

UPDATE: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Training and leadership opportunities prepare Care Aides for new roles and responsibilities

AS B.C. STRIVES TO IMPROVE service delivery in both residential and acute care, health authorities are recognizing the important contribution Care Aides bring to the health care team. And they are responding to HEU's call to make greater investments in Care Aides' utilization and leadership potential by providing ongoing professional development opportunities.

Just like other health care occupations, Care Aides bring a unique, defined set of skills to their practice. In recent years, employers have come to realize that those skills can be utilized in health care environments other than residential care – including acute care and mental health – and that Care Aides have an important role to play in teaching and mentoring others.

What's required is ongoing training and professional development opportunities to support Care Aides' skill development and leadership potential to keep pace with emerging demands throughout the health system.

NEW ROLES

Tracey Augustine is one of a growing number of Care Aides to make the transition from residential care to acute care.

A Care Aide for the past 16 years, Tracey now works in the 24-bed psychiatric unit at Nanaimo Regional General Hospital, caring for patients aged 16 to 98.

She received her training three years ago through a part-time, four-month course in mental health, offered by Vancouver Island University.

Tracey says it was a steep learning curve, in the beginning, with a lot of challenges, but she's very comfortable working in her new environment. "I work with RNs, psychiatric nurses and rehab assistants on a very team-oriented unit," she says. "Every day is different for mental health patients, so I'm always learning and I'm always using my assessing skills."

EXPANDED TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

For Care Aides to move into new roles, they need additional opportunities for training. In 2006, the union successfully bargained a \$5 million education fund to provide skills upgrading and career-mobility training for HEU members covered by the facilities

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agreement. Over the past three years, this fund has supported continuing education, laddering and post-basic training for more than 400 Care Aides.

About 70 Care Aides have taken acute care skills courses, more than 100 have been supported to become Licensed Practical Nurses, and others have accessed the training they need to become activity assistants, medical lab assistants, nursing unit clerks and sterile supply technicians.

And in Vancouver Coastal, the fund has helped more than 100 Care Aides working in residential care to upgrade their knowledge, monitoring and communications skills to better support frail seniors with dementia and other complex health conditions. The KEES program (knowledge, educational elements and skills for Care Aides) recognizes that Care Aides are the “eyes and ears” of a facility, and are key advocates for the residents. These courses are assisting Care Aides to identify changes in residents’ behaviours and health conditions, and to develop communications skills for report writing and record keeping.

HEU is now advocating for the KEES program to be offered on an ongoing basis in all health authorities.

LEADERSHIP AND TEACHING ROLES

In 2006 and 2007, WorkSafeBC (formerly WCB) launched an exciting pilot project at four residential care sites in Vancouver Coastal, where nine Care Aides and one LPN were trained to teach safe, patient-handling techniques and ceiling lift use to others on the health care team.

The results were phenomenal. Injuries were reduced. Ceiling lift coaches received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the entire nursing team. And the Care Aides who participated demonstrated how their skills can be effectively utilized in teaching and leadership roles.

In fact, the project was so successful that Vancouver Coastal has made the patient-handling initiative a core part of the health authority’s occupational health and safety program, and has committed funding for its further expansion.

Catherine Fast, a regional manager with Vancouver Coastal at the time, says, “This was the most exciting thing I’ve ever done professionally. We began by wanting people to use the lifts, but we got so much more. We discovered that by valuing Care Aides, giving them knowledge, skills and permission to be leaders, they blossomed. They problem-solved, they created innovations. We just hadn’t realized that potential existed.”

