Iowa caregivers ask Gov. Kim Reynolds and all elected officials to place a priority on Building a Strong Direct Care Workforce.

In my role as a home health aide, I dropped off a prescription to one of my clients, and when I turned to lock the door out of habit and needed to open the door. That video recorded case of her fall was not just a random accident. I called my immediate supervisor, who immediately assessed the situation and called for an ambulance. My client was diagnosed with injuries and the emergency room physician said not that if I hadn’t stopped to check on her, she probably would have died. I continued to provide care for her during her three-week recovery.

— Shern Wilkeson

Iowa, like many states, has faced a shortage of direct care workers, as the live the lives of the people they assist are not often easy. The state’s underfunded, female-dominated, high-demand workforce, which includes home health aides, personal care, and home aides, and direct care support staff, earns a median hourly wage of $13.80, according to the Direct Care Workers of Iowa 2019 Wage and Benefit Survey. The lowest hourly wage reported was $9.80.

RESEARCHER EDITORIAL: It takes a village to help aging Iowaans, and this state needs to step up.

Male-dominated occupations such as emergency medical technicians and firefighters are viewed as strong and well-paying careers for women, and they are... but not for direct care. Direct care work is often viewed as ‘entry level.’ As Donna, a hospice aide, put it, ‘I’ve worked in direct care for more than 46 years. So direct care is a career choice for the lady. She’s not viewed as an entry-level worker by the public, and I didn’t think that’s right.’ The ‘entry level’ language is built into and supported by our vocational and employment exam systems, language that leaves people down.

Iowa’s workforce affects other industries, such as manufacturing and technology, too, when their employees rely on direct care workers to assist them with daily caregiving responsibilities or to help them maintain their work. Family caregivers who provide the bulk of hours of care for Iowa seniors, friends, and neighbors are touched by the shortages of direct care workers needed to fill the caregiving gaps. Some family caregivers leave their employment to care for a loved one, placing their own financial security at risk.

Get the Register Opinion newsletter in your inbox.

A sneak peek of the newest editorials, columns and opinions from The Des Moines Register.

Subscribe Here »

It doesn’t end there. Women in direct care also face racial dynamics. Some have provided care as accountants, postal employees, and other better paying and benefits jobs in search of elevating their status in direct care when they are too well suited for ‘women’s work’ to make the change. We need people to talk about women who provide caregiving work.

The workforce affects other industries, such as manufacturing and technology, too, when their employees rely on direct care workers to assist them with daily caregiving responsibilities or to help them maintain their work. Family caregivers who provide the bulk of hours of care for Iowa seniors, friends, and neighbors are touched by the shortages of direct care workers needed to fill the caregiving gaps. Some family caregivers leave their employment to care for a loved one, placing their own financial security at risk.

Get the Register Opinion newsletter in your inbox.

A sneak peek of the newest editorials, columns and opinions from The Des Moines Register. 

Subscribe Here »

Systemic change requires bold policy decisions by elected officials. To address the wage issue, provide reimbursement rates that ensure that nobody working in direct care earns poverty wages. Some employers, such as Everyday, have made the decision to implement a $15.50 to $20 minimum wage, and bullets to “the decision to increase our minimum wage. Everyday took into consideration the national conversation related to elevate wage and the current shortages facing our direct care workforce,” said Troy Wade, Everyday’s vice president of CEO. “We are currently looking for ways to improve the lives of our employees, and we know this is a step in the right direction for all direct care workers.”

Gov. Kim Reynolds launched the Future Ready Iowa Initiative a few years ago, which focuses on high-demand occupations with goals of increasing the number of workers with postsecondary education and raising family incomes. Promising customers are being realized in the areas of apprenticeships and other activities. Unfortunately, in 2019, a $14.50 an hour minimum wage eligibility threshold for participation in Future Ready Iowa was adopted, essentially excluding high-demand jobs such as direct care workers.

We ask the government and all elected officials to place a priority on Building a Strong Direct Care Workforce.

Sherril Wilkeson is a home health aide. Dr. Pender is executive director of Iowa Caregivers. Email: sherril@iowacaregivers.org