CNA Week: The Sweet, the Bittersweet, and the Inexcusable

By Lori Porter

I love CNA Week, and special events like this have never been more important. Everyone in long-term care is so busy and, frankly, so tired we often don’t take the time to cheer on our certified nurse assistants (CNAs) and remind them of how essential they are to the care, happiness, and comfort of their residents. The opportunity to celebrate our great CNAs—to stop and say thank you, and recognize their value—is priceless.

We have heard about and witnessed some wonderful celebrations of our CNAs—cakes, parties, gifts, and touching tributes. Clearly, some leaders took the time to let their CNAs know how important they are. We even heard from some leaders in the field: For instance, Arif Nazir, MD, CMD, past president of AMDA—The Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine, sent us this message: “CNAs are the backbone of our care system, particularly in geriatric settings where frail residents rely on them not only as caregivers but as friends and, in many cases, as families. For decades we have failed to truly understand, fund, and enhance the role CNAs currently play and, more importantly, can play in the ideal health care future we all dream of. Such a future will elude us unless we assure that CNAs get a set at the table as equal team members.”

Elsewhere, U.S. Senator Tim Scott posted a message on Instagram: “My mother worked hard as a nursing assistant for almost 12 years. I will always be thankful for nursing assistants today and every day. Happy National Nursing Assistants Week!”

However, I was truly, deeply disheartened to hear from many of our members that they were not recognized during CNA Week—in fact, they generally feel unappreciated. We received the following among the comments when we asked people to share their CNA Week experiences:

• “Not a thing [was done for us]. Our company doesn’t give two cents about us.”
• “I had to call out of work today because my hands hurt so much after working 115 hours in 10 days.”
• “We worked short! Does that count? Even cancelled overtime to cover our shifts!”
• “Nothing from my company—just more hours.”
• “Nothing at all, and I’ve been here for almost 12 years.”
• “No highlight. No recognition at my work.”

To be fair, not all the comments were like this. One CNA said, “They took CNAs bowling and [gave us] a cute bag full of stuff.” Another said she received some thank you notes from residents’ families. One person, a CNA who became a hospice director, said, “We have four aides on our team. I was not hesitant about spoiling them, having been in their shoes. I got each of them a basket full of goodies, including bath and body items; and they were provided with lunch and a 40-minute massage.”

Still another CNA who is now the human resources director at her facility said, “I was put in charge of CNA Week this year and worked TIRELESSLY to make sure it was a good week!” In addition to free meals, she arranged a photo booth for free pictures, T-shirts, an ice cream truck with free treats, games, and gifts.

While I am tremendously grateful to those who showed love and appreciation to CNAs during their special week, our profession clearly continues to be undervalued and taken for granted. As one person said in the Facebook comments, “And companies wonder why they can’t keep or find staff... Aides are literally the backbone of nursing! They work their butts off to take care of people, and this is how they are treated! It’s ridiculous, and companies should be ashamed of themselves. It’s not hard to show your appreciation!” I couldn’t agree more.

In the months and years ahead, the National Association of Health Care Assistants (NAHCA) will continue to work to get our CNAs the recognition, wages, support, and advancement opportunities they so richly deserve. We won’t rest until every member reports that they are showered with love and appreciation, not just during CNA Week but every day throughout the year.

Lori Porter is cofounder and CEO of the National Association of Health Care Assistants (NAHCA).

AMDA’s Collaboration with CNAs

By Christopher E. Laxton, CAE

AMDA—The Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine has long supported collaboration with certified nurse assistants (CNAs)—vital members of the clinical team in nursing homes. We have encouraged clinicians to round with CNAs and to take the opportunity to hear the insights these key team members offer, who spend more time with residents than any other. Over the past two years, the Society has made a concerted effort to partner with CNAs to offer a variety of programs that recognize the important work CNAs do and to work together to ameliorate some of the challenges that they face. This included a series called “Healing Together,” which provided supportive tips on addressing the unprocessed grief and trauma suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic. “What Your CNAs Want You to Know: A Collaborative Approach to Improving Care in PALTC” (Nov. 19, 2021, https://youtube.be/K3Vr47titU) was a particularly popular webinar from this series, as was the list of key takeaways for health care leadership it generated (available at https://bit.ly/3qo6LhG). Our advocacy efforts continue to champion a better working environment for CNAs, including providing a living wage with benefits, opportunities for training and career advancement, and more supportive clinical and operational leadership.

As Society member and CNA advocate Dr. Arif Nazir has said, we believe that “CNAs are the backbone of our care system.”

Mr. Laxton is the Executive Director of AMDA—The Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine.