

The Critical Role of Patient Satisfaction in Attracting and Retaining Home Health Care Workers

Home health care organizations aware of the looming workforce shortage are searching for the best means to attract and retain high-quality employees. One angle these organizations should not overlook in their efforts to improve their competitive edge as employers is the effect of patient satisfaction on employees. Satisfied patients tend to correlate with satisfied employees, and home health care workers report the relationship with patients is one of the most rewarding facets of their careers.

The Impending Home Health Care Employee Crisis

Home health care agencies are expected to require greater numbers of employees than other occupations over the next eight years.¹ Recent estimates anticipate the need for home health care registered nurses to grow at 39%² and home health aides at 49%.³ This sharp rise in labor demand is a result of an aging population, the movement to transition patients from institutional settings, patients' desires to be cared for in their own homes and technological advancements that permit greater in-home patient care delivery.⁴

With the increasing demand for home health employees, the high turnover rates of home health care nurses and aides is cause for some alarm.⁵ A national survey of home health agencies found that annual turnover for registered nurses and licensed practical nurses was 21%.⁶ The study concedes that turnover rates varied by region, year and the methods used to calculate rates; however, it is certain that turnover rates in home health care are considerable. Another article claims that up to 90% of home health aides leave their positions within the first two years.⁷ These findings are particularly troubling when estimates of the overall nursing shortage are expected to reach well over one million by 2020.⁸

A recent study by the Foundation for Hospice and Homecare found that home health care providers may drive up to 5 billion miles each year as they care for millions of patients during approximately 428 million visits annually,⁹ greatly increasing home health care nurses' and aides' exposure to injury in highway accidents. Further, caring for patients in their homes requires additional training. Basic health care training usually assumes care delivery in traditional settings, and caring for patients in the home presents unique challenges that require vigilance during care delivery in order to avoid injuries to the caregivers or patients.¹⁰ This training is not always provided. The lack of staff support and care delivery support devices, such as mechanical lifting aids, can lead to overexertion or injury to patients, as well as personal injury to employees both inside and outside of patients' homes.¹¹ In fact, around 85% of home health providers have reported experiencing at least one work-related injury.¹¹ Low compensation is also frequently cited as a concern and motivation for turnover.^{12,13}



The Relationship between Home Health Care Employee and Patient Satisfaction

Bearing in mind the nature of home health care recruitment and retention – the relatively high turnover rates and the shortfalls in home health care employees – it is especially important to highlight the most positive aspect of home health care: the impact patients have on home health care employee satisfaction. Caring for patients in the home health setting tends to provide home care nurses a tremendous sense of pride, often more so than other nursing fields. One study compared the job satisfaction levels of three different groups of nurses (community care access, public health and home health nurses), and found that home health nurses were significantly more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction than other nurses.¹³ Home health nurses reporting higher levels of satisfaction claimed it was in part due to the fact that their supervisors afford them greater autonomy. Often, these nurses will cite consistent and direct patient contact as a major factor in their decision to practice in the home health care setting.¹⁴ Home health care generally calls for a more prolonged course of treatment than in traditional health care settings, which allows the caregiver to build a relationship with the patient and have a direct effect on that patient’s treatment and progression, which can be fulfilling both personally as well as professionally.

Extensive research has shown that hospital nurses’ employment satisfaction significantly increases retention¹⁵ and the relationship between patient and nurse satisfaction is well established. Now, new research shows that this relationship in the home health care setting can also be reciprocal.¹⁶ According to this new research, examining 6,023 patients and 892 employees of eight Press Ganey clients who use both the Employee Partnership Survey, which measures employee satisfaction and engagement, and the Home Health Survey, which measures home health patient satisfaction, there is a statistically significant correlation between home health care employee and patient satisfaction. These findings indicate that, when seeking to improve home health care employee satisfaction, it is also important to consider the influence of patient satisfaction on employee satisfaction.

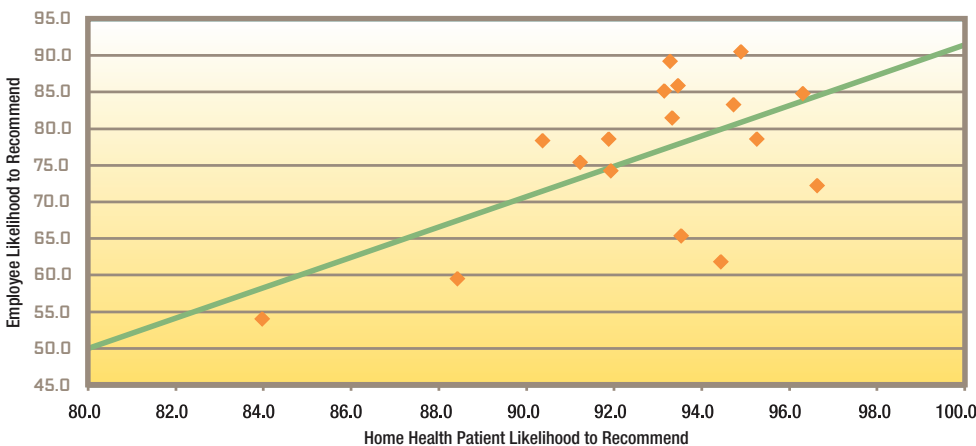
Home health patient satisfaction is important on its own when considering referral rates, loyalty and likelihood to recommend. However, there is also a strong relationship between how likely patients are to recommend an agency and how likely home health care employees are to recommend the agency where they are employed. Chart 1 illustrates the relationship between the likelihood of recommending the services of the home health agencies from employees and patients.

As this research shows, more satisfied patients are correlated with more satisfied employees. Therefore, those home health agencies that focus on the positive impact home health patients have on employees can also see improvements in employee satisfaction, and thereby improve retention and recruiting in the home health care setting.

CHART 1:
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOME HEALTH AND EMPLOYEE LIKELIHOOD TO RECOMMEND SERVICES

DATA INCLUDE 28,714 RESPONSES FROM 17 AGENCIES RECEIVED BETWEEN 1/1/2007 AND 12/31/2007

r = .60



Results based on 28,714 responses received between 1/1/2007 and 12/31/2007 from agencies that use both the Press Ganey Employee Partnership Survey and the Press Ganey Home Health Survey.

“Satisfied patients are easier and more rewarding to care for. We have found that focusing on patient satisfaction has a positive influence on productivity and efficiency at our agency – our employees are more engaged and dedicated.”

— MARY NEWBERRY, RN, BSN
Director, Riverside Home Health Care

Case Study: Riverside Home Health Care

The relationship between patient and employee satisfaction is further illustrated by the experiences of Riverside Home Health Care.¹⁷ Riverside is a mid-sized hospital-based agency located in Kankakee, Ill., that cares for patients across five counties in northeastern Illinois. The parent organization, Riverside HealthCare, a regional medical center affiliated with Rush System for Health in Chicago, has long had an awareness of and a strategy devoted to providing a caring environment for both its patients and employees.

Setting the Stage for Satisfaction

Riverside's rather low full-time equivalent (FTE) turnover rate was 2.9% in 2005, but turnover and recruitment were still concerns. At Riverside, it is important for employees to not only be competent but to also be motivated by helping patients and improving their experiences. Therefore, Riverside sought out employees who are of a personality type rewarded by patient satisfaction. "We have tried to design everything we do to promote that positive patient experience and to support the staff so that we can achieve that," said Mary Newberry, RN, BSN, director of Riverside Home Health Care.

Training is critical to Riverside's success. "We provide training in customer satisfaction and communication, coach and educate new employees to the position, then retrain them so that they have everything they need. We provide our staff with all the tools they need to be confident and successful," says Newberry, who participates in employee orientation. "I tell all new employees that my expectation is for them to treat each of our patients as though they were a beloved member of their own family. It sends a message at the outset."

As the environment of home health care can be isolating and difficult, Riverside has found it is imperative to ensure that everyone feels supported and understood. "That expectation has to come from the very top and it is emphasized throughout our organization," Newberry says. One thing that Riverside does in terms of creating a supportive culture is to consistently focus on promoting teamwork and the fun to be had in caring for patients in their homes. "I think humor is really important. And, home health care has a lot of humor to be found. Sharing funny stories is important."

Using Press Ganey's Patient Satisfaction Data

Knowing the impact patient satisfaction has had not only on their operations but also their employees, Riverside refers to their Press Ganey Home Health Care Survey data and patient comments on a regular basis. In fact, Press Ganey data is consistently utilized in reward and recognition, a practice known to positively impact employee satisfaction as well as retention. When Newberry receives a particularly good comment or a letter from a patient, she will send it on to the administration and even frequently to Riverside HealthCare CEO, Phillip Kambic. The highest levels of the administration want to see these stories of employee successes as they are considered to be a very important part of Riverside's culture. "I always send something, a note thanking and congratulating them or a phone call, to the provider. Quite often, our CEO will also send the employee a note of congratulations and thanks. This recognition is so important in letting our staff know how much we appreciate their efforts and how they individually contribute to the success of our organization.

Listed below are some actionable steps that work to improve both patient and employee satisfaction.

Goal Setting

- Educate patient on treatment plan.
- Set shared goals for both patients and staff.
- Keep expectations clear and allow for clarifications if there is confusion.
- Retain a copy and refer to it throughout the treatment to keep everyone on track.

Recognition by Patients

- Send patient recognitions to managers and senior leadership.
- Have managers/senior leadership send thank-yous to recognized staff.
- Announce recognition in staff meetings – public recognition in front of peers.
- Print special stories/examples in newsletters or other contact sources.



"It is really pretty simple: The happier your employee, the better your patients are going to be taken care of. The better your patients are taken care of, that boosts the happiness factor and satisfaction in the employee again."

— MARY NEWBERRY, RN, BSN
Director, Riverside Home Health Care

Staff Support

- Share funny stories during department meetings.
- Trade stories of what worked well to improve patient satisfaction/condition.
- Trade patients when staff get close to burnout or are frustrated by lack of progress.

Service Recovery

- Afford staff the right to decide how to handle service recovery - increase autonomy.
- Encourage immediate, proactive decision-making to improve patient care.
- Provide access to a service recovery fund without need of approval.

Maintain Contact

- Call patients between visits, particularly those who are experiencing a rough spell.

Provide Training

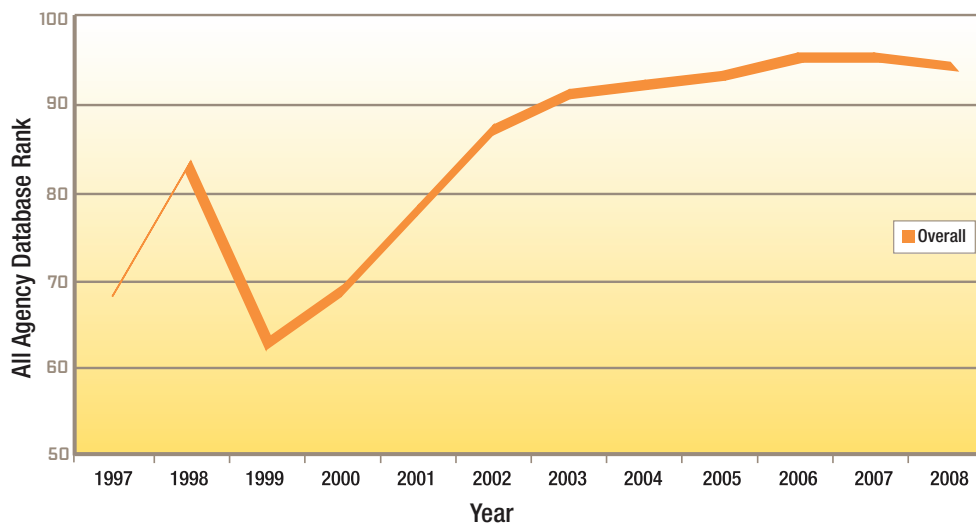
- Teach how to handle emergencies, especially common emergencies.
- Provide office training on safe lifting and other advanced procedures.
- Train how to treat specific, advanced or chronic conditions.
- Consider tuition assistance or reimbursement for continuing education.

Bringing in the Patient

As Press Ganey research has shown, patient outcomes and attitudes dramatically affect home health care employees. One way to positively begin the relationship is for patients and providers to set goals. Goal setting has been found to be very important to patient satisfaction and is required by employees at Riverside. Newberry trains providers to set expectations with patients to ensure greater patient satisfaction in home health care. “I think it’s really important for the providers to spend a lot of time during the first visit to see exactly what the patient wants out of the care and to talk a little bit about the treatment options in home health care, especially if they have not had the service previously.”

Newberry has found that when providers concentrate on the goals established at the initial visit and revisit them on an ongoing basis, it can dramatically improve patient and employee satisfaction. “The chances of having a high level of patient satisfaction and provider satisfaction improve greatly when you discuss and arrive at mutually agreeable goals at the outset and update these during discussions with the patient on an ongoing basis.”

**CHART 2:
RIVERSIDE HOME HEALTH CARE’S RANKING IN OVERALL PATIENT SATISFACTION IN
THE ALL AGENCY DATABASE, 1997-2008**



“When staff receive positive feedback from patients – that the providers caring for them are making a difference in their lives and health – it just reinforces their satisfaction with the job.”

— MARY NEWBERRY, RN, BSN
Director, Riverside Home Health Care

As patients move toward meeting their goals, providers also feel a sense of accomplishment from helping them do so. However, there can be setbacks. Riverside has also found that if a provider feels that he or she needs a break from a patient because there is not enough sense of progress, the patient is non-compliant, or the employee is simply emotionally drained, then it's time to have somebody else step in. This type of situation is a burnout warning. It is critically important to provide peer support and humor, to not fixate on the patient as the problem and to ensure the employees are prevented from experiencing burnout or negatively affecting patient satisfaction.

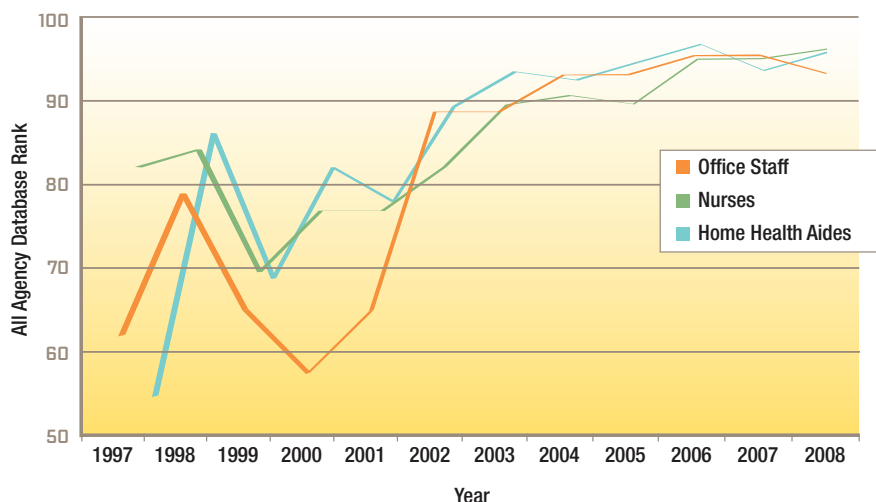
As Chart 2 shows, Riverside has had a very strong upward patient satisfaction trend since 1999, stabilizing their overall patient satisfaction ranking to within the 90th percentile in the Press Ganey All Agency Database for over four years.

Examining patient satisfaction with the employees at Riverside more closely, Chart 3 shows the equally positive trend in patient satisfaction with office staff, nurses and aides.

These charts show that overall patient satisfaction with employees at Riverside has risen significantly and held in the 90th percentile nationally for over three years. During this same period, Riverside's turnover rates began to drop. Riverside has consistently held overall exceptional patient satisfaction rankings, from the 94th to their latest ranking of the 99th percentile, in the All Agency Database. In 2006 and 2007, Riverside's turnover rate was a remarkable 0%.

Riverside officials know the difficulties inherent in home health care. By concentrating on patient

**CHART 3:
RIVERSIDE HOME HEALTH CARE'S ANNUAL RANKING IN
THE ALL AGENCY DATABASE, 1997-2008**



satisfaction efforts, they also have successfully retained highly satisfied and loyal providers.

Conclusion

One of the strategies that home health care agencies can consider when examining ways of improving employee satisfaction, as well as recruitment and retention, is to concentrate on patient satisfaction. Increasing patient satisfaction can increase employee satisfaction, which can impact provider retention in an unstable and tenuous field. Further, recruitment efforts can be improved by agencies that have solid retention rates and promote care that makes patients happier and healthier, as providers will want to work for agencies that promote and serve happy patients. The benefits of improved patient satisfaction in the home health care arena radiates throughout an organization and can result in improved patient outcomes and increased employee retention.

Resources

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