



The Long-Term Care Nursing Pipeline: Upward Career Mobility Among Residential Long-Term Care Staff

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Introduction

- **The LTC "Crisis":** The residential long-term care (LTC) sector faces a staffing crisis driven by high turnover, low wages, and a lack of career advancement pathways.
- **Growing Demand:** As the U.S. population ages, the demand for stable, trained LTC staff in over 11,000 nursing homes (NHs) and 34,600 assisted living (AL) communities is critical.
- **The "Pipeline" Solution:** Improving upward career mobility through human capital investment (education and training) is proposed as a way to recruit and retain the direct care worker (DCW) workforce.

Objectives

To examine career advancement patterns and identify individual and organizational factors associated with upward mobility among DCWs.

Methods

- **Design:** A cross-sectional analysis using data from the 2024 National Dementia Workforce Study (NDWS), a nationally representative survey.
- **Participants:** 396 staff from 35 AL communities and 370 staff from 28 NHs.
- **Variables:**
 - Prior experience as a DCW (yes/no) among licensed nurses (RNs and LPNs).
 - Working toward a certification, licensure, or degree program in healthcare (yes/no) among DCWs.
 - Individual-level factors: Age, Hispanic, non-White, foreign-born, female, # of children per household, provides direct dementia care
 - Organizational-level factors: Setting, for-profit, chain-affiliated, capacity, occupancy rate, dementia-specific unit, paid time off, paid parental leave, tuition reimbursement, and DCW hours per resident per day
- **Analysis:** Generalized linear mixed model with facility random effects, weighted to account for complex sampling design.

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Results

Approximately one-third (33-34%) of current unlicensed DCWs in both AL and NH settings are actively pursuing advanced healthcare credentials.

Figure 1. The Upward Career Mobility of Direct Care Workers in Long-Term Care Settings in 2024

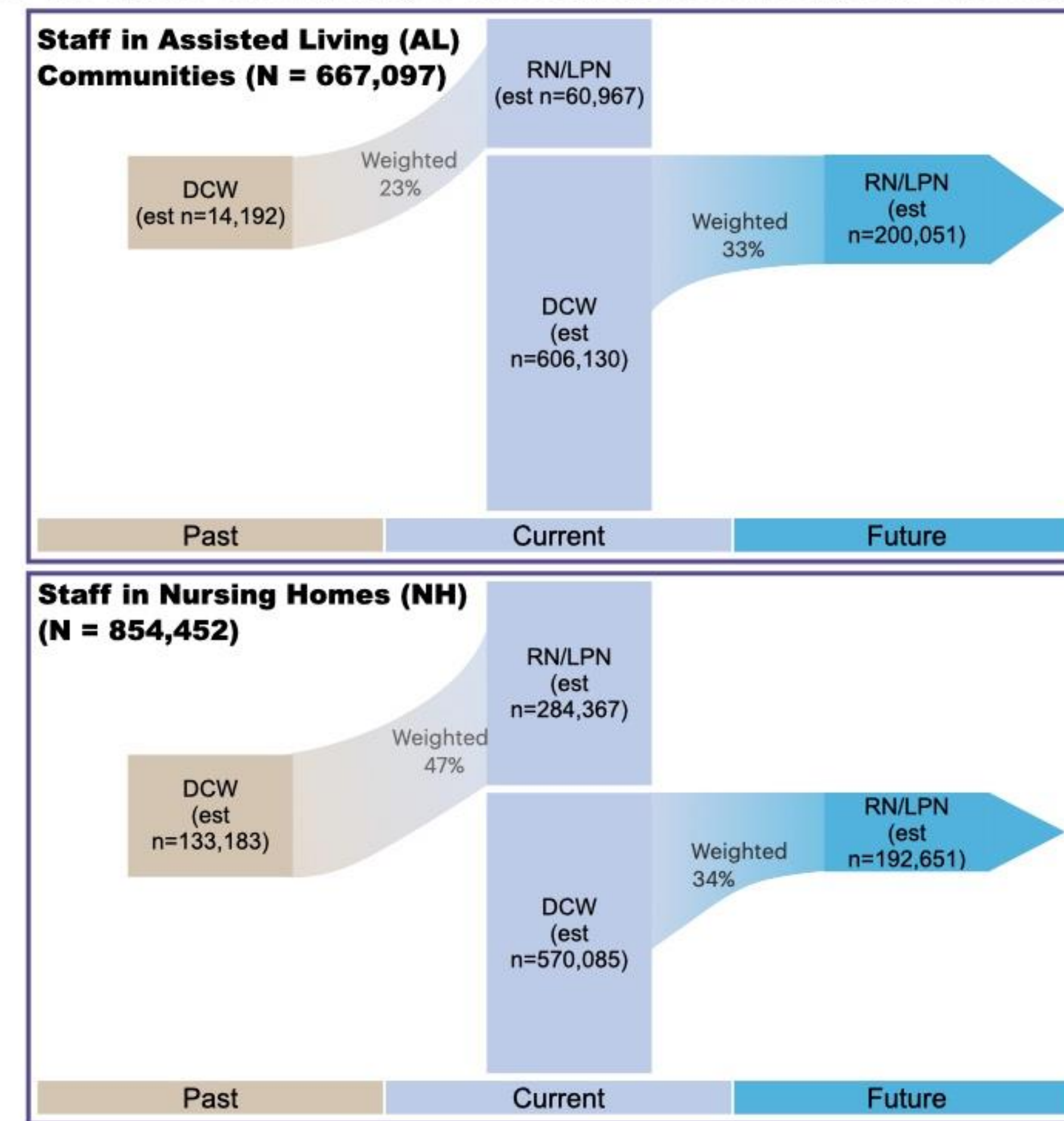


Table 1. Individual and Organizational Characteristics of Whether the DCW Seeking Advanced Credentials in Nursing Homes and Assisted Living Settings in 2024

| Characteristic | Overall N = 514 ¹ | DCW Not Seeking Advanced Credentials N = 307 ¹ | DCW Seeking Advanced Credentials N = 207 ¹ | p-value ² |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|----------------------|
| Individual Characteristics | | | | |
| Age | 37.24 (13.59) | 40.80 (13.44) | 31.97 (12.02) | <0.001 |
| Hispanic | 94 (18%) | 54 (18%) | 40 (19%) | 0.62 |
| Non-White | 226 (44%) | 127 (41%) | 99 (48%) | 0.15 |
| Foreign-Born | 76 (15%) | 36 (12%) | 40 (19%) | 0.017 |
| Female | 454 (88%) | 270 (88%) | 184 (89%) | 0.74 |
| # of Children per Household | 0.83 (2.70) | 0.85 (2.66) | 0.81 (2.77) | 0.76 |
| Provides Direct Dementia Care | 462 (90%) | 268 (87%) | 194 (94%) | 0.018 |
| Organizational Characteristics | | | | |
| Setting | | | | 0.11 |
| AL | 301 (59%) | 171 (56%) | 130 (63%) | |
| NH | 213 (41%) | 136 (44%) | 77 (37%) | |
| For Profit | 391 (76%) | 238 (78%) | 153 (74%) | 0.35 |
| Chain | 412 (80%) | 234 (76%) | 178 (86%) | 0.006 |
| Capacity | 83.82 (38.78) | 82.39 (40.36) | 85.94 (36.29) | 0.066 |
| Occupancy Rate | 80.00 (13.99) | 80.43 (13.00) | 79.36 (15.34) | 0.68 |
| Dementia Unit or Wing | 286 (56%) | 165 (54%) | 121 (58%) | 0.29 |
| Paid Time Off | 345 (67%) | 209 (68%) | 136 (66%) | 0.57 |
| Paid Parental Leave | 134 (26%) | 81 (26%) | 53 (26%) | 0.84 |
| Tuition Reimbursement | 237 (46%) | 140 (46%) | 97 (47%) | 0.78 |
| DCW HPRD ³ | 2.55 (1.15) | 2.48 (1.08) | 2.66 (1.24) | 0.18 |

¹n (%); Mean (SD)

²Pearson's Chi-squared test; Wilcoxon rank sum test

³DCW HPRD refers to Direct Care Worker Hours Per Resident Day

DCWs' upward career mobility was significantly associated with younger age, being foreign-born, working in non-profit, chain-affiliated facilities, with larger facility capacity, no paid time off, and higher DCW staffing levels.

Table 2. Association Between Individual, Organizational Factors and DCWs' Upward Career Mobility

| Predictors | DCW Upward Career Mobility (N = 514 DCWs in ALs and NHs) | | |
|---|--|-----------------|----------------|
| | Adjusted Odds Ratios | 95% CI | p ¹ |
| (Intercept) | 0.6475 | 0.0963 – 4.3540 | 0.655 |
| Age | 0.9296 | 0.9126 – 0.9468 | <0.001 |
| Hispanic | 0.9444 | 0.5606 – 1.5909 | 0.830 |
| Non-White | 1.0547 | 0.6708 – 1.6581 | 0.818 |
| Foreign Born | 3.2253 | 1.6865 – 6.1678 | <0.001 |
| Female | 1.3446 | 0.7139 – 2.5325 | 0.359 |
| # of Children per Household | 0.9445 | 0.8734 – 1.0214 | 0.153 |
| Provides Direct Dementia Care | 2.1082 | 1.0030 – 4.4314 | 0.049 |
| Nursing Home (reference: Assisted Living) | 0.6611 | 0.3719 – 1.1754 | 0.159 |
| For Profit | 0.4888 | 0.2773 – 0.8618 | 0.013 |
| Part of a Chain | 2.5482 | 1.2900 – 5.0339 | 0.007 |
| Capacity (Beds) | 1.0084 | 1.0021 – 1.0147 | 0.009 |
| Occupancy Rate | 1.0104 | 0.9941 – 1.0269 | 0.214 |
| Dementia Wing or Unit | 0.7100 | 0.4085 – 1.2338 | 0.224 |
| Any Paid Time Off | 0.4890 | 0.2912 – 0.8212 | 0.007 |
| Paid Parental Leave | 1.4809 | 0.8242 – 2.6610 | 0.189 |
| Tuition Reimbursement | 0.9879 | 0.5571 – 1.7520 | 0.967 |
| DCW HPRD ² | 1.2509 | 1.0088 – 1.5511 | 0.041 |

¹Generalized Linear Mixed Model with Facility Random Effects

²DCW HPRD refers to Direct Care Worker Hours Per Resident Day

Discussion & Implications

- **Internal Talent Pool:** Findings confirm that DCW roles are a significant pipeline into licensed nursing.
- **Targeted Support:** There is a need for tailored strategies to support domestic-born and mid-to-late-career DCWs, who currently show lower rates of upward mobility.
- **Policy Needs:** Smaller, for-profit, and independent providers may require additional federal or state support to develop advancement pathways, as current grant programs often prioritize non-profits.
- **Investment:** Continued funding, such as the Department of Labor's Nursing Expansion Grant Program, is vital to address the LTC workforce shortage.