

Home health care aide occupations are growing fast

Alaska's health care needs, like the rest of the country's, are expected to grow, especially as baby boomers – those who were born from 1946 to 1964 – are beginning to reach their 60s. Who will take care of them and other Alaskans who will need medical support services and personal care in the coming years?

Much of those services will be provided by direct care workers – those who provide the hands-on care and personal assistance for the elderly and disabled, and for people living with both acute (short-term) and chronic (long-term) medical conditions.

For the purposes of this article, direct care workers represents those in two occupations, often called home health aides and personal home care aides.

Home health aides work in residential facilities such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities

or group homes. Personal home care aides work with clients in the clients' homes or in daytime nonresidential facilities.

A lot of job openings are expected

The two direct care occupations, home health aides and personal home care aides, are among the 10-fastest growing occupations in Alaska. Home health aides are projected to grow 35.3 percent over the 2006 to 2016 period; personal home care aides are expected to grow 34.6 percent.

Nationally, home health aides are projected to grow 48.7 percent over the same period, and personal home care aides are expected to grow 50.6 percent.

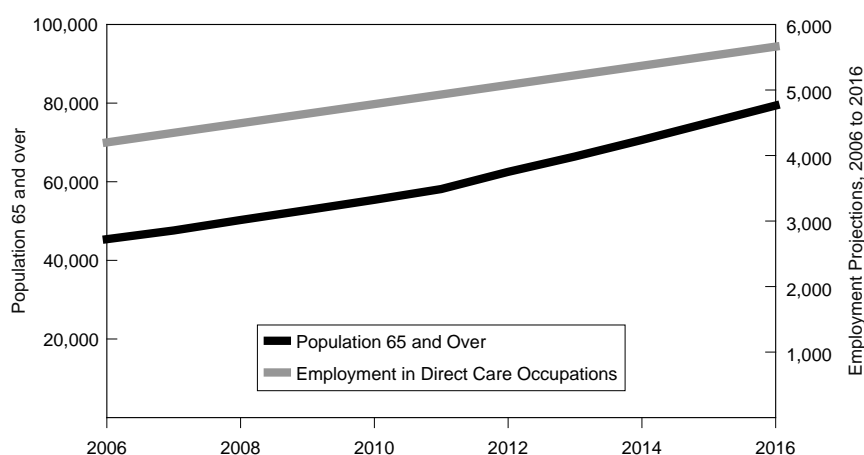
In Alaska over the 10-year period, one out of every 30 new jobs will be in the two direct care occupations. The combined job openings for direct care workers are expected to be 3.3 percent of the total projected growth for all occupations – 1,465 job openings.

Nationally over the same period, one out of 20 new jobs will be in the direct care occupations. That means the combined job openings for direct care workers are expected to be 5 percent of the total projected growth for all occupations – roughly 770,000 job openings.

Yes, we're getting older

In 2000, 5.7 percent of Alaska's population was 65 years and older. Eight years later, 7.3 percent was 65 years and older. Alaska's population projections for the 2006 to 2016 period call for about a 75 percent increase,

1 The Direct Care Occupations Population and employment, Alaska 2006 to 2016



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

from roughly 45,000 people 65 and older to 79,000. (See Exhibit 1.)

It's common knowledge that older people require more health care, but a 2008 national study¹ confirms that patients 65 or older tend to have more complex conditions and health care needs than younger patients. The study found the average 75-year-old American has three chronic conditions, such as diabetes or hypertension, and uses four or more prescription medications.

What makes an ideal direct care worker?

The primary task of direct care workers is to provide care for their clients and understand their needs. They need to be good listeners, give their full attention to what people are saying, understand the points being discussed and ask appropriate questions. They also need to communicate the needs of their clients to the clients' family members, their own supervisors, other direct care workers and other health care workers.

Direct care workers need to have empathy and treat their clients with dignity and respect. The workers need to be dependable at all times, but especially when they're working in private homes with family members depending on them to be on time.

Direct care workers need to be physically able to do the more strenuous job duties that are required, such as getting clients in and out of bed or bathing them safely. Organization is important. Direct care workers need to maintain accurate and timely medical and administrative records.

Job duties

The job duties of direct care workers vary depending on the workplace and each client's level of need. Job duties often include feeding,

¹ The study, called "Retooling for an Aging America: Building the Health Care Workforce," was released in April 2008. It's by the nonprofit Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, which was formed in 1970 as a component of the National Academy of Sciences.

bathing, dressing, grooming, changing linens, moving clients, monitoring medication and using medical equipment. If working in a private home, additional duties may include house-keeping, preparing meals, providing transportation and shopping.

Job satisfaction

Direct care workers often impact the lives of their clients in very positive ways by providing the assistance that their clients' families aren't able to provide. Direct care workers say that's the best part of their job.

The University of Alaska Anchorage's Center for Human Development earlier this year conducted a survey to better understand the needs and the motivations of direct care workers in Alaska.² More than 720 direct care workers took part in the survey; many of the respondents were employed by agencies that provide home care.

Most of those surveyed reported their work was challenging, rewarding and satisfying. Asked

² The survey, titled the "Direct Service Workers' Wage and Benefit Survey," is by Karen M. Ward, Curtis A. Smith, Susan L. Bales and Karin L. Sandberg. It was conducted for the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority's Workforce Development Committee. The final survey results, in draft now, are expected to be complete in July. The survey was specifically for direct care workers who work primarily with clients with Alzheimer's and related dementias, developmental disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, and behavioral health issues such as chemical dependency and mental illness. Forty-five percent of the respondents were women age 40 or older.

Top five reasons to look into a career as a direct care worker

1. There are excellent job opportunities in Alaska and the U.S.
2. Direct care workers say they like the job satisfaction they get from helping people who aren't able to do things for themselves.
3. You could potentially choose the hours you work and your clients.
4. Working in a direct care occupation gives you a jumping off point for later starting your own business related to direct care work and being your own boss.
5. It's fairly easy to qualify for the direct care occupations at the entry level.

why they became direct care workers, most (74 percent) said they wanted to help people, then, “I wanted to make a difference,” and “It gives me personal satisfaction,” (both were 61 percent). Interestingly, the least common reason for getting into the profession was, “It was an easy job to get,” (7.5 percent).

The wages

The Alaska median hourly wage³ in May 2008 for home health aides was \$13.72 and for personal home care aides, \$12.55.^{4,5} Though those wages are lower than Alaska’s median wage for all occupations (\$18.84), they’re still higher than the median wage for more than 50 other reported occupations in Alaska. A few of the 50 are child care workers (\$10.13), maids and housekeeping cleaners (\$10.76) and retail salespeople (\$11.49).

When compared to median wages for other states, Alaska’s direct care workers’ wages are the highest in the country.⁶

Direct care workers often also get intangible benefits. Depending on their employer, those may include the freedom to choose their clientele and the hours they work. The latter allows them to tailor their work schedules to what works best in their personal lives.

Training and advancement

Direct care workers don’t require formal training – just a high school education and specific training they get on the job. There is no state licensing for direct care workers in Alaska. However, personal home care aides who work with clients whose health care is covered by Medicare or

Medicaid are required to complete a state-approved personal care attendant program. In addition, employers often require certification in first aid, to operate specialized medical equipment or for something similar.

Additional education and training often helps in job advancement. One resource for evaluating a profession is the Alaska Department of Labor’s Alaska Career Ladder. The department tracked and analyzed actual occupation-to-occupation changes that Alaska workers made over a six-year period, from 2001 through 2006, to create the Alaska Career Ladder.⁷

The Alaska Career Ladder shows home health aides advancing to the occupational category of nursing aides, orderlies and attendants, which usually requires some type of postsecondary vocational training. The career ladder shows personal home care aides advancing to psychiatric technicians with a month to a year of on-the-job training, and to rehabilitation counselors, usually after getting a master’s degree.

Someone with an entrepreneurial spirit could also start his or her own company providing nonmedical home care. The expanding senior population and success of medical technology extending life expectancies are expected to increase demand for nonmedical home care, among other services.

The future

Considering the large employment associated with the direct care occupations, combined with an aging population and expected high growth rates in the occupations, the employment opportunities are excellent.

³ The median wage is where half the workers earn more than the median wage and half the workers earn less.

⁴ In contrast, the U.S. median wage in May 2008 for home health aides was \$9.84 and for personal home care aides, \$9.22.

⁵ Health insurance and other benefits aren’t included in this article because it’s based on the Occupational Employment Statistics program of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the OES program doesn’t collect benefit data.

⁶ The next highest median wages for home health aides were \$13.01 in Hawaii and \$13.23 in Connecticut. The lowest were \$7.55 in West Virginia and \$8.03 in Texas. The next highest median wages for personal home care aides were \$11.29 in Minnesota and \$11.50 in Massachusetts. The lowest were \$7.05 in Texas and \$7.35 in Mississippi. The wages are as of May 2008.

⁷ To get to the online Alaska Career Ladder, go to the Alaska Department of Labor’s Research and Analysis Section Web site at laborstats.alaska.gov. Click on “Occupational Information” on the left, then “Career Ladder.” For a detailed article about the Alaska Career Ladder, see the April 2009 *Trends*. Go to laborstats.alaska.gov and click on “Pubs/Manual/Surveys/News” on the left, then “Alaska Economic Trends.”