

Highlights from Kaiser Health News Web Event: The Crucial Role – and Tenuous Circumstances – of Home Care Workers during the Pandemic

Overview

On March 30, 2021, the Kaiser Family Foundation’s Kaiser Health News (KHN) and The John A. Hartford Foundation held an online panel discussion examining the essential role of home care workers during the pandemic and exploring the challenges and dangers faced by these crucial employees. Rani Snyder, vice president of program at the Hartford Foundation gave a brief introduction prior to the panel discussion. Elisabeth Rosenthal, KHN editor-in-chief moderated the panel discussion, and also briefly discussed KHN’s work pertaining to home care. Panelists included Joanne Taylor, owner of Senior Helpers Westchester, Robert Espinoza, vice president of policy at PHI, a nonprofit eldercare and disability policy organization, Karen Gilmore, a home care worker, and Clare McHugh, a novelist whose mother is a client of Ms. Gilmore. A full recording of this event can be found online at the [Kaiser Family Foundation’s website](#).

Panel Discussion

Following Ms. Snyder’s introduction, **Ms. Rosenthal** began the discussion by highlighting the occupational hazards faced by home care workers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. She noted that over 3,500 healthcare workers lost their lives to occupational hazards associated with treating patients during the pandemic, and that home care workers frequently risked COVID-19 exposure to deliver essential services to clients. Ms. Rosenthal also explained that the impact of these occupational hazards is racially and ethnically disproportionate since most home care workers are women of color.

Ms. Rosenthal also discussed some of KHN’s past reporting on the home care workforce during the pandemic, and noted key themes that emerged from interviews with home care workers. She said that many home care workers told KHN that they felt “invisible” to the policymakers and administrators making decisions that affect them, and expressed their anxiety about the risks they faced to their health. Ms. Rosenthal argued that because of the tremendous importance of home care workers, it is crucial that decision-makers begin seeing and hearing the needs of home care workers and support them in the post-COVID era.

Ms. Taylor described her challenges and successes in managing Senior Helpers Westchester (SHW), a New York-based home care organization. Ms. Taylor explained that her firm had three key priorities during the pandemic: supporting caregivers, safely delivering services, and marketing services so clients knew that SHW was still able to provide care. She then described how SHW tried to achieve these goals.

Ms. Taylor said SHW aimed to support caregivers in a variety of ways, including by providing bonuses, offering free rideshares to clients’ homes, monitoring the physical and mental wellbeing of caregivers, and providing free “thank you” meals to show appreciation. She also noted that SHW allowed any caregiver to indefinitely suspend providing services until the end of the pandemic without losing their job at SHW, but that many caregivers still stepped up to deliver services for their clients anyway. To help caregivers safely deliver services, Ms. Taylor said SHW actively procured personal protective equipment (PPE) from a variety of different sources in the early days of the pandemic while it was still scarce and trained caregivers how to wear PPE properly. Finally, Ms. Taylor explained that because of SHW’s marketing efforts, including virtual appointments with potential clients and prospecting emails and phone calls, SHW was able to deliver a high volume of crucial services to clients and retain much of its staff during otherwise difficult economic times.

Following Ms. Taylor, **Mr. Espinoza** discussed the demographic characteristics of the home care workforce, and how to improve supports for home care workers. Mr. Espinoza noted that there are about 4.6 million direct care workers in the U.S. who work in a variety of settings, most of whom are women (>80%), and most of whom are people of color. Mr. Espinoza also explained that many of these workers tend to be older themselves, with a median age of 43, and that many of these workers are paid relatively low wages (the median hourly wage for homecare workers is \$12.80).

Mr. Espinoza then described some of PHI's work on supporting home care workers. He discussed PHI's report called Caring for the Future, which includes eight policy and practice recommendations to improve working conditions for caregivers and help improve healthcare outcomes. The recommendations, Mr. Espinoza said, consider the unique demographic characteristics of home care workers and incorporate feedback from interviews with workers. The recommendations are:

1. Reform long-term care financing to facilitate higher wages for home care workers and better funding for essential services;
2. Increase compensation for home care workers;
3. Strengthen home care training standards and infrastructure;
4. Fund direct care workforce interventions;
5. Improve home care data collection;
6. Center policy and practice around the needs of direct care workers;
7. Rectify structural gender and racial inequities in home care, and;
8. Shift public understanding of direct care to elevate public perception of home care workers and ensure the public understands their essential role.

Ms. Gilmore and **Ms. McHugh** concluded the panel discussion by sharing their personal home care experiences. Ms. Gilmore talked about how rewarding home care can be when connecting with a client, and said she often felt appreciated by the McHugh family. Ms. McHugh explained how crucial Ms. Gilmore's work was to her family, describing the enormous positive impact Ms. Gilmore has made in caring for her mother.

Ms. Gilmore also described the challenges she faces as a home care worker. She mentioned she had to make several lifestyle changes to minimize her risk of COVID-19 exposure so as not to accidentally spread the virus to her elderly client, including frequently sanitizing her belongings and living space and minimizing the amount of time spent outside her home. Ultimately, Ms. Gilmore said it was her sense of personal responsibility toward her client that kept her going, and she described the close relationship she was able to form with her client. Ms. Rosenthal noted that these kinds of relationships are often the backbone of home care.

Q&A

The question-and-answer segment following the panel discussion was brief, and mostly gave panelists an opportunity to reiterate and elaborate on points they made earlier in the discussion. In response to one question about wage policy for home care workers, **Mr. Espinoza** advocated for introducing a public policy solution to ensure home care workers do not lose public benefits when taking more hours or earning additional income. He also argued for a new social insurance program for long-term care services so that elderly individuals do not have to exhaust their incomes and savings to become eligible for Medicaid and access crucial services.

The other panelists also discussed addressing the home care workforce shortage, since in many cases the shortage makes accessing services more difficult. To address the shortage, panelists suggested raising wages and improving benefits for home care workers, and improving reimbursement rates for home care services.

The Kaiser Family Foundation will continue to publish research and facilitate discussions pertaining to home care and other long-term care issues. To stay up to date on the Kaiser Family Foundation's latest work, visit their [website](#).