

We Care for Home Health Care Workers

By Ebehitale Imobhio

Ebehitale Imobhio is a senior at the University at Buffalo, majoring in global gender studies. She is Nigerian and used to live in New York City and Jamestown before moving to Buffalo for school. She is passionate about advocacy and social justice and one day hopes to work to represent the rights of disenfranchised people.

*= indicates name change for privacy

Key Facts about Home Health Aides

- Home Health Aides (HHAs) are a type of in-home health care providers.
- The duties of an HHA can range from basic care, such as assisting clients with homemaking or personal care to things as complex and crucial as overseeing the administering of medications or directly administering medications (Home Health Aide Job Description, 2019).
- Due to the nature of the job, most HHAs will be required to be available on holidays, on weekends and/or overnight (Home Health Aide Job Description, 2019).

What's the problem?

- Unlivable wage: HHAs make \$27,839/year before taxes in Erie County. The minimum an adult should make to cover all their expected expenses in Erie county without children or other dependents is \$24,370 (Living Wage Calculator-MIT, n.d.). This means that HHAs make slightly above the living wage. In order to support any dependents, an HHA would have to make a substantially higher amount compared to the Erie County living wage salary. Due to this, HHAs tend not to have the ability to take time off work.
- Abuse: According to U.S. News and Reuters, nearly 1 in 4 HHAs face verbal abuse at work, and verbal abuse has been found to lead to physical abuse. Margaret Quinn, director of the Safe Home Care Project at the University of Massachusetts, stated in an interview "*[t]here is increasing scientific evidence that verbal abuse, as well as physical abuse, can have harmful, long-term impacts on employees' health, such as depression*

and burnout, and on the stability of the workforce, such as high turnover, which is costly for employers and hard on those receiving care when an aide they've developed a relationship with does not return" (Gordon, 2019).

- Isolation and problems with unionizing: HHAs are also very unlikely to be members of workers unions. They face challenges in unionizing due to a general lack of knowledge about unions. Many HHAs also work through agencies and thus never interact with their coworkers, according to Jennifer*, a union representative.
- Lacking legal protections: Although New York State Employee Laws provide basic protections to HHA workers, the protections they offer are not enough. Specific policies addressing the issues that HHAs face at work are crucial. The policies regarding in-home care workers that already exist are all targeted at their clients. While we must protect in-home care patients from abuse, it is also just as vital that we protect in-home care workers. Finding a solution to these issues needs to be a priority for Erie County.

Shortage of in-home care workers

- There is a national shortage of HHAs and other in-home caregivers. 17% of HHA jobs remain unfilled within New York State (Farrell, 2019).
- Due to working conditions and lower wages in the job field, there is a high turnover rate in HHA (NY Home Care Workforce Trends and Patient Care, 2019). In New York State, almost 40% of in-home care patients are unable to access HHAs (NY Home Care Workforce Trends and Patient Care, 2019).
- Despite the growing demand for HHAs, its number has dropped. For example, an HHA agency called Catholic Health Home Care Services, whose total number of workers dropped from 500 in 2016 to 335 in 2018 (Gordon, 2019).

Why does this matter to Erie County?

- In 2018 approximately 39% of Buffalo's population was at least 50 or older (Census Reporter, 2018).
- This means that there will inevitably be a greater need for HHAs and other in-home care workers. This demand will be unmet because there is a high turnover rate in HHAs.

There is also a downward trend in this job sector due to low wages, unfavorable hours, and a lack of a safe working environment (Famakinwa, 2019; Gordon, 2019).

- It is our obligation to have in-home care resources available to our aging population should they need it.

One HHA's story

Madeline has been working as an HHA for over 20 years now. She has two sons and one daughter, who are all teenagers. Madeline is very proud of her job because she loves being able to help people have a good quality of life despite their illnesses or disabilities. In the time that she has worked as an HHA, she has worked with many amazing clients that she has truly loved taking care of. She has also worked with many clients who have either been physically and verbally abusive towards her or had family members that were. Most of the time, she would have to keep working with the clients for various reasons. Due to the shortage of HHAs in her current agency, she usually gets to pick her clients, but she has had to change clients due to abuse at the hands of the client or their family members.

“I once had a client that would constantly spit on me or at least try to about twelve years ago. I told my supervisor about it and he informed me that my options were to take another client that was almost two hours away or fill in for people who could not make their shifts-meaning I would have no permanent case of my own-or keep working with him. Obviously I kept working with him, I didn't have a real choice...due to having kids and an already specific established schedule on top of not having a car I was stuck with this client until we got a new one.”

Recommendations

- Create policies that are aimed explicitly at legal protections for HHA and other in-home care workers: By creating policies that prioritize the legal protection of in-home caregivers against abuse at work, we will effectively be making the job safer. This could result in less burnout, lower turnover rates, and possibly lead to more people working as HHAs. Erie County has the opportunity to be pioneers in an area that is sorely lacking.

- Create mandatory programs that educate HHAs on their legal rights as part of their training: By creating programs like these, HHAs can be made aware of their legal rights. This would show them that they have legal recourse in the event of them being abused at work.
- Create a hub of information for in-home caregivers on the Erie County Government website: This would include information about legal rights and protections for in-home caregivers, mandatory training, licensing information, and any other information necessary for the optimal function of an HHA.
- Make employment in this field more desirable: There is already a shortage of HHAs both locally and nationally. We need to respond to this need by increasing wages and creating more legal protections for HHAs to make this job more attractive to the general public.
- More research: While much is known about the shortage of HHA workers in federally and in New York state specifically, little is known about the state of Erie County's HHAs. It is essential to research the status of this job sector not only because it is crucial to be aware of the general condition of workers but also to be aware of one of the fastest-growing jobs nationally.

References

- 35 Surprisingly Powerful Reasons to Be A HHA In 2019! (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.homehealthaideguide.com/how-to-be-hha/hha-reasons/>.
- Census profile: Buffalo, NY. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US3611000-buffalo-ny/>.
- Famakinwa, J. (2019, June 13). 22% of Home Care Workers Targets of Verbal, Physical Abuse. Retrieved from <https://homehealthcarenews.com/2019/06/22-of-home-care-workers-targets-of-verbal-physical-abuse/>.
- Farrell, C. (2018, April 18). The Shortage Of Home Care Workers: Worse Than You Think. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2018/04/18/the-shortage-of-home-care-workers-worse-than-you-think/#6bd687f43ddd>.
- Gordon, S. (2019, June 19). Nearly 1 in 4 Home Care Aides Faces Verbal Abuse. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2019-06-12/nearly-1-in-4-home-care-aides-faces-verbal-abuse>.
- Living Wage Calculator. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/36029>.
- Home Care Association of New State. (2019). NY Home Care Workforce Trends and Patient Care [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://hca-nys.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/HCA-Letter-on-Workforce-News-Article-and-Rate-Needs.pdf>
- McKay, D. R. (2019, June 10). Home Health Aide Job Description: Salary, Skills, & More. Retrieved from <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/home-health-aide-526026>.
- Mishra, M. (2019, July 24). Home health care aides often face verbal abuse from clients. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-caregivers/home-health-care-aides-often-face-verbal-abuse-from-clients-idUSKCN1UJ28G>.
- Rights for Home Health Aides - NYC Employment Law Firm. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://lipskyloewe.com/services/nyc-wage-and-hour-attorney/rights-home-health-aides/>.