

PADONA Journal

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***REPRINT OF ARTICLES FROM PA DOH RAI SPOT-
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Effective Leadership

WHERE SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Beth Baker, Freelance Journalist

Nursing homes continue to be plagued by high staff turnover and difficulties with recruitment and retention. The Paraprofessional Health Institute (PHI) estimates that three-quarters of nursing homes “fail to meet CMS-recommended nursing assistant levels.” Turnover of CNAs nationally is over 50 percent, and much higher in some nursing homes. Moreover the wages of CNAs remain stubbornly low, averaging \$19,000 annually, in part because aides are often not given full-time work. Job-related injuries are three times higher than the average US employee, and one in six CNAs still lacks health insurance, according to PHI.

Against this backdrop, a new peer-to-peer recognition program offers one promising tool for nursing homes to show appreciation for staff members who are too often overworked and underpaid.

Ceca Foundation, founded in 2013 to nurture high patient satisfaction through recognizing and rewarding outstanding caregivers, is piloting a peer-to-peer recognition program in 10 healthcare facilities in Washington, DC, including 5 nursing homes, as well as hospitals, a hospice, and a residential psychiatric facility. The foundation hopes to expand to 500 providers within 5 years, with the next launch planned for Baltimore and Philadelphia.

The Ceca Caregiver Award Program encourages employees to nominate a co-worker who has demonstrated exceptional caregiving. Employees use their smart phones or work stations to log on to a user-friendly website which lists each employee’s name, photo, and job title, and with space to indicate a specific caregiving value the nominee exemplifies and space to share details. The values include empathy, humor, integrity, professionalism, and teamwork in caring for residents. “We consider all staff to be caregivers, not just nurses or CNAs,” explains Matthew P. Lawlor, Chair & CEO of Ceca Foundation. “The idea is to build teamwork and engagement.” The foundation offers the program free to nursing homes. Nursing home employees who win the award receive \$250. “Honestly what we’ve learned is that you don’t want this

to be about the money,” Lawlor says. “But a lot of these folks are making the food and cleaning the laundry and pushing the brooms, and the cash does matter.” Winners are presented the award at a celebration. In addition, all nominated employees’ names and photos are displayed on a television monitor in the lobby or other prominent place.

One key to the program’s success is that Ceca requires the organization’s leader to participate in both selecting the award winner and in attending the celebration. The CEO’s involvement is symbolic, but very important to the award’s impact, Lawlor says.

To make it feasible for the top executive to participate, the program requires a relatively small commitment of time. The awards are given quarterly in nursing homes (monthly in hospitals). The three-person judging panel, made up of a foundation representative, a resident representative such as a family caregiver or ombudsman, and the head of the facility, reviews all nominations. The nominations are summarized in reports ahead of time, and meetings take 15 minutes. The awards ceremonies are also kept to 15 to 20 minutes.

The ceremonies are often very moving, says Lawlor, who has attended many. In one example of an award recipient, a CNA spent two hours trying to get to work during a blizzard—a trip that normally would have taken 15 minutes—and was told by the cab driver the fare would be \$60. She did not have the money, so she borrowed it from the receptionist, along with another \$60 for the trip home, without ever asking for reimbursement or telling anyone. “She burst out crying when she got the award,” says Lawlor. In another case, a food service worker came in on his day off to prepare a resident’s favorite dish for his birthday dinner.

To measure the program’s success, Ceca Foundations uses three criteria: engagement rate, “net promoter” score (which measures how frequently employees would recommend their nursing home to others), and turnover rate. The data set is not yet large enough to offer a strong evidence base, says Lawlor, but the trends are promising.

Nationally, peer-to-peer recognition programs are a tried and true technique in

many occupations. A 2015 report on trends in employee recognition programs by WorldatWork, a human resources (HR) association, found that of 407 organizations studied (9 percent of them in health care/social assistance), nearly half used peer-to-peer recognition. A survey of 815 HR professionals, conducted in 2012 by SHRM/Globoforce, found that peer-to-peer recognition programs contributed to employee engagement and retention, as well as customer satisfaction.

Lawlor says the Ceca recognition program complements efforts of nursing homes that are the culture change journey. “For one it’s focused on the resident,” he says. “Then there’s promoting a culture of open communication and teamwork. And we insist on the top person being involved. If you want culture change, it starts with the leader.”

To learn more about the program, visit www.cecafoundation.org.

Beth Baker is the author of *With a Little Help from Our Friends - Creating Community as We Grow Older* and of *Old Age in a New Age - The Promise of Transformative Nursing Homes*.

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