



Aging Workforce in Health Care Settings

The aging of the U.S. population is expected to have significant impacts on the health care industry in coming years, both as an employer and as a service provider to an increasing number of older patients. Consider these forecasts:

- By 2050, the U.S. Census predicts that 19.6 million American workers will be 65 years or older, or approximately 19% of the total U.S. workforce.
- The number of individuals in the labor force who are 65 years or older is expected to grow by 75%; those in the labor force who are 25 to 54 is only expected to grow 2%.
- By 2016, a third of the total U.S. workforce will be 50 years or older; this group may number 115 million by 2020.

These statistics pose a unique challenge for the health care sector, particularly as the patient base expands due to the Affordable Care Act and the

demand for high-quality health care increases. Research and data from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) find:

- By 2020, nearly half of all registered nurses will reach traditional retirement age. Currently, the average age of a nurse in the United States is 50.
- Nearly one-quarter of physicians in a 2007 nationwide survey were 60 years or older, with New Jersey having the sixth highest rate among the states (26.9 percent).
- In 2001, more than 80 percent of all dentists in the United States were older than 45; the number of dentists expected to enter the field by 2020 will not be sufficient to replace the number of dentists likely to retire.

Just to maintain the current ratio of providers to the total population in 2030, the IOM estimates needing an extra 3.5 million formal health care providers.

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For further information on this topic, explore the following resources:

- http://www.cdc.gov/nationalhealthyworksite/docs/issue_brief_no_1_older_employees_in_the_workplace_7-12-2012_final508.pdf
- <http://www.dol.gov/odep/pdf/NTAR-AgingWorkforceHealthCare.pdf>

United Heartland is committed to providing and directing our customers to helpful resources regarding strategies to deal with aging workforces in all workplace settings. Contact our team of specialists for more information at 800-258-2667.

Strategies to Retain Older Workers

If hospitals and health care workers can't find ways to retain and accommodate older workers, they risk losing a significant amount of institutional and workplace knowledge as well as a resource for productivity. Consequently, many organizations are identifying strategies that will help older workers stay on the job longer. These include:

- Examining workplace flexibility, including phased retirement.
- Developing "disability management" strategies to reduce work performance declines related to age, including physical, cognitive and sensory disabilities.
- Performing workplace assessments to identify changes that can be made to reduce physical and mental fatigue for older employees as they complete work tasks.
- Creating team-oriented structures that allow older workers to transfer their knowledge to younger workers while allowing younger workers to assist with tasks that may be more difficult for older workers to perform by themselves.
- Utilizing technology to improve work processes and reduce the demanding nature of bedside nursing.

Age and the Impact on Workers' Compensation

Recent studies have found that the impact of an aging workforce on workers' compensation claims is less than once feared. The National Council on Compensation Insurance in 2011 found that the average claim costs for workers age 35 and older tend to be similar. A follow-up study in 2012 found that workers of all ages shared remarkably similar types of workers' comp injury designations for a range of specific diagnoses. Despite these findings, older workers do tend to experience more physical and mental changes as they age, including:

- Loss of visual acuity
- Loss of hearing
- Reduction in joint mobility and manual dexterity
- Decrease in muscular strength
- Slowing of reaction and movement time
- Greater susceptibility to occupational health hazards
- Ability to learn and recall information is slower

Having an effective wellness program in place is an important consideration as part of an overall strategy in managing the issues of an aging workforce and reducing the impact of these physical and mental changes. In health care settings, Safe Patient Handling and Mobility programs can also help to reduce the likelihood of injury when performing patient transfers. Other strategies to reduce potential risks for aging workers include:

- Performing ergonomic evaluations
- Adopting snow and ice removal programs
- Improving contrast in low-light areas
- Examining the length of shifts and work performed at night

