

The Unsung Heroes: Long Term Care Staff's Quality of Work Life

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The conditions of work in our nursing homes can be tough because of the complex care needs of residents, especially among those living with dementia who make up the majority. Even before the pandemic, there was concern about frontline staff (nurses and continuing care assistants) who provide the daily essential care. They often worked short staff, lacked necessary time to complete care tasks and were at risk of burnout and physical injury. COVID-19 has placed additional strain on nursing homes and those working in them. There are increased infection control rules and reduced support from volunteers and family. The impact of COVID-19 is adding to this already worrisome situation about staff. Despite the important role nursing homes have in our health system, there is minimal information about the health and well-being of these essential staff and what we should do to help them.

We will assess the quality of work life of frontline staff in Nova Scotia's nursing homes. A survey about staff's physical and mental health and key features about their work environment will be completed by 500 continuing care assistants and 150 nursing staff in several nursing homes across Nova Scotia. A research assistant will administer the survey with the continuing care assistants through videoconferencing or telephone. Nursing staff will complete the survey online. Facility managers will also complete a survey about characteristics and features of their organization. Around 10 nursing homes are expected to participate in different areas of NS, and represent different sizes, and physical design features. We will use survey tools available from researchers with the Translating Research in Elder Care program at the University of Alberta who have conducted the survey with staff in nursing homes in Western Canada for over a decade. From this survey, we will understand how the experiences and health of staff may differ across nursing homes and the way in which the nursing home's work environment may affect their staff's health and wellbeing. We will also understand how staff experience in Nova Scotia may be similar or different from staff experience in Alberta. By including leaders from the nursing home sector throughout the project, we will increase capacity for research and the potential for quality improvements.

This study will fill a gap in information about long-term care. Our results will help employers, Nova Scotia Health and our Health Ministry find ways to better support nursing home staff. These results will also inform workforce approaches to recruit and retain these much needed staff.