More of a Good Thing: A Framework to Grow and Strengthen the PALTC Workforce from the Inside Out

By Erin O. Vigne, RN, MA

W e are all aware of the staffing crisis that post-acute and long-term care (PALTC) communities are experiencing across the nation. It is discussed in webinars, during meetings, in articles, and in casual conversations among exhausted clinicians, concerned industry leaders, and policymakers who are now seeing what all of us knew was a looming problem long before the pandemic.

The staffing crisis not only affects the care that patients currently receive in PALTC settings but also will have an enormous impact on the quality and consistency of the future caregivers and clinicians on which these communities rely. The situation can feel overwhelming and insurmountable. Yet amid the worry and chaos, we hear some good ideas, practical strategies, and success stories from a variety of sources.

If we bring together the stakeholders — industry leaders, medical directors, administrators, members of the health care team, patients, and family members — to learn why staff are leaving, share ideas and lessons learned from the pandemic around trust-building, develop and improve on existing strategies to recruit more providers and caregivers, and, perhaps most importantly, listen to each other, we will rediscover and perhaps redefine what it means to work in PALTC.

We must appreciate the people who are still committed to working in these communities, understand why they stay, and actively draw and welcome new people to a career in this setting.

The 4Ms Initiative

In 2016, the John A. Hartford Foundation and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI), in partnership with the American Hospital Association (AHA) and the Catholic Health Association of the United States (CHA), launched the Age-Friendly Health Systems initiative, which began in hospitals and is now expanding to long-term care communities. As described by the IHI, “becoming an Age-Friendly Health System entails reliably providing a set of four evidence-based elements of high-quality care, known as the ‘4Ms,’ to all older adults in the healthcare system: What Matters, Medication, Mentation, and Mobility” (“What Is an Age-Friendly Health System?” https://bit.ly/3fmr59K).

This framework encompasses the key elements of care that “should drive all decision making in the care of older adults” and is designed to focus on the whole person — including wellness and strengths — rather than on disease alone (IHI, Age-Friendly Health Systems: Guide to Using the 4Ms in the Care of Older Adults, July 2020, https://bit.ly/3giUUBE).

These four elements can also be expanded to include caring for staff, inarguably a critical component of an age-friendly environment. Applying the 4Ms to staff could result in a higher level of staff fulfillment, contentment, retention, and recruitment.

More of a Good Thing

“More of a Good Thing: A Framework to Grow and Strengthen the PALTC Workforce” is a collaborative, interdisciplinary initiative designed to crowd-source the collective intelligence and experiences of the frontline staff and PALTC leadership to develop practical, effective strategies to recruit and retain talent in PALTC at all levels.

The initiative is led by AMDA – The Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine, which recognizes the critical need for a strong and stable long-term care workforce. The Society’s members, who include medical directors, advanced practice practitioners, and other PALTC leaders, can play a key role in developing and disseminating strategies with the help of other professional organizations and their members.

Members of AMDA saw firsthand an example of this collaborative potential when certified nursing assistants (CNAs) were invited to present “What Your CNAs Want You to Know” during a webinar last fall as part of the Society’s “Healing Together” campaign. Attendees of medical directors and other members of PALTC leadership left the experience with a straightforward list of tips they could use right away to start improving the morale and trust within their health care teams.

Imagine the impact if we brought more stakeholders to the table and worked together to grow, test, and refine those strategies. Potential would then turn toward promise — and then we’ve got something.

Upcoming Opportunities

To ignite this potential, the Society is hosting a series of focused, monthly discussions this spring to address the themes of the 4Ms that are focused on the needs of PALTC staff:

• What Matters (facility culture, mutual respect, a voice)
• Medication (health promotion, wellness, and workplace safety)
• Mentation (stress management and compassionate self-care)
• Mobility (opportunities for career advancement with ongoing education)

Each discussion will begin with a brief overview of the topic by an expert and some strategies to consider for addressing one of the 4Ms for staff. Attendees will then be invited to share ideas around that topic. Through facilitated feedback and discussion, they will determine how to best embed these strategies in daily practice routines, making the “right” thing to do also the easy thing to do.

The goal for these virtual, roundtable-style discussions is to develop action plans with concrete, practical steps that PALTC facilities can take to build and strengthen trust with current staff and to recruit and retain new staff to grow and strengthen the PALTC workforce. These action plans will then be consolidated and shared with stakeholders and partner organizations through a variety of channels such as published articles, a podcast, and a website page. Ongoing feedback will be solicited to improve the existing strategies and add new ones that have been effective.

The success of More of a Good Thing depends on the collective cooperation, sharing of ideas, and commitment to making a difference by all of us who understand the critical importance of a workforce that is healthy, content, and fulfilled by its work. Between all of us, we have the answers, and now is the time to make it a priority to put our ideas into action and change the future of PALTC.

For more information on the John A. Hartford Foundation and IHI’s Age-Friendly Health Systems initiative, visit https://bit.ly/3fmr59K.

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