and Fairness: Values Critical to Iowa's Long Term Care System

Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ The relationship between the worker and the elder or person with disability goes two ways and is based on mutual respect.➤ Direct Care Worker wages and benefits need to be competitive and equitable across all care settings.➤ Opportunities for advancement within the direct care profession should be developed and recognized.
Safety	Iowans must have access to quality care through assurances that: <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Staff is adequately prepared for the work they are asked to provide.➤ The number of staff is adequate for the number of people for whom they are asked to care.➤ DCW competencies are assured through education and ongoing training to build new skills, and take on new workplace challenges.➤ Standards for care assure uniform preparation, regardless of setting, for like work.
Fairness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Workers need access to basic employee protection of health insurance and workers compensation regardless of employer.➤ Consumers need training on how to be good employers.➤ Consumers and workers need a clearinghouse for the provisions of the employer / employee relationship, and verification and recognition of credentialing through the expanding registry.