

# Personal Support Workers: Discussion with employers



**Workforce Planning Board**  
of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin



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This report has captured what was shared with the partner team for this event. It is not fully inclusive of all health care settings, but it has provided a snapshot of where the industry and its support partners can continue to discuss matters. It also provides other potential partners with a snapshot of where the sector is in regards to personal support workers and how they may contribute to the conversation.

Thank you to our partner group: Georgian College, Dufferin Board of Trade, Waterloo Wellington Local Health Integration Network, and Wilfrid Laurier University.

## Why have a discussion with employers?

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Unifor released a full report [Caring in Crisis: Ontario's Long-term Care PSW Shortage](#) that outlined the working conditions of Personal Support Workers in their own words in December of 2019. This report outlined the situation at a provincial level and from the perspective of the workforce. This employer report is to help round out the picture locally from an employer perspective so that actions can be identified and new approaches taken that meet the supply and demand sides for the role.

Demand for personal support workers has been a constant in health care organizations for more than a decade. Most recently, EmployerOne 2019 found that the health care and social assistance sector had 772 separations in 2018 and 62% of employers found that they had problems filling positions. Personal support worker was the most frequently mentioned role. In the 2020 version of the survey, which looked at 2019, the sector hired 1732 people but had 929 separations. Of those 929 separations, 743 were quits. Once again, health care providers were citing personal support workers as a hard-to-fill position. That January 2020, when we asked employers across industries to identify the roles they intended to hire for the 2020 year, care providers and support workers led the way with employers anticipating hiring 459 workers in that area. Then about 6 weeks later, businesses across Waterloo Wellington and Dufferin were closing their doors in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic, however, saw demand for this position increase. The provincial government's decision to limit front-line workers to one long-term care home created more demand for the role with long-term care homes who lost workers looking for replacements. According to Findyourjob.ca, in April 2020, there were 2,782 online job postings across Waterloo Wellington Dufferin. 270 of them, or 10%, were for home support workers, housekeepers and other related occupations, one of that National Occupation Classification (NOC) codes that personal support workers fall under. Looking at that NOC, in July, 312 of the 8,658 on-line postings were for this role. That trend continued for the year with November seeing 226 postings for the role. The 2021 year has not shifted demand. In January 2021, health care organizations posted 306 times for home support workers and 287 times in February. In the 2021 Home Care Ontario pre-budget submission, the association estimated home care organizations alone will need 10,000 more personal support workers across the province.

When we looked more closely at February 2021's numbers and where demand was, we saw that of those 287 job postings, 95 of those postings were in the smaller centres and rural areas of Waterloo Wellington and Dufferin. We are aware that while some of the home care organizations may be located in the larger urban centres, their clients and workforce needs could also be rural. A small group in rural Wellington has been looking at the needs of the rural areas and smaller centres who are finding recruitment even more challenging and desperately need more people.

A small partner group came together to discuss with employers their needs and how they were connecting with the community and service providers to find people to work, and stay, in these roles. This report sums up that employer insight.



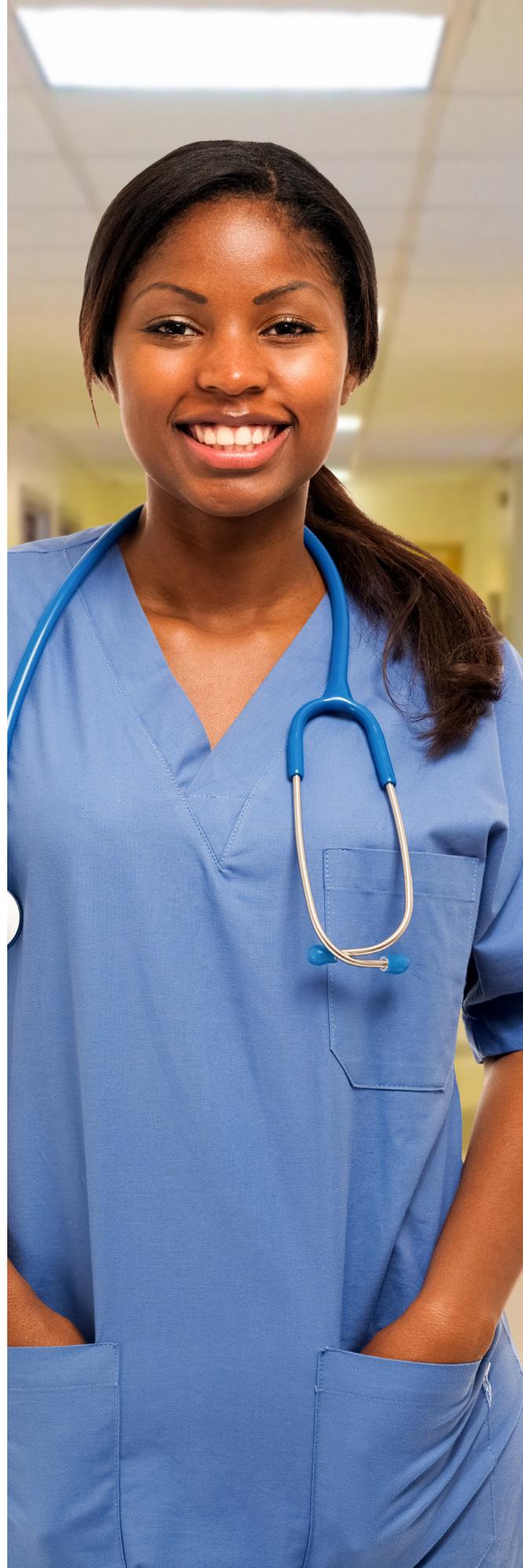
## Context Setting at the Event

To give some information to our employers at the event, we invited Dr. John Hirdes from the University of Waterloo to speak. Dr. Hirdes had just written a paper entitled [“The Long-term Care Pandemic: International Perspectives on COVID-19 and the Future of Nursing Homes”](#) with colleagues. Dr. Hirdes spoke to long-term care and staffing, with some focus on the personal support worker role.

This context setting helped provide some insight into what was happening beyond Ontario and Canadian borders. The lack of people within the personal support worker role is not unique to our local or even national health care system. Dr. Hirdes discussed long-term care utilization rates as well as international examples of the PSW role and how the role may need to adapt as health care itself changes. He also spoke to the more complex needs of patients served by home and long-term care. The role for PSWs would be facing some changes given all these variables happening in health care. The audience was invited to ask questions post-presentation.

## Employer Discussion

Our first topic of discussion was around what skills and qualities employers are seeking in their personal support worker employees. We have used this information to create a one-pager that can be shared, as a first exploration step, with those thinking of pursuing PSW training. It will help provide a first realistic glimpse into the role. That one pager can be found on page #5.



# Personal Support Worker: Is it the fit for you?

We spoke to local employers to develop this document - to help you, the person seeking training, figure out if this is the right path for you to pursue.

## Qualities Sought in Personal Support Workers

**Hardworking:** you come in and work to meet needs of people

**Motivated:** 24 hours/7 days a week/365 days a year and you want to be there

**Proud to be in healthcare:** you are proud to provide healthcare to others

**Caring:** You can relate to people and want to help

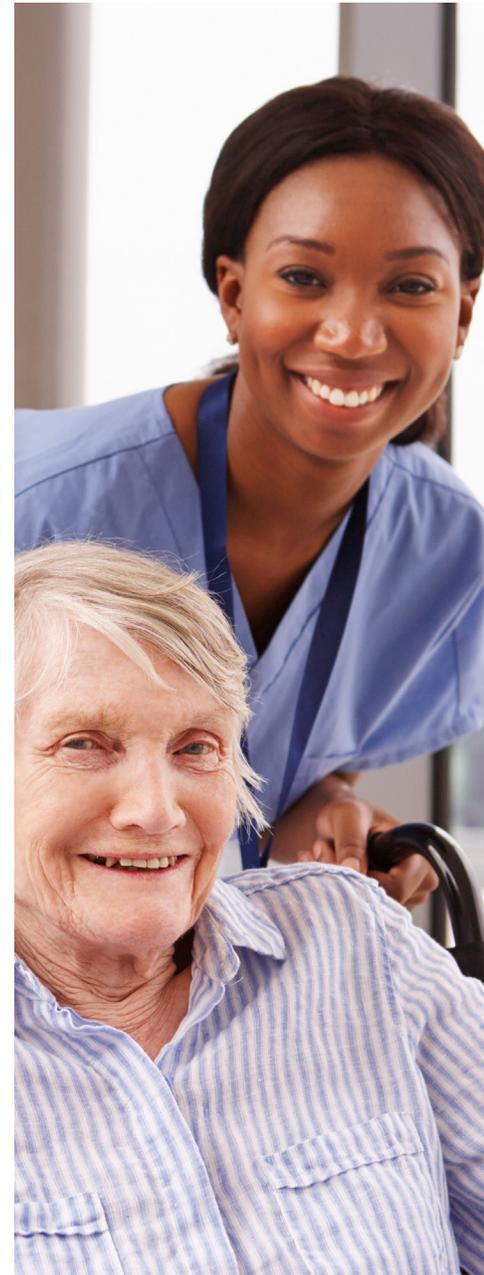
**Adaptable to change:** You are willing to do different tasks and to shift your work to get the job done

**Reliable:** You always show up when scheduled and commit to being where you need to be

**Professionalism:** You commit to being a professional when working with your client and health care colleagues. Your language is respectful.

## Skills and Education to Have and Develop

- PSW certificate needed or is ideal in most environments.
- Computer literate: A lot of employer training is on-line so this is a required skill.
- Observational/clinical skills: You are aware of changes you are seeing in clients (physically and behaviourally) and able to share those changes with other staff.
- Communication skills: You know you need to change how you communicate with clients versus families versus colleagues.
- Client service skills: You know how to approach families and clients with matters, ensuring you have set boundaries when dealing with families.
- Teamwork skills: You know how to look at the workload and work as a team player to balance the load for all.
- Self-care/coping skills: You know the job is highly rewarding and that there are tough spots. You will care for yourself when those moments arise without harming clients or others on the team.



## Where are the opportunities as a Personal Support Worker?

- Provide care to people in home-based settings if independent working is important.
- Work in rural settings over large centres (more people looking for these roles in cities).
- Expand your knowledge into brain injuries and how they affect people.
- Learn more about targeted illnesses, the responses they create in others and how to ensure better care (for example, caring better for dementia patients when aggression may exist).
- Ability to return to school for further upgrading to registered practical nurse role.
- Start as part-time but opportunities to add shifts to increase hours.



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## Employer trends around internationally trained professionals working as PSWs locally

Internationally trained professionals are becoming a big part of the PSW workforce. We spoke with the employers about their recruiting and hiring of internationally trained professionals who are working in Canada as personal support workers. Almost every employer had worked with internationally trained professionals.

- There is the need for a standard test that internationally trained health care professionals can take in order to prove they have the skills for PSW certification. Why the need for the test? Many PSW candidates are overqualified and coming from other countries. To have them undertake PSW training when they have training beyond what is needed is a waste of training dollars. One example is a company who reported that they hired a doctor with 27 years of experience after he completed his PSW training.
- A lot of internationally trained nurses (IEN) work as PSWs, especially after their first year of a nursing program (seen as PSW skills equivalency).
- Companies hire international students who have health care experience and education from other countries, but these employees limit their hours to part-time. As well, some of these students are not continuing their studies in health care so could be lost to the industry.
- Companies lose some of these PSWs when they decide to return to school to pursue Registered Practical Nurse (RPN) education.
- Long-term care institutions provide new PSWs with opportunities to learn from other staff whereas sometimes new PSWs in home care do not get those opportunities.
- There are some cultural and communication challenges as well as understanding of work environment. The examples listed include: taking the bus to get to work, the concept of clocking in and clocking out and how to use maps and travelling from home to home in a new city or town. Many hires have the necessary English language skills. One employer did mention an employee who had communicated a preference for female patients over male patients due to religious consideration, but it was their first consideration in years of employing PSWs with international qualifications.

Many organizations were doing their part in getting these skilled immigrants into the health care workforce.

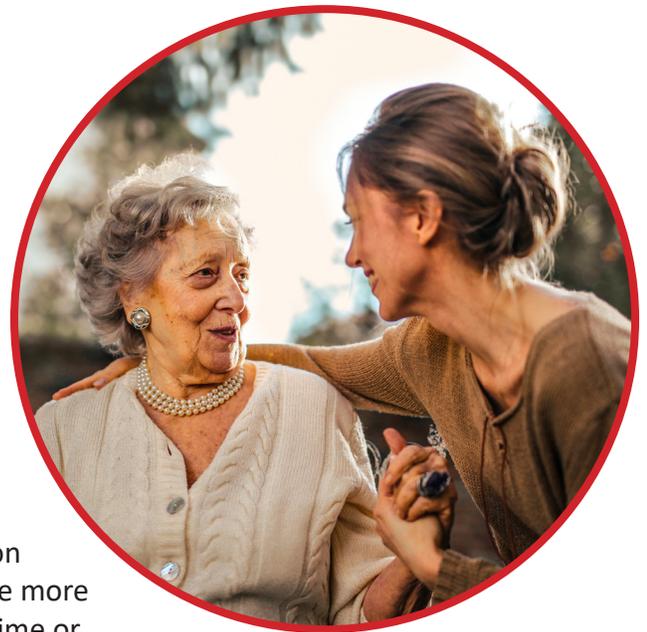
## Engaging and developing PSWs

The retention of personal support workers within organizations and within the sector has been difficult. Prior to the pandemic, there were documented cases of burn-out and workers leaving the field. The COVID-19 pandemic, and its pressures on staffing levels and work-life balance, has made retention harder. Employers shared with us some of the ways that they are trying to support the development of their PSWs in the hopes that they will stay in the role and that they will feel they are continuing to learn and develop their skill sets and knowledge.

- Employers are developing career paths for PSWs and encouraging them to stay with their organizations.
- Some internal training opportunities that companies do with staff include medicine training, lift training, acquired brain injury knowledge.
- Employers offer support to workers to transition from the PSW role to the RPN role. There was an awareness that the employer may be training, or supporting the training of, that person who will then leave for another organization.
- Some employers were open to training that employees find that support their PSW role and work but that the employer had not found or prioritized.
- There are tools in place that work to connect PSWs to other professional supports. E-shift was mentioned which allows PSWs to connect to palliative care nurses who can provide guidance and information.

Our employer group also talked about how they are changing their work environments to support PSW retention.

- Some employers are looking at the number of hours that a person gets as organizations know that the more hours someone gets, the more likely they are to stay with the organization. A lot of work is part-time or casual which is easier to leave if another offer emerges.
- There was also talk of building a model of care where there is guaranteed work and where employees' families have consistency which feeds into a work-life balance.
- There was mention of bridging programs that would help a Home Support Worker move into the Personal Support Worker role. This would be an example of one of those career paths that employers are trying to create.



## Realities of the job

The smaller group sessions spoke to employers about the industry acknowledging the realities that are happening with personal support workers. They also asked if there were any “myths” that persisted and how the industry and its partners (postsecondary and beyond) could work to fix those misperceptions.



## Acknowledging realities

- The majority of the workers who work in home care start as part-time and, with time, can move to full-time if they want. In this sub-sector, many work days but can take shifts doing night coverage if they need more hours. Part-time work is the current default for the position.
- PSWs have experienced a lot of grief during the pandemic and they will need support even if employers do not see it impacting them, and their staff, for some time. It could be a delayed reaction in the industry.
- Many personal support workers are often doing the work on their own and there is not enough time for them to do what needs to be done. One employer mentioned the 6 minute challenge which is the amount of time that some PSWs have to get a client dressed and ready for the day and the challenge that is for someone focused on caring for others.
- There is acknowledgement that organizations need to be supporting PSWs a lot better. Some suggestions included allowing time for follow up and showing them that are supported. There is a difference in supports.
- Employers acknowledged that there is COVID-19 burnout and fatigue happening with PSW staff. In some environments, there is a team who is there to provide support. For some, but not all PSWs, that team environment can help PSWs feel supported.
- Health care is a workplace that is about people. Personal support workers can work on teams in some cases and on their own in others. Working on one's own can make one feel removed from supports and lonely in some cases if there are pressures. There needs to be opportunities to make each PSW feel part of a team – workplace wellness challenges, staff opportunities to come together (whether holiday based, regular meetings or through staff events). Tech could provide opportunities to bring bring people together in new ways.
- Acknowledgement that the pay is on par with other industries (for example, retail or manufacturing) and does not always have the same job security as roles in those industries and this affects recruitment and retention.
- Some people who complete PSW training never make it into the industry or leave it quickly. The reasons provided include not enjoying the occupation and the wages not meeting the living needs of the workers.

## Myth busting

The industry did see some “myths” that need to be addressed, within and beyond the industry.

- Personal support workers are professionals with a skill set and that image needs to be portrayed more. The industry needs to talk more about the value-add of PSWs and how essential they are to care giving for families who rely on them to provide knowledgeable care for their loved ones.
- PSWs are often the first person there and they need to respond in the moment while waiting for other health care professionals. Their roles are complex as they oversee the care and witness changes in the patient. They see patients regularly and are doing the hands-on care, which gives them different information critical for care.
- There is a place for “you” here. There is variability in the role as well as flexibility in some cases. PSWs in some environments do get to operate in a team while others can work on their own. There are many different types of opportunities in the role.

## Using resources

To round out the input from employers, the sessions discussed what resources they are using to secure workers and ensure they had coverage. Many reported they were using local schools and training programs as their recruitment pools. Employers shared that not only were they connecting with the schools for graduates but that they were taking student placements where PSW students experience the workplace and the role while learning. One challenge with this work-integrated learning experience is that some programs do not accept home care employers for placements and have their students do placements in long-term care. These placements are students’ early connections with the workforce and can make it more difficult for home care to recruit them for their roles as they have no experience with that work environment.



Using school placements to find staff assists with finding new staff to the industry. There is also the question of how to find more experienced staff. Human resources managers within health care have also sought out ways to find more experienced staff. They have been using job fairs, connecting with employment services and using referral systems with their own staff to bring on more experienced PSWs. These managers are also connecting with human resources groups specific to the industry to share experiences and resources.

Some organizations are coming together to figure out how they can reduce the amount of time that personal support workers in home care are spending in transit between clients. Having to travel between clients reduces the amount of time that workers can spend with clients. While there have been attempts to try innovative ways, there are restrictions on innovation due to contractual language in organizations and rates of pay. The industry is hopeful that something can be worked out to better support clients and the workforce.



## Where do we go from here?

It is very obvious that there is a brewing crisis in the health care sector due to the lack of PSWs, but what needs to be discussed, changed and pursued? The employers in the session, although not asked, did share ideas about things that need to be considered to improve the attraction and retention of PSWs.

- There needs to be more practicum options. At present, not every program allows practicums in home care settings and there may opportunity to have more discussions about how to make this happen. What are the barriers and how can employers work with training providers to address concerns or limitations?
- WPB with Wilfrid Laurier University is doing further research into international students and newcomers who appear to be making up more of this talent pool. This research may help provide more information to the sector and help support this workforce better.
- PSWs in home care need to be able to drive between client homes, but with fewer people getting driver's licenses, there needs to be discussion around how organizations can get people into clients' homes in innovative ways. Are there models out there for how to support workers who do not have that license but are a perfect fit for home care?
- The gap in pay between long-term care and home care PSWs will need to be addressed as it is one factor that affects the ability of home care to recruit and retain workers.
- Long-term care and home care could consider more opportunities to come together to discuss programs. There have been funding opportunities that may support more, or new PSW programming or support programming in smaller centres where people already live.
- One participant mentioned the opportunity for client-partnered scheduling as well as working together on a larger retention strategy. If there was some way for organizations to partner together and address peak times when PSWs are needed for each, this may help ease some of the demand.
- There is a need to look at the PSW role itself. Is it a transitional role or is it a stable one where experience is an asset? Is there a way to combine the role of a PSW with other responsibilities to minimize burnout? Is there a role for the PSW on the clinical team and what does it look like?
- There needs to be a better understanding of the numbers of people needed by the industry and the actual graduating numbers as well as available worker numbers. Fluctuations will always exist, but with an established baseline, training providers and employers would know what the talent pool numbers are and whether programming needs to be expanded and how it needs to be expanded.
- Finally, there is an overwhelming need for the role of the PSW as the "eyes and ears" of nursing staff to be recognized by those within and outside the industry. That recognition also needs to include appropriate compensation, established career development and educational opportunities.



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