

Considering a Career in Long Term Care

If you are looking for a way to make a real difference in people's lives, then consider employment and career options in long term care. Nursing facilities, assisted living residences and homes for people with mental retardation or developmental disabilities are seeking qualified candidates who care about the quality of life for our most vulnerable citizens.

If your priority is making a difference in people's lives, then read on and consider joining the long term care profession.

It's All About People

Long term health care is a rapidly growing field, and compassionate employees at all levels are needed to deliver quality care and to help ensure a positive quality of life. More than one million nursing facility patients in the U.S. depend on employees of the nation's 17,000 nursing facilities to meet their needs for round-the-clock nursing care, personal contact and companionship. Almost another million people, who are generally healthier and more independent, live in 32,000 assisted living residences.

It is important to note that nursing facilities may use many different types of names, including "nursing home," "health care center," "rehabilitation center," "health facility," "nursing center" and others. Likewise, assisted living residences are often called "residential care centers."

Today's long term care settings typically provide full-service care for the elderly and disabled. Dedicated staff care for:

- *Persons needing short-term care and rehabilitation while they recover from a medical situation;*
- *Seniors living semi-independently in an assisted living community but needing help with some personal care activities;*
- *Acutely ill patients needing nursing facility care around the clock.*
- *Persons with mental retardation or developmental disabilities.*

The long term care team is made up of a group of caring, compassionate individuals who provide supervision and professional caregiving services. In nursing facilities, the objective is to restore or maintain each patient to his or her highest possible level of functioning. Facilities also work to ensure quality and compassionate care for patients entering the end-of-life stage. In assisted living, the goals are to promote independence, autonomy and choice. Whether the care setting is a nursing facility, assisted living residence or a home for persons with mental retardation or developmental disabilities, dedicated employees are vital to the quality of care each person receives. Caregivers do much more than just provide quality care and assistance to our loved ones and respected elders. They also give them love and support. While this type of work can be hectic, its rewards far outweigh its demands—and you have the satisfaction of knowing you make a difference in people's lives.

You will have a secure future as part of the long term care profession. The fastest growing segment of our population is made up of those over the age of 85. By the year 2030, 33 million people will be seniors, and one in five will be in need of some type of long term care. The number of nursing facilities and assisted living residences will double by 2030 or before.

In all long term health care settings, there is a variety of work required to provide quality of care and quality of life; this will accommodate a wide range of training, experience and interest.

Qualifications

Educational requirements vary depending upon the position. For instance, to enter a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) program you need a high school diploma or high school equivalency diploma, but if you are entering a field like physical therapy, you need a more advanced degree. Nurses are either Registered Nurses (RN) or Licensed Practical Nurses (LPN). Overall, the most important qualifications include the desire to help others, and the compassion and understanding that frail elders and the disabled need.

Employment Options

The long term care field offers careers and employment opportunities in a variety of health professions and settings. That is, similar positions generally can be found at nursing facilities, assisted living residences, residential care communities, adult day care centers and homes for persons with mental retardation and developmental disabilities. Also, different states vary somewhat in their requirements for various positions, so you need to check in your area about what qualifications you will need to be a member of the long term care team.

Following is a brief description of the major areas that may interest you.

Certified Nursing Assistant, Resident Assistant and Other Positions

- The Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) provides personal care to residents or patients, such as bathing, dressing, changing linens, transporting and other essential activities. CNAs are trained, tested, certified and work under the supervision of an RN or LPN.
- The Resident Assistants (RA) generally work in assisted living residences and provide direct personal care services to residents but are not certified as CNAs. Depending on the state, this position is also available in some nursing facilities.
- In some states, a Qualified Medical Assistant (a CNA with specialized training), may assist with the administration of medications and treatments.

Nursing Services

Several levels of professionals within the nursing staff provide quality nursing care.

- The RNs plan for patient care by assessing patient needs, and developing and monitoring care plans in conjunction with a physician and facility Care Planning Team. Several levels of Registered Nurses – including Unit Directors, Assistant Directors of Nursing, and Directors of Nursing (DON) – supervise all nursing services. The DON is responsible for monitoring the overall quality of care at the facility as well as the facility's compliance with federal and state regulations.
- Education requirements for Registered Nurses vary according to the type of program. Nursing programs include diploma nurses who are graduates from hospital schools of nursing, Associate degree nurses from two year programs and Bachelor degree nurses from four year programs. Some nurses have advanced degrees and practice as the DON or other leadership positions. All nurses graduating from any type of nursing program are required to successfully pass state board testing to obtain a license to practice.
- A Charge Nurse or Unit Manager is an RN or LPN who is responsible for the supervision of a unit within the nursing home. The Charge Nurse schedules and supervises nursing staff and provides care to facility patients.
- The LPN provides each patient with daily routine medications, necessary medical treatments, change of dressings and other related treatments as prescribed by the attending physician. LPN programs require one year of post-high school education, as well as successfully passing a state-licensing exam.

Therapy Services

Therapy services are a key aspect of today's nursing facilities and are also available in some assisted living residences. Many facilities will contract for these services from a firm specializing in therapy services; some facilities maintain staff therapists. Therapists need education beyond high school. Areas where therapists specialize include:

- **Physical Therapists (PT)** – Provide rehabilitation exercises for persons recovering from injuries, strokes, or suffering from arthritis. PTs offer training in the use of walkers and crutches along with exercises to increase strength.
- **Occupational Therapists (OT)** – Provide rehabilitation training for persons who, after therapy, can be independent with self-care. OTs help patients maximize their ability to perform personal hygiene, food preparation, etc.
- **Speech Therapists** – Provide evaluation and treatment of speech and swallowing disorders with the goal of restoring speech and language abilities.
- **Respiratory Therapists** – Measure the respiratory responsiveness of patients and administer treatments that improve breathing capacity.

Activities Professional

Nursing facilities and assisted living residences typically offer a variety of in-house or external events such as trips to a mall, social events, picnics and arranging religious services. Activity and recreational professionals are specially trained to develop appropriate levels of activities that offer entertainment, educational opportunities, religious expression and provide social interaction along with mental and physical stimulation. These individuals often manage a facility's volunteer program as well.

Social Services

Social workers are critical to the success of the long term care team. They act as the contact between patients, their families and facility staff. They assess patients, interact with the medical staff and, in general, provide for the patients' well-being. Social workers also serve as counselors to both patients and their families, especially during the initial period of adjustment to a long term care setting. In many states, social workers must be licensed and may be required to have advanced degrees.

Dining Staff

There are a variety of career and employment options available in this segment of long term care. The Dining Services Manager oversees the dining staff and performs nutrition-related services to promote patients' general health and well-being through the use of medical nutrition therapy and diagnostic assessment. They are responsible for the identification of patients' dietary needs, and planning and implementation of dietary programs. Dietary aides, cooks, wait staff and other members of the Food Service staff are an important part of the nutritional well-being of the residents and patients.

Administration

There are a variety of administrative, financial and other non-medical employment opportunities available within the long term care environment, including:

- **Nursing Facility Administrator** – The administrator is a licensed professional who manages the day-to-day operations of the facility. Administrators are trained in medical, social, financial and legal aspects of long term care and are an important resource to families and patients. Typically, the administrator has a four-year degree in health administration or is a Registered Nurse with certification in long term care administration. Some states require advanced degrees.

- **Assisted Living Administrator/Director/Manager** – The assisted living administrator manages the daily operations of the residence to ensure the services and care the residents need are provided.
- **Marketing Director** – In assisted living, this person arranges for and manages details related to moving into a facility. The person in this position is also responsible for arranging tours of the residence for prospective residents and may handle external public relations matters.
- **Admissions Director/Coordinator** – In nursing facilities, the admissions staff works with patients and their families to ensure that all requirements for admission to the facility are met.
- **Billing and Payment Coordinators** – The staff in these positions work to verify benefits, answer questions regarding payments (e.g. insurance or Medicare) and organize the billing and collection process.
- **Medical Records and Health Information Personnel** – These professionals are responsible for making sure of the accurate and timely documentation of medical services provided to patients. This may involve tasks from coding of treatment for reimbursement purposes to reviewing care plans to ensure coordination of services.
- **Office Administration/Administrative Assistant** – This staff handles general office responsibilities.

Housekeeping, Laundry, Building and Grounds

- **Housekeeping** – Housekeeping ensures the upkeep of resident and patient rooms.
- **Laundry** – Many facilities maintain their own in-house laundry operation and this task is very important as each resident or patient has their own personal items that must be laundered and returned to them.
- **Maintenance/Building and Grounds** – Maintenance personnel ensure the physical plant is in good condition and non-medical equipment is in working order.

Sources

To receive more information, contact a local facility, or visit the American Health Care Association (AHCA) at www.ahca.org or the National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL) at www.ncal.org for affiliated organizations in your state.

Special thanks to the following affiliates for contributing to this material: Indiana Health Care Association, Massachusetts Extended Care Federation and the West Virginia Health Care Association.

The **Caregiver Jobs Clearinghouse**: www.carecareers.net