



Carol's Column

Signals Newsletter for June, 2016

Many of us will rely on the services of a paid caregiver at some point during our caregiving journey. These are individuals hired to come to our homes and provide light housekeeping and personal care services for our loved ones. We might hire them directly or find them through a home health agency. They are certified nursing assistants who work in assisted living facilities and nursing homes. They may provide hospice services to those in the final stages of life.

We entrust these paid direct care workers with the most important people in our lives: our mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, grandmothers and grandfathers, and other family members who are ill, fragile, or have a disability or special needs.

A Huffington Post article stated that despite decades of advocacy by direct care workers themselves, care work is still seen by too many Americans as somehow "less than" other forms of work. A board member from the Direct Care Alliance said, "Direct care work is expected but not respected."

Almost half of all direct care workers rely on public benefits such as Medicaid and food stamps. And 89% of them are women. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, personal care aides are paid as low as \$16,240 per year. The lows for home health aides averaged less than \$16,410 per year, or \$7.89 per hour. For pay that is barely above minimum wage, they are asked to care for their own families as well as ours.

A trade association calls direct care work back breaking and mentally heart-breaking.

We have to start investing in what Caring Across Generations calls our "Care Force." The Care Force includes unpaid family caregivers like those of us who need Social Security to recognize our quarters of work in the home, taking care of our loved ones. Or tax breaks for the more than \$5,000 a year that family caregivers contribute out of our own pockets.

It also includes paid direct care workers who are the working poor. This matters to us and our loved ones, because the true cost of low pay is high turnover, inability to attract people who want to do this labor of love, and a future where there simply won't be enough family caregivers or paid caregivers for all of us who will need care.

Caregiving in this country matters. The people who need care matter. It is time to put our heads and voices together to change conditions that don't reflect the importance of this work that for many of us is a sacred task.

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