How to Keep Your Staffing Levels High

A Senior Living Recruitment & Retention Guide from

✳️ Icon

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Introduction

The staffing shortage has become practically synonymous with the senior living experience. While we've seen improvements in the past 12 months, senior living is still far from where it needs to be. That's especially true given the expected pressure an aging Baby Boomer population will place on senior living infrastructure.

For many communities, the staffing crisis was exposed in the pandemic. But its roots trace back years – decades even. That's why "solving" the crisis isn't a matter of just turning a few organizational levers. Systemic issues require systemic solutions.

This involves building a multi-faceted plan to address every aspect of the employee experience, from wages to culture. Here, we lay out nine strategies that can help your community build this sort of plan – so you can attract prospective talent and retain current staff members.

Background: The Current State of the Senior Living Labor Market

Data

While operators have, generally, reported staffing improvements, the labor shortage remains one of the most pressing concerns for communities. In NIC's final executive insights survey, 82 percent of communities reported staffing shortages.

Older adults and families have taken notice. In a recent report, this group reported inadequate caregiver support and staff qualifications as two of the top five concerns when considering a community. One participant went so far as to note that "The care [in assisted living] was so poor that we had to hire full-time aides to be in the apartment with her since she didn't get any response most of the time when she needed help."

Legislative Changes

The Labor Department's recent overtime threshold rule has been a hotly-debated topic in the senior living sphere. Critics point to its high costs and fear what it could mean for communities that already survive on razor-thin margins. Proponents see the rule as a win for labor rights. But no matter your stance, the result of the rule is clear: it could give 3.6 million more workers access to overtime pay. And that would balloon operating expenses.

This rule comes on the heels of various class action lawsuits being levied against communities on the basis of understaffing and inadequate care. This is to say: the courts are increasingly concerned with who's running – and being hired to run – senior living communities.

News Stories

In a recent Axios report, it was found that every state in the US was affected by senior living staffing shortages. Forty-three of those states saw long-term facilities close as a result. This supports an initial finding from Senior Housing News that more than two-dozen states linked their staffing difficulties with closures.

The broader takeaway here: it's not hyperbolic to call this labor shortage a staffing crisis. Your community may not be experiencing pronounced staffing issues right now. But the industry is dealing with understaffing broadly. And industry-wide issues tend to have domino effects. The best way to fortify yourself against those effects is by building a robust recruitment and retention plan. That's what this guide is for – to help you do just that.

Make Scheduling a Collaborative Process with Your Staff

Fifty percent of nurses have a side hustle or second job. What's more, most nursing home employees report the need to work in multiple communities because of low wages. The quick answer people may draw from these figures: just pay employees more. But senior living communities survive on razor thin margins – and operating expenses are rising. In most cases, there's little budget flexibility. So you need to get creative.

Most care workers work in multiple communities because of low wages

Most communities take worker preferences into account when scheduling shifts. And full coverage is the goal at the end of the day. But if your employees are working multiple part-time jobs, you must do your absolute best to balance shifts accordingly. But how do you make this collaborative scheduling process easy? For one, you could adopt a tool that automatically sends shift opening alerts and lets staff members claim those shifts. But this sort of technology should be additive. There are other considerations that we've teed up

01 Skill & Relationship Matching
Do certain members of your team have more experience with residents in memory care? Do other staff members have established relationships with residents in a certain wing of your community? Use that information to shape work schedules.

02 Staff Meetings
Schedule these meetings on a regular cadence to let staff share any preferences about work hours or your shift scheduling philosophy. This can help you and your staff get on the same page.

03 Fair Distribution of Shifts
You don't want to overload one staff member at the expense of another. Try to balance shifts among your staff – this will also help limit your use of overtime hours.

04 Incentives for Less Desirable Shifts
Every community is different, but there are bound to be shifts that attract less interest. If you're finding it difficult to fill, say, a late night weekend shift, consider offering a gift card to the staff member who claims it.

05 Employee Input
This is an intentionally broad category. It can cover every staff preference, from upcoming vacations to favorite tasks (activity oversight, administrative work, etc.). Ensure your team members feel comfortable sharing these preferences with you – and that you will use them to inform your staff scheduling.

The Takeaway:

Scheduling will shift over time. Turnover rates are high, and this means that many communities have to onboard staff members – and balance their preferences – on a semi-regular basis. Your schedules may change every week, but your commitment to employee feedback shouldn't.

Track Industry Wages to Stay in Line with Competitors

"We used to compete with other sectors of the healthcare industry. Now, we're competing with McDonald's and Wendy's." That quote and story may have come out two years ago, but it's a reality many communities still experience today. It's true that caregiving is a mission-driven occupation. But communities have a duty to their staff – to pay as competitively as they can.

The industry is also changing. In California, the minimum wage for nursing home, assisted living workers will rise from its current $15.50 to $25 per hour by June 2026, with incremental increases leading up to it. And wages for RNs, a subset of candidates that senior living often pulls from, are projected to grow more rapidly than wages for other professions.

So how do you keep track of these changes? How do you pay a competitive wage while managing costs? Two options: salary widgets and wage benchmarking platforms. Such tools can help community leaders see the wages for senior living communities in their metro market and across the US. Moreover, these tools can also track wages for different fields in your area. Note: this is where the wages of fast food establishments can come into play.

Caregiver Salary Nationwide

Low
$11.42

Median
$16.00

High
$20.00

The Takeaway

Wage tracking tools don't just help you set hourly rates and salaries at your community; they can also inform your broader HR strategy. The more informed you are, the more effective your hiring and retention strategies will be.

Make Employee Recognition a Staple of Your Community

Given rising operating expenses and slim margins, it's difficult for communities to simply pay employees significantly higher rates. Fortunately pay isn't the only consideration that your employees make when deciding whether to stay or leave their current role.

Eight out of 10 employees would stay in a job where they felt supported and valued vs. a job that pays 30 percent more but leaves them feeling unsupported and undervalued. Not only that, but almost half of US workers (46 percent) left a job because they felt unappreciated, and 65 percent of those surveyed felt they would remain in a position with an unappreciative boss if their coworkers appreciated their work.
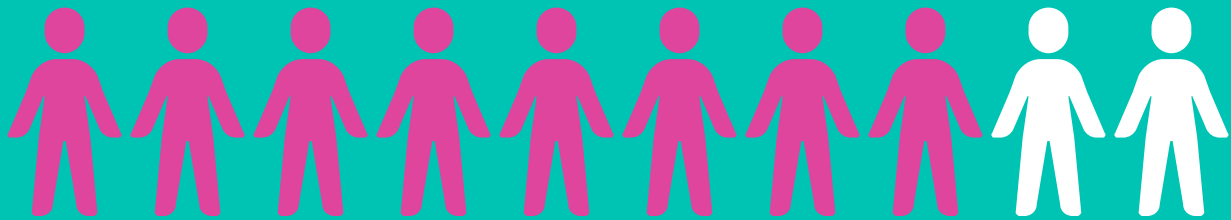
Eight out of 10 employees would stay in a job where they felt supported and valued vs. a job that pays 30 percent more but leaves them feeling unsupported and undervalued.

The takeaway: employee recognition informs employee retention.

But the conversation around the staffing shortage doesn't start and end with retention. You want your staff members to stay and succeed. Recognition plays a key role in the quality of employee contributions, too.

A recent Gallup poll found that employees who receive great recognition are 20 times as likely to be engaged. This finding was echoed by a report from Achievers, where the frequency of recognition directly correlated with employee productivity and engagement. (The study also noted that employees who were recognized on a weekly basis were almost three times as likely to avoid thinking about working elsewhere.)

This invites the question: how can you make employee recognition a staple of your community? There are three action items here.

| Find a Concrete Way of Sharing Compliments | Source Feedback from Your Entire Community | Deliver Positive Feedback Quickly |

Find a Concrete Way of Sharing Compliments

If you use a messaging app, maybe this means creating a dedicated "shoutouts" thread, where you and other staff members can commend great work. If you have regular meetings with your teams, consider allocating time in each meeting to recognizing exemplary efforts. You can also adopt a tool for gathering positive feedback, which informs the next consideration: who compliments your workers.

Source Feedback from Your Entire Community

Yes, you should regularly recognize exemplary work. But your staff interacts with residents and their families on a regular basis. This increases the pool of people that see your staff's commitment to enhancing the aging experience. A recognition and rewards platform can consolidate feedback from these people and let them share feedback with the tap of a button. A tip: make sure it's easy for folks to share testimonials from the app. If it's not simple to share, people often won't.

Deliver Positive Feedback Quickly

When turnover rates are high, the demand for employee recognition is a time-sensitive one. You can't wait six months to compliment an employee on how they ran a fitness contest. They may have left by then. The best recognition system is one that makes sharing feedback easy and highly visible.

The Takeaway

Recognizing employees' hard work is a crucial component of retaining your team members. Senior living caregiving is a mission-driven occupation; your staff needs to feel connected to their work and know you're proud of that work.

Simplify Workflows and Save Staff Members' Time with Technology

It's no secret that a single senior living staff member often juggles the work of multiple people. This workload is one reason why nearly 80 percent of senior living caregivers reported feeling burnt out in 2021. Given the continued staffing struggles, those rates likely haven't changed much.

80%

Nearly 80% of senior living caregivers reported feeling burnout

So how do you relieve this burnout and increase productivity? Save staff members' time. With what? Senior living technology.

This sentiment is echoed by the 74 percent of respondents in a recent engagement and technology survey who reported that helping staff members coordinate personalized programming and activities was a top need for tech. And with solutions like digital activity calendars, staff can reduce time spent on calendar management by 80 percent.

But management tools aren't the only solutions that can save time; smart home devices and AI technology (like Smart Aging™) also accomplish that goal. Below, we'll tee up these two use cases and how they relieve staff workloads while improving the quality of care your community offers.

Smart Home Technology Promotes Resident Autonomy & Reduces the Need for Staff Intervention

AI Management Tools Automate & Streamline Administrative Tasks

Smart Home Technology Promotes Resident Autonomy and Reduces the Need for Staff Intervention

Let's say you're a staff member at an assisted living community. You conduct rounds at regular intervals and, generally, stay near your residents in case anyone needs you to turn off lights or turn up the heat. It's important work, but it pulls you from other duties that require a human touch (communicating with families, helping residents participate in life enrichment activities, cleaning living areas, etc.).

To simplify some of this work, your community deploys smart home technology. Some residents use it just to turn on the TV. Others use it to turn lights on and off. A few "super users" try every smart home capability you have available, from controlling thermostats to drawing the blinds.

The result of this smart home technology use: resident requests – for tasks like turning off lights – have declined and resident satisfaction has grown.

What's more: smart voice devices can broadcast community programming to residents with a simple "Alexa…" phrase. Residents can RSVP in a similar way. This means residents can sign up for events on their own and at their convenience.

This resident autonomy frees you up to develop deeper relationships with your residents, offer more personalized care, and engage with families more frequently.

AI Management Tools Automate and Streamline Administrative Tasks

Senior living staff members are workhorses. And yet there's always work left over, whether it's crafting communication templates, generating marketing collateral, or sifting through rows of resident data.

This is where AI technology comes into play. Ideally, your current senior living technology platform already offers some time-saving capabilities – like Activities Supply Tracking. But AI technology can expand on them. For example, let's say you need to review activity data. ChatGPT integrations can analyze it in seconds – and let you know that your Secret Santa event was a smashing success.

Need to come up with captions for a few upcoming Instagram posts? Prompt your chosen generative tool and use the results as a starting point. Then, make tweaks until you're satisfied with the result.

Have a new broadcast message you want to send to residents and families? A smart template generation feature can give you three options for the intended message, like a holiday celebration invitation. From there, you can make changes before sending that message.

The Takeaway

Senior living technology (engagement platforms, digital calendars, automated communication tools) helps fill in gaps that staff would otherwise have to meet, whether that's monitoring heating and cooling in residents' units or conducting resident check-ins. The right tech saves time, saves money, and improves resident wellness.

Invest in Your Workforce via Ongoing Training and Professional Development

There may be a key focus on retaining staff past their first 90 days, but once employees pass that milestone, it's vital that you keep investing in their development. The data backs this up.

Seventy-one percent of workers say that job training and development increased their job satisfaction.

71%
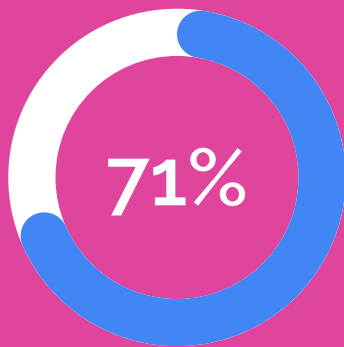
Seventy-one percent of workers say that job training and development increased their job satisfaction.

Your employees need to feel that you're invested in their success.

To accomplish this, consider crafting a formal professional development plan for your senior living staff. Here are several strategies that could fit within such a plan.

Establish a mentorship program

Reassess Promotion Criteria on an Annual Basis

Prioritize Internal Hires When Roles Become Available

Reimburse All, or a Portion of, Outside Training Costs

Proactively Share Training Opportunities with Your Staff

Make time for training and professional development.

ESTABLISH A MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

The exact specifications in this step can vary. (For a thorough how-to guide, we advise checking out this resource.) But what remains consistent across mentorship programs is the value of structure. Whether you're assigning internal mentors to newly-hired employees or finding industry leaders to mentor current staff, it's vital that you clearly list the program's objectives, associated timelines, and scope.

REASSESS YOUR PROMOTION CRITERIA ON AN ANNUAL BASIS

Work obligations and expectations are constantly evolving. For example, the popularity of AI tools has inspired many organizations to reevaluate what duties are core to certain roles. This is especially true for an industry like senior living. The bottom line here: your promotional criteria should reflect the current needs and expectations of your organization. So keep it updated. Has proficient use of engagement technology become necessary to staff success? Add it to your promotion policies.

PRIORITIZE INTERNAL HIRES WHEN ROLES BECOME AVAILABLE

A great way to sustain a staffing pipeline is by funneling that pipeline into higher-level positions when possible. Professional development, in this case, doesn't just refer to training courses. It also refers to the efforts you take to guide staff members along their career path. Show your employees that you believe in their potential and current strengths. Give them the first chance to apply for vacant roles in your community.

REIMBURSE ALL, OR A PORTION OF, OUTSIDE TRAINING COSTS

Plenty of employers offer education stipends for employees that want to learn about a relevant topic. It's not just a great way to demonstrate your commitment to employees; it can also benefit your community. For example, resiliency training has been shown to help combat compassion fatigue. And certain VR platforms offer training to help staff members manage palliative care.

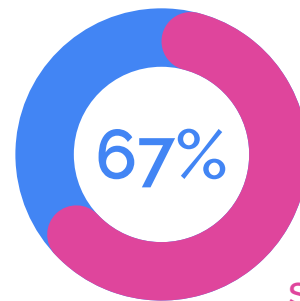## PROACTIVELY SHARE TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES WITH YOUR STAFF

It's one thing to cover the costs of training; it's another to proactively encourage your staff to enroll in various courses. This step is particularly useful if you feel there's hesitancy among your staff to use any training stipend you offer. Plus, it gives context for what sorts of classes fit under your definition of "relevant training."

MAKE TIME FOR TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

If you want your staff to take advantage of training opportunities, it's important that you carve out time in the day for them to complete it. The average employee spends just 57 hours per year on training. That's not necessarily a bad thing. But studies show that increased staff training leads to safer residents and higher-quality service (particularly in memory care settings).

Build a Real-Time Rewards Program to Keep Staff Engaged

Margins in the senior living space are tight – and will likely remain that way for the foreseeable future. But there are still opportunities to reward employees for their hard work. What's more: 67 percent of employees said that better rewards would encourage them to stay at a job longer.

The rewards don't need to be monetary, either (think: offsite team celebrations, extra PTO, or lunch with the CEO). This tactic is akin to the employee recognition strategy we highlighted earlier. What's important is that you're doing it on a consistent basis and that the rewards hold some value.

67%

Said that better rewards would encourage them to stay at a job longer

When the average staffing agency features roughly a 30 percent markup, a rewards program that keeps employees around can pay for itself.

The operative term in this strategy here is "real-time." Many communities offer bonuses, but this sort of financial reward takes time to process. This means that the distance between a milestone and its reward can span months. And with turnover rates as high as they are, employees could leave before feeling rewarded for exemplary work.

That's not good enough. Your staff members want gratification quickly. When launching this sort of program, it's vital that you find ways to reward employees within the week. A recognition and reward platform can help you a great deal here.

Want to reward employees at their six-month work-iversary? With a reward platform, you can assign a virtual badge to that six-month reward, which will automatically track and share the reward with your staff.

Plus, you can use these platforms to create reward escalators. (Think of this like airline points.) For example, maybe you want your staff to get a nominal pay increase every three months. The platform can track those updates and notify staff when they happen.

Notably, these rewards help with retention in another way. Once staff members earn rewards or escalators, they won't want to leave and lose those perks. With access to a recognition and rewards platform, your staff can see exactly what the rewards are and the value they bring.

Partner with Local Educational Institutions to Build Talent Pipeline

Staffing shortages aren't just due to limited talent in the moment; they're also indicative of dwindling staffing pipelines. In other words, to combat the staffing crisis, senior living communities must attract up-and-coming talent. Fortunately, many communities have accomplished this in numerous ways. Here's a roundup of top examples we've seen.

Westminster Oaks established partnerships with local high schools and Florida State University to fill entry-level positions.

Due to its location, Westminster Oaks has to frequently compete against the likes of Disneyworld when attracting talent. To build inroads with emerging talent, the community formed a partnership with local high schools and Florida State University.

Today, Westminster Oaks is the site of FSU's SeniorHealth™ clinic, which also gives students early exposure to the long-term care environment.

Chelsea Senior Living partners with local high schools to share what a career in senior living may look like.

Chelsea Senior Living's high school program began when Chelsea CEO Roger Bernier realized there was an opportunity to connect with students charting their professional journeys and address the staffing shortage.

Jason Kahn, the director of communications at Chelsea echoed this. "I think that [the program] is important, in this day and time, where workers are hard to come by and hiring was difficult for a lot of companies, this program provides a great outlet for senior living providers."

The New Jewish Home's SkillSpring program supports New York City youth from under-resourced schools in pursuit of careers in long-term care.

The New Jewish Homes's program was first created to support young adults. But as the staffing shortage has grown more pronounced, the program has also helped create a training ground for early-career talent. Of note, The New Jewish Home has gone on to hire 76 percent of the participants in the Young Adult program.

There are a few other creative solutions that extend beyond partnerships:

- Brookdale Senior Living dedicated a page on its website to employing high school grads and early professionals.

- Rowntree Gardens hired a specialized "Millennial recruiter" to promote job openings to younger talent.

- In Minnesota, high school students who work in senior living and care settings can now earn academic credit for their employment.

Gamify Elements of Your Staff Members' Day-to-Day

Relied on frequently in training and education, gamification is known for its ability to drive collaboration and social interactions. (We've previously covered the benefits of gamification for residents, whether for activity goals or mental acuity.) Your residents aren't the only ones who can benefit from a gamified senior living experience, though. Staff can, too.

Let's revisit the foundation of a rewards program. You craft reward criteria. Staff members fulfill that criteria. You reward those staff members. That foundation is, in essence, a game. So apply it to other aspects of your staff's workload. Here are some examples of how that gamification may look in your community.

Hoping to encourage more interpersonal connections between staff and residents?

Consider creating a "Question Competition" where staff ask residents a specific question ("What's your favorite ice cream flavor?"). The staff member with the most answers by the end of the week wins a prize.

Want to promote physical fitness for staff members?

Host a weekly steps competition. Side note: gamification has been proven to offer several advantages for motivating behavior change in health and well-being practices.

Need to fill out your life enrichment calendar?

Consider asking staff to share activities by a certain deadline and vote on them. The winning idea gets added to the calendar and the author of that idea gets a reward.

Want to boost staff proficiency on your newly-adopted calendar tool?

Launch a game that rewards staff members for correctly executing various procedures, such as creating an event, checking attendance data, and reviewing attendance RSVPs.

Regardless of the competition you run, make sure the rules are clear and comprehensible and progress and results are visible to every employee. Visibility plays into the competitive fun. A staff member may see, for instance, that they're just 250 steps behind the leader of your community's walking competition. That knowledge acts as a motivating factor. Plus, promoting these games on your Recognition and Rewards platform meets this need for visibility while ensuring any prizes are immediately tracked.

The Takeaway

An engaged staff is a retained staff. Gamifying parts of your staff's work helps foster a sense of camaraderie, friendly competition, and motivation.

Create a Plan to Phase Out Stop-Gap Solutions

The senior living industry has largely propped itself up with stop-gap staffing solutions like Staffing Agencies, Sign-On Bonuses, and Excessive Overtime. Case in point: 87 percent of communities have relied on agency staffing over the past year.

87%

87 percent of communities have relied on agency staffing over the past year

In a vacuum, this isn't a glaring problem. Stop-gap solutions shore up temporary issues. But the staffing crisis isn't temporary; it's impacted the industry for years. Not to mention: the stop-gap solutions that communities leverage, such as agency staffing, cost a premium.

In other words, the extended use of short-term solutions compresses already-thin margins. Of course, senior living leaders recognize this reality. But they're boxed in. They need these solutions to run their communities.

Still, it's important to remember that the staffing crisis doesn't need to be a permanent fixture in your community. And, as you start seeing progress on the hiring front, you'll need to redefine your staffing goals and expectations. In the midst of a shortage, your main goal may be to cover every available shift. With a more established staffing pipeline, your main priorities may range from talent diversification to operation expansion.

That's where a "phase-out" plan proves its value. This type of plan outlines what metrics you must hit to scale back staffing agency use, excessive overtime, or high sign-on bonuses. A phase-out plan could include:

| Current Staff Headcount | Staff Headcount Goal | Satisfaction Rates | Current Staffing Expenses | Staffing Expenses Goal |

There are a couple advantages to crafting a plan with this sort of detail. For one, you can tie any goals (e.g., reduce overtime costs by 40 percent) to concrete metrics. The second: you have a resource that methodically spells out how to scale back your stop-gaps.

You Need a Web of Creative Solutions to Lift the Burden of the Senior Living Staffing Crisis

A few years ago, adequately addressing the staffing shortage was a near-insurmountable task. There were quarantines to balance, resident occupancies to fill, and inflationary pressures to navigate.

Fortunately, many of those issues have either been resolved or are being resolved. This gives communities time to breathe and focus on their hiring and retention strategies. Does that mean every community will magically fix the staffing crisis in the next 12 months? No. After all, this is a systemic issue. But the more comprehensive your plan, the greater the odds it will succeed.

The final takeaway here: your staff supports your community. The best communities find ways to continually support their staff.

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