

ISSUE BRIEF:

STRENGTHENING THE CAREGIVER WORKFORCE WITH REFUGEE PARTNERSHIPS

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Introduction

From 2020 to 2060, the number of adults aged 65 and older in the U.S. will increase from 56.1 million to 94.7 million, while the population of those aged 85 and older will nearly triple. This demographic shift will drive demand for direct care workers, with projections indicating the need for 1.2 million additional jobs over the next decade, totaling 9.3 million direct care positions.¹

Additionally, the aging population will experience a significant rise in ethnic diversity, with the proportion of ethnic minorities increasing from 24% to 45%, and immigrants from 14% to 23%.¹ These changes underscore the growing need for cultural and linguistic competency within the direct care workforce. Addressing these needs and creating opportunities for underserved communities are crucial for meeting the evolving long-term care requirements of our diverse aging population.

In California alone, a predicted shortage of 600,000 to 3.2 million direct care workers by 2030 highlights the urgent need to address workforce shortages while meeting the cultural needs of a growing, diverse aging population.² This broad range reflects the uncertainty surrounding whether the workforce supply will grow sufficiently to meet the increasing demand for care services. Current direct care workforce shortages are caused by factors such as low wages, high turnover, recruitment challenges, insufficient training, and limited career advancement opportunities.³ Effective cross-sector collaboration is necessary at the local, state, and national levels to:

- Expand access to career pathways and direct workforce training
- Foster strategic partnerships among organizations offering caregiver training, translation and interpretation services, and cultural competency training
- Reduce barriers by providing incentives to direct care workers who are actively engaging in direct care workforce training for older adults

Strategic collaboration with organizations providing culturally appropriate services to refugee communities can strengthen and expand the caregiver workforce through tailored workforce development initiatives, helping refugees secure stable employment and ensuring culturally appropriate caregiving.

Recognizing the potential of such partnerships to address workforce shortages, the San Diego State University Center for Excellence in Aging & Longevity (CEAL) sought to collaborate with organizations deeply rooted in refugee communities. Through their previously developed partnership with United Women of East Africa (UWEAST), CEAL successfully designed and implemented a caregiver training program tailored to the linguistic and cultural needs of refugee communities, training over 250 caregivers in four different languages.

This collaboration highlights the value of cultural and linguistic competencies in expanding the caregiver workforce. It also illustrates how strategic partnerships can lead to innovative and sustainable solutions to address the direct care workforce shortage.

"The collaboration between United Women of East Africa and the SDSU Center for Excellence in Aging and Longevity equips refugees with the skills and support they need to excel in their new roles, while ensuring the care they provide is compassionate and culturally competent. Together, we are building a stronger, more inclusive workforce that meets the diverse needs of our aging population."

Sahra Abdi
Executive Director, UWEAST

The Problem

Delivering culturally competent, high-quality care to aging populations is crucial, but direct care workforce shortages threaten this goal. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these concerns with an estimated 420,000 nursing home staff leaving the industry permanently due to pandemic-related issues. This has intensified the existing workforce shortages driven by the growing aging population.

A 2022 study by the American Health Association revealed that 54% of nursing homes were forced to limit new patient admissions due to these staffing shortages. Additionally, home health acceptance rates fell from 48% in June 2019 to 36% by June 2021.⁴

The reduction in capacity in post-acute settings has significantly impacted the healthcare system. Many hospitals have had to delay patient discharges because there is not enough staff in these settings to support patients after they leave the hospital. As a result, patients face the risk of receiving lower-quality care and may experience delays in obtaining necessary services.⁵

Addressing these shortages requires overcoming several key challenges. One of the most pressing issues for direct care workers is historically low wages, with nearly half (45%) of the workforce living below 200% of the federal poverty level, and about 47% relying on public assistance.⁶

Additional challenges include inconsistent training requirements, limited access to training, and inadequate career advancement pathways, all of which discourage individuals from entering the direct care field.⁷ Furthermore, the variability in federal and state training requirements complicates efforts for direct care workers to pursue further training or career advancement.



Addressing Direct Care Workforce Shortages through Refugee Community Integration

Each year, approximately 70,000 refugees resettle in the U.S., and the unemployment rate within this group is rising. Creating tailored career pathways for refugees can help address both the immediate shortage of direct care workers and the diverse needs of our aging population.⁸ By creating new career opportunities through strategic collaboration, we can effectively meet the demand for direct care workers.

However, refugee communities face substantial challenges that hinder their full potential. Systemic, cultural, and language barriers often lead to a decline in socio-economic standing, impacting not only employment but also other social determinants such as health, income, and transportation.⁹

For example, in regions like San Diego, refugees represent a largely untapped workforce that could help mitigate current labor market shortages. Yet, many newly arrived refugees or asylees are restricted to entry-level jobs due to language barriers, difficulties navigating specific system recruitment requirements, challenges in transferring work history, and lack of resources such as transportation and childcare.¹⁰

Although various federal and state programs, such as the Refugee Career Pathways (RCP) program, aim to support refugees through education, job training, and employment opportunities, few focus specifically on training refugees for direct care roles.¹¹ Tailoring these programs to meet the needs of the direct care sector is essential.

Securing steady employment is crucial for overall health and well-being, as outlined by Healthy People 2030.¹² Individuals with stable jobs are less likely to live in poverty and more likely to experience better health outcomes. Nonetheless, refugees often face significant barriers to employment, including linguistic and educational challenges. Addressing these barriers through targeted employment programs, workshops, and training is vital for fostering economic independence and sustainability within refugee communities.

Despite existing policies aimed at improving employment opportunities for refugees, disparities persist due to factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and educational attainment. Strategic initiatives that focus on integrating refugees into the direct care workforce can help bridge these gaps and contribute to a more equitable and effective care system.

Building Effective Community Collaborations

Community-based, refugee-serving organizations are uniquely positioned to address these challenges effectively. They possess deep understanding and strong connections within refugee communities, allowing them to provide tailored support and build trust. By leveraging their local knowledge and networks, these organizations can create more accessible and relevant training opportunities and serve as trusting connections to refugee communities. Yet, no single system or organization has all the resources, expertise, and capabilities to meet the needs of U.S. refugees. According to the California Immigrant Policy Center, community-based refugee-serving organizations often face fragmented funding and siloed service delivery.¹³

Strategic community collaborations can bridge the identified gaps and siloing of services by combining resources and expertise to address the direct workforce shortages and the ongoing employment needs of refugee communities. Successful resettlement and integration rely on multiple factors, such as access to healthcare, legal services, and social connections. Various organizations and agencies can address these needs in different ways. As federal and state requirements evolve, place-based strategic collaborations are particularly effective in overcoming barriers to employment. These collaborations can tailor solutions to the unique needs of specific communities, ensuring that services are culturally and linguistically appropriate. Key components of these collaborations include:

- **Direct Care Employment Navigation**
- **Caregiver Trainings**
- **Peer Support**
- **Community Workshops**
- **Technical Assistance**

The Solution

By working with organizations that offer these services, strategic collaborations can foster a more equitable and just community. They enable community leaders to leverage their strengths to fill current gaps, ensuring sustainable success in areas such as career pathways, training, recruitment, and retention support.

CEAL's partnership with UWEAST exemplifies the power of strategic collaboration. Through this partnership, over 250 caregivers received training tailored to their unique needs, fostering ongoing peer support and continuous professional development within refugee communities. UWEAST's deep-rooted connection with the community ensured that the training was both accessible and culturally relevant. This collaboration serves as a model, illustrating the potential for similar initiatives to be implemented across the nation, creating pathways to success and sustainability in caregiving.

Building effective collaborations with refugee-serving organizations requires several key factors. First, establishing mutual understanding and trust is crucial, as it forms the foundation for a successful partnership.

Respecting diverse cultural values ensures that the needs and perspectives of refugee communities are honored. Open and frequent communication helps maintain transparency and facilitates ongoing dialogue. Aligning on a shared vision and clear goals is essential for ensuring that all partners work towards common objectives. Additionally, having established relationships and adequate resources supports the sustainability and effectiveness of the collaboration.¹⁴

The implementation strategy starts with a strengths-based assessment to identify the specific challenges and requirements of the refugee community. Engaging directly with refugees through surveys, focus groups, and community meetings ensures their voices are heard. Programs are then designed based on these insights, with continuous input from the refugee community to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Ongoing review and updates based on feedback and outcome data allow for adaptability and the expansion of successful approaches.



Increasing the Supply of Caregivers through Collaboration with Refugee Communities

To effectively build collaborations with refugee communities, policymakers, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and advocates can follow the Collaborative Framework for Refugee Integration into Direct Care outlined below.

A key aspect of this framework is the incorporation of peer support services. Peer support is vital for maintaining emotional well-being among caregivers, fostering a supportive community, and enhancing program effectiveness. It has been shown to reduce caregiver burnout, provide ongoing encouragement, and ensure that caregivers have the resources and emotional support they need to succeed. By leveraging insights from peer support, we can better address the diverse needs of caregivers.

Collaborative Framework for Refugee Integration into Direct Care



Conclusion

The success of CEAL's collaboration with UWEAST exemplifies the transformative impact that strategic partnerships can have on addressing both caregiving workforce shortages and the needs of refugee communities. By investing in these collaborations, we can build a caregiving system that is not only more inclusive and effective but also responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of a diverse population.

Focusing on strategic collaborations, culturally responsive training, and career pathways will allow us to bridge the widening gap between the growing demand for care services and the shortage of direct care workers. At the same time, these efforts will provide meaningful and sustainable employment opportunities for refugee communities, enriching the workforce with diverse perspectives and skills.

This comprehensive approach will enhance the quality of care provided to our aging population while promoting equity and inclusion in the caregiving workforce. The benefits will extend to both caregivers and those they care for, resulting in higher-quality, culturally competent care that improves the overall well-being of all involved. Through continued collaboration and commitment, we can create a caregiving system that not only meets the needs of today but is also prepared to address the challenges of tomorrow, ensuring a better quality of life for caregivers and care recipients.

Our partnership with SDSU CEAL has been transformative for many East African and overall refugee communities. Through culturally responsive caregiver training, we've created pathways to meaningful employment while addressing critical workforce shortages in the caregiving sector.

-Sahra Abdi, Executive Director, UWEAST

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