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Background

The Nexus Home Care Project is a research study based in Vancouver, BC with additional research conducted in Nova Scotia and Ontario. Our study examines the role of home support workers in the continuum of care to elderly persons living in the community. The research explores how agency policies and formal job descriptions compare to actual job performance and demands in clients' homes; the relationship between worker characteristics and job satisfaction; and elderly clients' and family perceptions of Home Care services and benefits.

The Nova Scotia portion of the Nexus study was conducted by the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging at Mount Saint Vincent University between March and May 2008. Forty home support workers (HSWs) from five agencies, four publicly funded and one privately owned and operated, participated in an one-on-one interview.

Findings

The two tables below provide background and employment information for all 40 home support workers who participated in the Nova Scotia portion of the study.

A number of themes emerged from our interviews with home support workers, including: job satisfaction, recognizing needs beyond the care plan, work-client relationships, sudden or unpredictable events or crises, safety concerns, scheduling and compensation, job stress, and changes in the work environment.

Profile of Participants—Nova Scotia HSWs		
	Average	Range
Age	47 Years	22 to 65 Years
	Number	Percent
Gender		
Female	38	95%
Male	2	5%
Education		
Less than High School	6	15%
High School	13	33%
Some post-secondary	4	10%
Completed post-secondary	17	43%
Place of Birth		
Canada	38	95%
Other	2	5%

Job Satisfaction

Almost all (93%) were satisfied to very satisfied with their job. Reasons for satisfaction included: relationships with clients and other workers; feeling appreciated or needed; making others feel good; helping people to remain independent; hearing clients' stories; and, independence of the job.

*...I feel good about having made a good difference in somebody's day. I feel good about my work. I feel like, hey, that went well... I feel encouraged. When I leave somebody and I know I made a good difference in their day, I feel good about it... for the most part... I love my work... **Robin (55 year old HSW for 4 years)***

Recognizing Needs Beyond the Care Plan

Most workers identified needs that were beyond the client's care plan. These needs included: social interaction; transportation; groceries; banking; heavier housekeeping; and increased frequency in home support visits. Although participants did not refer specifically to going 'above and beyond' the care plan, some discussed actions taken outside the scope of duty.

*Most of the time I say...myself personally, if I have all my work done and there is something that needs to be done, you know, that's not, like, say dishes if it's not on the care plan you don't do it. If I have time, I do it. **Zara (55 year old HSW for 14 years)***

Employment Profile of Participants —Nova Scotia HSWs		
	Average	Range
Years as HSW	9 Years	10 Months to 22 Years
Hourly Rate of Pay	\$14.61	\$10.00-\$15.05
Number of clients per day	5	3-6
	Number	Percent
Work Status		
Regular full-time	15	38%
Regular part-time	14	35%
Casual full-time	6	15%
Casual part-time	5	13%
Professional Training		
Continuing Care Assistant	11	28%
Home Support Worker	18	45%
Personal Care Worker	4	10%
Other	12	30%

*Participant names have been changed to ensure confidentiality



Worker-Client Relationships

Workers discussed building relationships with clients while maintaining professional boundaries. These relationships were both challenging and beneficial. Issues included: development of client trust; understanding client needs; improved client social interaction; worker grief associated with client decline or death; and client desire for social interaction over assigned tasks.

...I know you're not supposed to become close to your clients but when you work with someone for 14 years, you do... build a relationship with them and become friends with the families... And I think that's very important to be able to have that trust in your client and them to have that trust in you as well. So it's part of the homecare, to me.

It's very important. Avery (54 year old HSW for 15 years)

Sudden or Unpredictable Events or Crises

Most (98%) experienced an unpredictable event or crisis on the job. Examples of these experiences included: finding a client deceased; medical emergencies; falls; diarrhea, nausea and vomiting; sexually inappropriate behaviour by clients; physical aggression by clients; and utility issues such as appliances breaking down or pipes breaking.

...[I] went to her visit, and knocked on the door and went in. And most times she is in bed so ... [I] made my way to her bedroom and happened to glance out of the corner of my eye in the bathroom and she was lying on the floor... she had fallen going to the washroom. Cecelia (48 year old HSW for 18 years)

Safety Concerns

Many workers (70%) had concerns about workplace safety. These concerns included: aggressive clients or family members; winter driving; pets; smoking; lifting and transferring; clutter; unlocked firearms; unsafe houses (i.e. broken steps); racism or other prejudices; and high-crime neighborhoods.

I go to one particular lady in a not-so-great area and her son who lives there... I've seen enough drug addicts to know... And sometimes I think, am I going to walk through the door here and-- you never know...there's nothing ...you can do about that. Willow (28 year old HSW for 2 years)

Job Stress

Although workers were generally satisfied with their jobs, most participants (80%) said they experienced job stress. Stresses included: client problem behaviors; client or family personalities and demands; lack of equipment and supplies; travel time between clients; inability to meet all client needs due to policies, care plans, or lack of time; client illness; and client death and lack of emotional support in their work.

The traveling...dealing with the palliative client. That can be stressful. Dealing with the demands of the family. Dealing with an Alzheimer's [client]. Not really having the interaction of a co-worker... The worker itself can feel isolated.

Sidney (40 year old HSW for 11 years)

Scheduling and Compensation

Issues related to scheduling and compensation included: lack of sufficient time to perform tasks assigned; split shifts; lack of available hours; last-minute schedule changes; travel distance, reimbursement, and fuel costs; and wages.

...I had somebody pass away months ago and they still haven't filled that spot. Or if they did, they filled it for, like, one time only...And they can be unpredictable, too, like, you have a lot of clients passing away or ones that go into hospital and your hours drop. And then if somebody's sick, well, normally you get some of their hours. So you might be too busy for a day... Melany (30 year old HSW for 8 years)

Changes in the Work Environment

Some participants discussed changes they have seen in their work environment. Positive changes included: scheduling (i.e. being given time off for a client funeral); wage increases; and workplace safety. Negative changes included: a reduction in tasks covered by the service; decreases in time allotted to clients; and barriers to recruitment such as increased medicalization of tasks and changes in education requirements.

I know in the past we used to take clients out for walks, but I don't think there's anybody... now. Accompany clients to medical appointments, no. Shopping, no. Banking, no. But actually, when I first started, we did all of those things.

Annette (52 year old HSW for 13 years)

OTHER RESEARCH PROJECTS

British Columbia Elderly Client and Family Members of Clients
Between 2007-2008 interviews were done with 83 elderly clients of Home Support and 56 family members of clients of Home Support to examine their experiences with home care services.

British Columbia and Ontario HSWs

Interviews with 119 (BC) and 28 (Ontario) HSWs were done in 2007-2008. These data will be compared across the provinces.

This report highlights only some of our findings.

For more information please contact us at

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) for their funding.

We are also grateful for the collaboration of Dr Janice Keefe, Pamela Fancey, and Shannon McEvenue at the Nova Scotia Centre on Aging at Mount Saint Vincent University, the participating agencies, and all 40 Home Support Workers whom we interviewed.