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Thought Leaders

Thought Leaders: Home health care industry struggles with recruitment, reimbursement shortfalls

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Workforce issues and reimbursement struggles remain among the biggest challenges for home health care companies – and neither issue seems to be going away any time soon.

So say the region's top Thought Leaders in the industry, who came together for a roundtable discussion with Buffalo Business First hosted by Hodgson Russ LLP.

Time and time again, the discussion returned to difficulties in the areas of recruiting and retaining professionals, as well as how to best adapt to a sicker patient population.

"What's keeping me up at night is the lack of caregivers, not just at the paraprofessional level, but on the nursing side too," said Joyce Markiewicz, president and CEO for Catholic Health Home and Community-Based Care.

Part of the problem, says Eric Wiedemann, owner/president of Home Instead Senior Care, is that anyone who has ever had interaction with an elder person thinks they can succeed at the job, but that's certainly not the case.



COLIN GORDON

William Gillick, left, Joyce Markiewicz and Eric Wiedemann discuss the impact of workforce recruitment and financial challenges on the home health care industry at a Thought Leaders roundtable.

Most don't realize the physical demands, nor the challenges that low reimbursement rates offer on the pay side. Plus, they can earn more working in the fast food industry than they'll make working with an older, sicker population in home care.

"We learn pretty quickly this isn't the job or career for them, either because of limited skillsets, limited commitment, limited availability in their schedules," he said. "That's the most difficult thing going forward."

Still, demand is growing for home care professionals as people increasingly remain home for care, either as they age or even after a surgery or acute medical treatment.

And many times that means those providing care might require increased training or state certification or licensure.

So what to do? Companies are working to grow awareness about opportunities in the field, both at the high school and collegiate level, as well as with individuals in the general community. They're also adding technology through devices and apps to help stretch the workforce.

Recent changes at the state level may make things even more difficult, with limits by the State Department of Health on how many and which home health companies can contract with Medicaid longterm care providers, said Emina Poricanin, a partner at Hodgson Russ LLP.

"To keep Medicaid costs down, it makes more sense to provide more community-based services, the state recognizes that," she said. "On one hand, they're saying it's a good way to make sure people are receiving care, let's keep them in the home, but it's a different thing to limit how many providers are able to provide this service."

William Gillick, owner of Homewatch CareGivers, said guidelines are way overdue for modifications that would allow caregivers to do more, with current rules for personal care aides and home health aides established more than 20 years ago.

"If we could expand the roles a little bit, but also make this business match what people want," he said, that might help alleviate the problem.

At the same time, he said, family members question hourly rates and don't recognize how many hours their loved one might actually need.

Judy Baumgartner, president of Kaleida Health Visiting Nursing Association, said today's home care patient has far higher needs than two decades back, when they were likely treated for the same conditions in a hospital setting.

That's led her company to add more nurses and professionals with specialized skill sets as well.

But changes need to come on several fronts, including changes at the state and federal level to increase the skill levels and allowable services workers can perform.

"The patient that we see in home care is not the patient we saw 20 years ago but we can only do the exact same things we did 20 years ago," Baumgartner said.

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