

MAKING A BAD SITUATION WORSE: EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES FACING RURAL HOME CARE WORKERS AND DELIVERY

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The worsening care gap

- With the US population aging, many senior citizens desire to age in place rather than in healthcare institutions like nursing homes (Cutchin, 2003; Milligan, 2009)
- The demand for home care services continue to outpace the number of home care workers
 - Nearly seven million direct care workforce jobs will need to be filled by 2028, with the majority in home care (Campbell et al, 2021)

Geographic breakdown of home care

- The care gap is especially pronounced in rural areas (Campbell et al, 2021)
- People who live in rural areas are more likely to experience poor health outcomes and have less access to healthcare services, including less utilization of home care
 - Major challenges preventing access to healthcare include inadequate transportation and a lack of physicians (Arcury et al, 2005; Douthit et al, 2015; Lahr et al, 2021)
- Nursing home closures and mergers (Healy, 2019) in rural areas make recruiting and retaining home care workers especially important

Challenges facing home care workers

- To address the worsening care gap, policymakers and scholars need to pay more attention to the challenges that home care workers and providers face
- Universal challenges confronting home care workers include low compensation (Campbell et al, 2021), high turnover (Butler et al, 2013), and unacknowledged emotional labor (Franzosa et al, 2019)
- Limited research on rural home care workers suggest that travel cost reimbursement leads to less turnover (Morris, 2009), but more research is needed on how to recruit and retain caregivers

Research questions and methods

- **Main research questions**
 - What are the unique challenges facing rural homecare workers and delivery?
 - What policy interventions would help reduce the care gap that is especially pronounced in more rural areas?
- **Qualitative-based research strategy**
 - We reached out to a wide range of organizations (agencies, unions, policy advocates) and relied on snowball sampling to recruit interviewees
 - We have conducted 15 semi-structured interviews (14 home care workers and one agency representative) across upstate NY

Methods and sample questions

- **Sample questions include:**
 - What are some of the challenges you face providing care to clients in more rural areas?
 - Can you walk me through some of the differences caring for clients in cities compared to more rural areas?
 - What do you do to convince a client when they don't want to do something?
 - Are there cases where you have to provide companionship to your clients?

Themes

- In addition to universal challenges that home care workers face, we have identified three types of unique challenges that confront rural caregivers
 - Workforce and workflow challenges
 - Patient social isolation and defiance
 - Transportation and infrastructure challenges

Theme I: Workforce and workflow challenges

- Labor shortage remains a persistent challenge for caregivers and providers
 - “I would say, although I don't think it's unique, it seems to be everywhere now, but just a lack of help. We don't have home health aides, especially that travel in that area. If I'm not here, if I don't go, they really don't have coverage.”
- Some agencies would like to pay caregivers more, but reimbursement schemes do not account for transportation time
- Shorter cases compound many of these challenges

Theme II: Patient social isolation and defiance

- While many senior citizens experience isolation, this issue is especially pronounced in more rural areas
 - “I have somebody that's actually on a private dirt road. Sometimes we could just walk to the end of his driveway, but that's the extent of the fun there for him.”
- Some evidence of increased social defiance that impacts the day-to-day work of caregivers
 - “It's just the difference in the sensibilities or the difference of the culture, I think, up here. Sometimes you have to literally convince people that they need care.”
 - “It's more farming, more farm towns. They're used to living or doing things with less. I've had people that never took a bath before or they only, they wouldn't shower. They'd only bathe.”

Theme III: Transportation and infrastructure challenges

- **Transportation issues represented the most common challenge confronting rural home care workers**
 - Upstate NY climate worsens transportation challenges
 - One caregiver reported traveling approximately 800 miles/week due to the combination of multiple clients/day in very remote areas
- **Infrastructure challenges that impact daily tasks**
 - “...now their hot water tank is going, so we have to turn the hot water tank off and then turn the water on every time we're going to use it. So, that definitely affects him and how often he wants to bathe...because he just doesn't have the proper facilities.”

Discussion and policy implications

- **Need policy awareness of the challenges facing rural home care workers and delivery**
 - Distinguish between government policy and what agencies need to do
- **Encourage pilots to address some of these challenges**
 - Cornell-Healthcare Workers Rising transportation pilot
- **Build Back Better plan**
 - Proposed \$150 billion investment in home care needs to address the unique challenges facing rural home care delivery

Next steps

- **Examine potential policy interventions and implications**
- **Over the next month we hope to interview 5-10 more home care workers and 3-5 more agency representatives**
 - **Any help on potential interviews would be most appreciated!**

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THANK YOU

- Please contact us at jsk374@cornell.edu with any comments or questions