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Carol Wissing, a certified nursing assistant, helps Karen Brokus into bed at Ennoble Skilled Nursing and

Rehabilitation Center in Dubuque. CNAs are in demand in Dubuque and across the nation.

JESSICA REILLY • *Telegraph Herald*

Lawmaker fights to keep 6-day mail service

Representative Kind says a reduction would have a 'negative impact,' while an Iowa union also is voicing concerns about cutbacks.

BY JEFF MONTGOMERY
jeff.montgomery@thmedia.com

As a tumultuous year for the U.S. Postal Service nears its end, union leaders and local lawmakers are taking a stand against looming service cutbacks.

U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, D-Wis., recently co-sponsored a resolution urging the postal service to continue six-day mail delivery. Kind said his support was inspired by recent attempts to cut Saturday service, as well as his expectations that similar proposals will surface in the future.



Ron Kind

"There is an effort afoot to limit mail delivery to five days (per week), and I feel that will have a disproportionately negative impact," Kind said. "This would create problems for people who rely on the mail for prescription drugs and it would put many businesses — especially in rural areas — at a competitive disadvantage."

Concerns about cutbacks also are being voiced in Iowa. Members of the postal union voiced their disapproval during a protest held in Des Moines last week.

Bruce Clark was a postal employee in Dubuque for nearly 40 years and now serves as president of the Iowa Postal Workers Union.

"I think the protests were about a range of

See MAIL, PAGE 2A



JESSICA REILLY • *Telegraph Herald*
U.S. Postal Service letter carrier Connie Kuhn delivers mail along Southern Avenue in Dubuque on Thursday.

Crisis on the front lines

With a growing elderly population, the shortage of certified nursing assistants challenges patient-centered health care

BY BEN JACOBSON • *bjacobson@thmedia.com*

For four years, Abby Leslein's workdays have been marked by illness and death.

She spends months growing close to her residents, learning their physical and emotional needs and about their lives before Ennoble Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center.

They observe holidays together, celebrating against a backdrop of relentlessly beeping machines and flashing lights.

She gets to know their families and friends. They laugh together and, occasionally, cry together.

And then, all too often, Leslein will watch, helpless, as those for whom she has fought so hard slowly fade and die.

"Many of them I consider to be like my family," said the certified nursing assistant. "It gets extremely heartbreaking if their conditions change."

CNAs such as Leslein are on the front line of patient-centered care in the U.S. Long-term-care facilities like Ennoble depend on them to keep residents fed, clean and — above all — safe.

But the fast-paced, high-stress and low-paying work environment takes its toll. With facility operators reporting substantial turnover rates, career CNAs are exceedingly rare.

"The solution: They need to be paid a million dollars a day," said Rebecca Walters, a registered nurse and CNA instructor at Northeast Iowa Community College.

"It's a hard job," she added. "And it is a job for a younger person. If you can make the same amount of money at McDonald's, you're not going to take care of somebody's body fluids."

Just days away from her 21st birthday, Leslein already is one of the most experienced CNAs at Ennoble. Soon, she will take the next step, becoming a licensed practical nurse

on her way to becoming a registered nurse.

While care center administrators are supportive of CNAs taking career initiative — many even offer tuition-reimbursement programs — it essentially guarantees a near-constant workforce shortage.

"I honestly did not know that the staffing crisis for CNAs is everywhere," said Leslein. "It's not just one nursing home and some hospitals."

See CNAS, PAGE 6A



CNA Melanie Astocondor assists Ennoble resident Doris Puccio.

The CNA challenge

THE JOB MARKET

CNA jobs, 2016: 1,510,300

- Iowa: 21,460
- Illinois: 60,090
- Wisconsin: 32,380

CNA jobs, 2026 (projected): 1,674,400

Projected growth of CNA jobs: 11%
Projected growth of all occupations: 7%

U.S. MEDIAN SALARIES

CNA: \$26,590

Licensed Practicing Nurse: \$44,090

Registered Nurse: \$68,450

All occupations: \$37,040

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

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"A 'Thank you' and a 'Great job' go a long way. Recognizing employees that do go above and beyond."

ANGELA HORANEY, ADMINISTRATOR OF ELIZABETH (ILL.) NURSING HOME, ON HELPING CNAS AVOID BURNOUT

CNAs bond with clients

Continued from page 1A

THE JOB

If doctors are the composers and nurses the conductors, CNAs are the instruments through which modern health care is delivered.

The workers feed, bathe, dress, groom and move patients. More than half of CNAs nationwide work either in skilled-nursing facilities or assisted-living homes for the elderly, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"You do everything from getting people up in the morning, doing their hair and getting them dressed, bathing them, feeding them," said Faith McNally, a CNA from Cascade, Iowa, who works in Dubuque. "You help them with their physical therapy."

CNAs don't just help with physical needs.

"A lot of people enjoy talking with the CNAs because the CNAs are the aides that are with them all the time," McNally said. "You kind of grow to have a relationship with your clients."

Doug Shinkunas lives at Ennoble Manor. He said the good CNAs make a less-than-desirable change of setting easier to stomach.

"I'd rather very much be independent," he said. "But you come to the point where you rely on them for things you used to be able to take care of yourself. They don't make you feel bad about the situation you're in."

In Iowa, teens as young as 16 can earn their certified nursing assistant certificate, which is a pre-requisite to many health care careers.

In Iowa, CNAs in training must attend more than 70 hours of classes and complete 30 hours of clinical work. Then comes written and practical exams overseen by the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals.

From there, they are free to work with residents of care facilities and in certain hospital settings.

"I'll tell you honestly, I could never do their job. I could never do it," said Shinkunas.

At long-term-care facilities, CNAs are on staff 24 hours per day. They work on holidays and weekends, tending to residents who rely on them for tasks as simple as moving from a bed to a chair.

Many CNAs are working toward other career goals. Oftentimes, they must manage the demands of a full-time job as well as college classes.

For example, Leslein has managed dual roles as a student and CNA throughout almost her entire tenure.

"I have to plan to sleep," she said. "I have to plan when I eat. I have to plan pretty much everything."

Another challenge is the evolving nature of the work. Michelle Healey, Ennoble's director of business and administration, said constantly updated regulations from the U.S. Centers for Medicare Services mean new ways CNAs have to interact with patients.

Badrails now are forbidden except in special circumstances, as are alarms that alert care center staffers when a fall-prone patient has gotten out of bed.

As options for treating the mentally ill dwindle nationwide, more patients with behavior issues or emotional health demands are making their way to long-term-care facilities. At the same time, administrators



CNA Tatiana Astocondor assists Carl Till at Ennoble Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Dubuque.

are encouraged to reduce the amount of antipsychotic medications distributed to patients.

"You have to find new approaches, new holistic approaches to help the patients," Healey said.

WORKFORCE GAP

According to federal labor statistics, about 1.51 million certified nursing assistant positions existed in 2016. That number is expected to grow to 1.67 million in 2026 — an 11 percent jump.

That outpaces the expected growth rate of all occupations, which is 7 percent.

In Iowa, 21,460 CNA jobs existed last year. There were 60,090 CNAs in Illinois and 32,380 in Wisconsin.

"They will have a job in every part of health care," said Dani Ettema, administrator of Hawkeye Care Center in Dubuque. "It's a very demanding aspect of work right now."

Despite the industry's reliance on CNAs, the pay is relatively low.

In Iowa, the average annual wage for a CNA is \$27,310. In Wisconsin, it's \$27,980, and in Illinois, \$26,830. CNAs nationwide earn about \$26,590 per year — or \$12.78 per hour.

Workers have to look for rewards outside their paychecks.

"The pay isn't amazing for all the work (we) do," said McNally. "I think a lot of the reasons CNAs stay where they are is because of the attachment to the clients. It is really grueling. The hours can be crazy. Physically, it can wear on you. Emotionally and mentally, too."

Healey said an added challenge to keeping CNAs is the prospect of sign-on bonuses offered by competing facilities.

"It's very difficult," she said. "The CNAs have a tendency to go where the money is. ... You'll see a lot of the CNAs making their way around to a lot of facilities."

Angela Horaney, administrator of Elizabeth (Ill.) Nursing Home, said care center leaders recognize the workload. Steps are taken to avoid "burnout."

"A 'Thank you' and a 'Great job' go a long way," she said. "Recognizing employees that do go above and beyond."

A DIFFERENT SETTING

Not all CNAs work in long-term-care facilities. About 6.5 percent work in general medical or surgical hospitals.

At Mercy Medical Center-Dubuque, CNAs are an "integral" part of the patient care team, according to Robert Wethal, the hospital's chief nursing officer and vice president of patient care services.



NICC student Cassie Sendt, of East Dubuque, Ill., practices her skills on fellow student Patricia Silva, of Dubuque, during their CNA class at the Dubuque Town Clock campus.

"They're somewhat of an extension of a nurse," he said.

Hospital officials attempt to maintain a 1 to 8 CNA-to-patient ratio. Each CNA likely will work with two or more nurses per shift.

Becky Bellows, director of the medical/surgical floor at UnityPoint Health-Finley Hospital in Dubuque, said CNAs — or patient care techs — help with everything from brushing teeth to helping patients walk.

"They help with patient experiences," Bellows said. "If we have patients who need a little extra time, a lot of our patient care techs will sit one-on-one with patients."

Because CNAs are spending so much time working closely with patients, their observation skills are critical.

"We always say our CNAs are kind of the eyes of the nurses," Bellows said. "A lot of times they'll come and tell us if they're seeing different things."

Because hospital patients are more transient than residents of long-term-care facilities, CNAs don't spend as much time getting to know the people in their care.

"Our patients can be here anywhere from one day to two weeks," Bellows said. "It all depends on what their diagnosis is."

CNAs "truly are vital," according to Wethal.

"For a long time, CNAs were viewed as doing more grunt work," he said. "That's truly not the case. They are part of the team, and their work is very important."

MAKING THE CUT

When students enter the CNA program at NICC, instructors waste little time introducing them to the demands of the job.

Dena Stolze, operations coordinator and student success coach at NICC, said prospective CNAs are treated to a "dose of reality" right away. Business partners from care facilities meet with students to help them

understand what to expect. "They talk about hours and expectations and tasks and types of residents they're going to work with," Stolze said. "We try to get from day one, they know what they're getting into."

Students also must undergo a two-step tuberculosis test and background checks. This helps weed out applicants who, even if they were certified, would be unemployable.

"We don't want to expose our vulnerable population to people who are felons and things like that," Stolze said.

Classroom time is spent learning procedures, like how to move residents into a supine position or how to take vital signs, such as blood pressure. Eventually, students move into "clinicals," during which they work in a real care setting with real patients.

Cassie Sendt started training after hearing about the job from family members and friends. But she initially was skeptical about whether she had made the right decision.

"I didn't think I was going to be ready," she said recently, after passing her written exam. "I didn't think I'd make it through the class. And I didn't think I'd be able to deal with it."

But her clinical experience at ManorCare Health Services in Dubuque helped her realize that she was on the correct path.

"This is what I want to do,"

Sendt said. "I can handle it. Being around these people, the residents, they make your day that much better. You walk in there, and they're smiling and they're happy to see you. It just reassures me that I am in the right field."

Longtime CNA Carol Wissing has seen countless recruits come and go. It is

easy to tell who has the chops. "You're going to know pretty quick whether they're really cut out for it or not, whether they're going to enjoy it or not," she said.

Getting CNAs into care facilities to experience them firsthand is important, according to Walters.

"They start there and they see positive images from long-term care, where the staff really care about the people," she said. "It's not like back in the '60s when they all sat in their chairs, drooled on themselves, voided on themselves."

THE NEXT STEP

With more than 30 years as a CNA, Wissing is something of an anomaly. She has spent decades in the direct-care field, valuing her relationships with residents above drastic career shifts.

She learned the trade after being less than thrilled with care that her grandmother received at a facility. Wissing thought she could do better.

"I just like helping people," she said. "I think we're all in this world to help each other. I enjoy talking with them."

But for many — such as Leslein — a stint as a CNA is a precursor to career as a full-fledged nurse.

"I wanted to take it to the next step and use more skills," she said.

Wethal said the job used to be seen as a viable long-term work option. If a CNA got a

job in a hospital, he or she could expect good benefits and relatively good pay.

"I think, for a long time, there was kind of career CNAs, if you will — people that enjoyed working with patients and working at the level they were working without furthering their education," he said. "For a

long time, it was a fairly stable job."

Now, the number of student-CNAs is "tipping the scales," he said.

But Mercy officials aren't

concerned that CNAs frequently are short-term assets. By working around school schedules, the hospital becomes a sort of training ground for future nurses.

"The nice feature of that is the majority of those students we can actually capture and keep them as nurses after they graduate," Wethal said.

Likewise, officials at Finley view CNAs as potential homegrown nurses.

"We can get them as an RN working the floor, so they can just kind of work their way up," Bellows said. "It's awesome to watch the CNAs grow in that respect."

While long-term-care facilities are "blessed" to have nursing assistants who have realized their "true calling," it does serve as a foundation for strong nurses, according to Horaney.

"You're in the trenches, and you understand," she said. "And I think it makes for more compassionate nurses, if they were a CNA prior."

WHY WE DO IT

A CNA's job description likely will focus on the physical needs of a patient or resident. But after they spend a few days on the job, they realize there is so much more to it.

A certified nursing assistant is a person's rock, emotionally and physically. They often are residents' best friends and caregivers rolled into one.

It's hard for CNAs to watch their patients struggle and die. But they know they made a difference, McNally said.

"When they pass away, you know they're not suffering anymore," she said. "And you know you're the person who has given them the best care in their last moments."

The bonds that can form are so strong, even seeing residents leave under happy circumstances can be difficult.

"It's bittersweet when somebody you like gets discharged," said Leslein. "It's like, 'I'll miss you, but don't get readmitted here.'"

It's not just the residents.

"We also have to be there as kind of a shoulder for the families, too," said Wissing. "The families are seeing the change in their loved ones. They're not behaving the way they have their entire lives."

"You always have to be there to say, 'It's OK.'"

Every CNA at some point will have to console a family member distraught over the decision to move a loved one to a care facility, according to Walters. And when that time comes, it's the CNA's job to reassure them.

"OK, but he needs to be here," she recalled telling family members. "We're going to do the day-to-day things for him. We're going to bathe him and keep him clean. You're going to bring the Sunday paper in and sit and read with him. When you have that special dessert that he loves, you bring it in. We're going to make sure he gets it."

"You're going to do the fun things now. Let us do the work."



Doug Shinkunas



Robert Wethal

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