

# BUSINESS ACTION GUIDE

Leading at the Intersection of People & Profits

## SET THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS

### Effective Onboarding and Mentorship: Cooperative Home Care Associates

Half of all hourly workers leave new jobs in the first four months, according to the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM). Effective onboarding (orienting and training new employees so that they gain the skills, knowledge, and behaviors needed to function well), paired with a program for mentoring new employees, can be an effective retention strategy. This is especially true for employees that face barriers to employment. To learn more about effective onboarding and mentorship, we spoke with Michael Elsas, President, and Adria Powell, Executive Vice President,



MICHAEL ELSAS,  
PRESIDENT

ADRIA POWELL,  
EXEC VICE PRESIDENT

at Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA), the nation's largest worker-owned cooperative. CHCA, with 2,050 workers, provides high-quality home care services to elders and individuals living with disabilities. Their clients are primarily Latino and African-American residents of the South Bronx, Harlem, and Washington Heights areas of New York.

Since 1985, there has been a significant increase in demand for in-home care for the elderly. Most retirees prefer to live at home as long as they can, and home care can be price competitive compared to nursing facilities. At the same time, the people most directly responsible for delivering home care – home health aides and other direct care workers – are generally low paid with few benefits, and work part-time with unpredictable hours, and inadequate training and support. Yet these are the people who take care of our aging parents and loved ones. We founded CHCA on the belief that home health aides who are given good salaries and benefits, training, support, and opportunities to advance will provide high quality care.

We recognized that home health aid is an entry level position and that we were going to attract people with significant barriers to employment. Our goal was to create a culture of retention and we looked for caring people who were committed to work. We started an employer-embedded training program (serving both CHCA employees and employees who are ultimately hired by other agencies) and built in supports to keep people in the program. Then we added three more months of on-the-job training support through our peer mentoring program. We also work with employees on an ongoing basis to help them solve problems that can affect their success on the job. These are some key lessons that we learned in the process:

#### 1. Identify barriers to success early on – and resolve them

At CHCA, we have a number of people with minimal or no formal work experience. Even before our training program begins, we work with each person to identify potential barriers such as access to adequate childcare or transportation and connect them with resources to

overcome those barriers. We also discuss participants' long-term and short-term occupational goals, determine their familiarity with mainstream financial institutions and skills with money management, and make referrals to appropriate nonprofit organizations that can provide support. All of these things increase their chances of long-term employment success.

#### CHCA'S FORMULA FOR EFFECTIVE ONBOARDING AND MENTORSHIP

1. Identify barriers to success early on – and resolve them
2. Train employees in both hard and soft skills and ensure training reflects job realities
3. Provide structured mentoring and coaching supervision
4. Build ladders and raise the floor

**2. Train employees in both hard and soft skills and ensure training reflects job realities**

The legal requirement for home care workers is just two weeks of clinical training before they start working with patients. We double that. We find that more training is effective in preparing people to work with a very vulnerable population. Before they start work, CHCA employees undergo a four-week training that teaches them both clinical and non-clinical skills such as team-building, respecting differences (such as race, class, language, and religion), and effective communication.

The training also prepares people for the challenges they may encounter onsite. We take a situational approach and do role plays to practice. These scenarios can range from a client who doesn't want to go to bed to a son dealing drugs in the back room. We can't predict what folks will walk into, but we can give them the skills to handle it. Home care work is often described as a "low-skill" job, but in our experience, that is far from the case.

Graduates of the training program receive dual certification as a Certified Home Health Aide and Personal Care Assistant, with guaranteed employment through CHCA. We are fortunate to be large enough to support our own in-house training program, which requires a certain scale of business – around 500 or more employees. This approach works well for us because recruitment, selection, training, support, and retention all build on each other.

**3. Provide structured mentoring and coaching supervision**

All new CHCA employees are assigned a peer mentor to support them during their training and throughout their first three months of employment. During this time, new employees receive calls every week from a peer mentor asking about any challenges they experienced and offering advice or referrals to other organizational resources. Mentors go into the field to support trainees and employees in the client's home, and are also available to all employees when they confront a particularly challenging personal or professional situation.

COOPERATIVE HOME CARE ASSOCIATES  
MISSION

Together, we strive to achieve the following goals:

- To provide reliable, high-quality home health care services for those who are elderly, chronically ill, or living with disabilities;
- To offer the highest possible salaries and benefits while building a profitable worker-owned company; and
- To give workers opportunities to learn and grow as members of a health care team.

Peer mentors are experienced home health aides. We have 12 Level I mentors who also work part-time as home health aides and make phone calls from home, and six Level II mentors who spend their time mentoring about 100 employees per year, including visiting employees onsite to see how it's going. Thanks to their experience, mentors can also help resolve some of the challenging situations that may arise.

In addition to the mentorship program, we intentionally train supervisors to be coaches rather than disciplinarians in order to help employees learn and improve. We also provide frequent opportunities for employees to gather for peer exchanges, problem-solving sessions, and additional clinical skills training. All of these structures give employees ways to deal with any problems they may encounter, which increases retention.

#### 4. **Build ladders and raise the floor**

We have an internal career ladder through our mentorship and supervisory coaching programs, and we are currently working to enhance it. We feel that from a workforce development perspective, the real answer for most frontline workers is not climbing from a bad job to a good job, but making their existing job better. So we advocate building career ladders for some while “raising the floor” for everyone. We raise the floor at CHCA by offering our home health care workers 100

percent employer-paid health and dental insurance; the opportunity to participate in worker-ownership, through which employees can receive dividends based on our annual profits; an employer-contribution to their 401(k) account; and access to free tax preparation services to help them obtain the Earned Income and Child Care Tax Credits. We also offer no-interest loans and encourage workers to create savings and checking accounts, instead of relying on expensive check cashing services.

#### FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

We strongly believe that our investment of time and money in training, onboarding, and mentorship is worth it. These initiatives have enabled us to successfully establish a workforce that can transition from public assistance and satisfy both clients and contractors with the high-quality care they provide. Last year, our turnover rate was under 15 percent, which is phenomenal in an industry with an average of 30 percent to 50 percent turnover. This saves us about \$1.2 million annually. We have a solid core of great employees, and 70 percent of people who apply for new positions are referred by existing employees.

#### HOW DO WE LEARN MORE?

[Forbes: The Onboarding Experience Matters to Your Future Employees](#)

[Inc. Magazine: 3 Ways to Supercharge Your Onboarding Process](#)

[Chron: The Advantages of Mentoring in the Workplace](#)

[Society for Human Resource Management: Onboarding New Employees: Maximizing Success](#)

[PHI: Cooperative Home Care Associates Best Practices](#)

[PHI: Coaching Supervision](#)

*Other companies that excel at effective onboarding and mentorship include Zappos, Union Health Center, and Zingerman's.*

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