The Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly, Central New York (PACE CNY) is one of 72 federally funded PACE programs in 30 states. PACE programs offer a full continuum of preventive, primary, acute, and long-term care services to individuals over 55 years old who are eligible to live in skilled nursing homes but able to live safely in the community with adequate support and services. The PACE model applies an interdisciplinary team approach to manage, integrate, and provide comprehensive medical and social services. PACE CNY, a managed long-term care program, operates under the auspices of Loretto, the largest provider of eldercare services in Upstate New York. Founded in 1926, Loretto is a not-for-profit offering 22 programs at 17 sites ranging from independent living and adult medical day programs to rehabilitation and skilled nursing care.

Serving the greater Syracuse area and all of Onondaga County in central New York, PACE CNY has 323 employees, 130 of whom are certified home health aides (called geriatric care workers, or GCWs), and serves over 400 elders per year. Of the program’s enrollees, 97 percent are funded through Medicaid and Medicare. “In PACE,” says Penny Abulencia, PACE CNY’s executive director, “our goal is to think of everything we can feasibly and reasonably do to maintain somebody in the home.”

PACE’s strong commitment to keeping elders at home is matched by its beliefs in fostering learning, cultivating leaders, and supporting staff in doing the best job they can. Abulencia and her team have
developed strategies for recruitment and retention that focus on empowering staff and recognizing that leaders, both formal and informal, exist at all levels of the agency, including among GCWs. “Everybody knows their role and place in life, right?” notes Abulencia. “And it’s hard to step out.” To counter this mentality among GCWs, Abulencia and her team stress listening to and valuing individuals and the information they provide, while also providing GCWs the skills and confidence to value their own contributions.

PACE CNY, part of the original 16 PACE demonstration programs begun throughout the country, served its first enrollees in December 1997. A nurse by training, Abulencia worked for 26 years in a hospital setting before she became the vice president of clinical services at Loretto in 1997, a year and a half after a bitter strike left the nursing department in tatters. She accepted the position of Loretto’s first nurse executive knowing that only as an equal member of the senior leadership team would she be able to help set policy on how to manage and treat employees and elders. In 2001, Abulencia assumed the role of PACE CNY’s executive director.

Yet for PACE CNY, new hire statistics reflected a retention problem common across the industry. When they began looking carefully at retention data in 2005, it painted a bleak picture: nearly half of the GCWs hired for the program were leaving after six months or less of employment. Abulencia recalls, “I was blown away by the number of new hires leaving.” The high rate of turnover represented high recruitment, hiring, and training costs for the program. It also meant less quality of care for the elders receiving services through PACE. With new GCWs “coming in as fast as they were going out,” Abulencia recognized the need to put an end to this “revolving door.”

GCWs at PACE CNY bear many responsibilities. They provide personal care to elders in their homes, driving many miles to reach their clients. GCWs also assist clients in going to their medical appointments, checking for safety, toileting and hydrating, serving meals, providing medication reminders, and assisting with recreational activities.

According to Abulencia and Holava, newly hired GCWs often face overwhelming feelings of inadequacy, frustration, loneliness, and fear—feelings that accompany the start of any new job but are compounded by working alone in a client’s home. Without any support or guidance to lead them through the initial bumps of a physically and emotionally demanding job, GCWs often chose to leave within a few months of being hired.

Loretto’s organizational culture is well aligned with Abulencia’s own values of making the needs of elders and the employees who serve them the highest priority. She says, “[I] work in an organization where doing what’s right is allowed, encouraged, the thing that is expected…that’s Loretto.”

Cheryl Holava, PACE’s director of education, observes how these values are important to PACE CNY’s leadership: “This is an extremely high integrity organization. Penny [Abulencia] and I have a meeting of the minds. We’re on the same track in terms of advocacy for the aides, their important contributions and the respect that they need for making those important contributions.”
To stave off the drain of staff, PACE CNY instituted a number of different initiatives to improve new hire retention. These initiatives have been quite successful: PACE CNY’s retention rate for the last several years has averaged between 84 percent and 90 percent for new hires in their first six months of employment, as compared to 52 percent in 2005.

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Over time, PACE CNY has expanded its strategy to focus on not only better retention of new GCWs, but also to keep veteran GCWs as part of the PACE CNY team. Throughout, learning and leadership have been critical elements of PACE’s approach to workforce improvement.

Components of PACE CNY Strategy for Addressing Retention

- Creation of Recruitment and Retention Performance Improvement Team that includes geriatric care workers
- Improvement of orientation curriculum
- Establishment of peer mentoring program, including mentee and mentor support systems
- Creation of Geriatric Care Worker II position
- Training and refreshers for supervisors and managers in PHI Coaching Supervision™
- Provision of staff training and educational supports
- Creation of supportive work environment, including formal opportunities for dialogue, open communications, and flexible scheduling
- Competitive wages and benefits

The Recruitment and Retention Performance Improvement Team (RRPIT)

As one of the first steps to reining in the high turnover among new hires, Abulencia and her team at PACE created a committee to oversee improvement efforts. Established in May 2006, the Recruitment and Retention Performance Improvement Team (RRPIT) consists of staff members from PACE CNY and Loretto, including educators, GCWs, supervisors, schedulers, and recruitment staff from human resources. Together, they meet monthly to identify and develop strategies to address employees’ needs, focusing on both hiring and keeping employees.

When Shelley McCann joined the PACE staff in 2007 as scheduling supervisor, she became a member of the RRPIT. She believed that the lack of a support system for new hires was scaring off potentially good staff. To learn about why new GCWs were leaving soon after starting, the RRPIT conducted interviews to uncover how new aides perceived the work environment and what systems existed to support them.

It was an eye-opening exercise. Staff spoke of common stressors among the workforce in the first three months of employment—for example, inadequate skills and fear of looking foolish. They also discovered protection/security for new GCWs traveling into the field was inadequate. “We began to look at orientation and the buddy system and how we were scheduling new aides,” says Abulencia.
The Business of Caregiving

Improved New Hire Orientation

As one of its tasks, the RRPIT modified the orientation training offered to new hires. All new hires arrive at PACE CNY having been trained and certified as home health aides. Holava explains that the new orientation training goes beyond what is taught in the certification classes, providing a deeper understanding of the impact of aging on the elders that PACE serves. “It’s not just about the disease,” she states. “They’ve learned about it all, but we need to talk about it from the patient’s perspective. [Keeping] them in their own home is a thread throughout all of our enhanced training.”

This new “enhanced training” orientation involves 36 hours of classroom educational sessions, including, among others, mechanical lift training, fall prevention, nutrition, geriatric care issues and understanding the aging brain, as well as skills such as map reading to prepare GCWs for traveling to client homes that may be in unfamiliar areas. This classroom training is interspersed with opportunities for new hires to “shadow” more seasoned PACE GCWs, promoting better retention of the material. During this orientation period, which generally lasts 2.5 to 3 weeks, new GCWs receive their full salary and a weekly $25.00 gas card. The new hires provide much of the services to the clients who are visited, with support from the experienced aide. The curriculum also schedules new GCWs to meet with different supervisors, mentors, and schedulers and to become familiar with all the various housing locations where PACE enrollees might live.

Upon completion of enhanced orientation, most new hires are ready to take on their own caseload independently. The program offers flexibility, however, recognizing that learning speeds and comfort levels vary. According to Lavetta Spara, a PACE CNY GCW who completed her enhanced orientation training in November 2009, the new structure—with combined in-class work and practicum—is indeed helpful: “It’s teaching you two things at once. It’s preparing you in class for it, and it’s showing you how to do it.”

Improved Support Through Peer Mentoring

The introduction of the Recruitment and Retention Performance Improvement Team and the new enhanced orientation training brought some improvement, but Abulencia and Holava felt more was needed. One of the initiatives they were interested in undertaking was a formal peer mentoring program, in which more seasoned GCWs could teach new arrivals the ropes about home care.

In 2006, vision and opportunity came together when the New York State Department of Health awarded the Project Home contract to PACE CNY. Project Home, which focuses on diverting individuals from nursing home care, fit perfectly with the PACE mission. A home and community-based workforce development component of the contract, which provided $100,000 for each of three years, allowed PACE CNY to contract with the SEIU/1199 Training and Upgrading Fund, which in turn subcontracted with PHI, a national nonprofit that provides workforce development and training design services to eldercare and disability services providers. PHI worked with management and labor to design and implement a peer mentor program.
Peer mentor Kathy Van Slyke describes her first few weeks as a caregiver at Loretto

I remember when I first came to Loretto, [I] already had … my certificate…. And they were short-staffed. They needed help, and seeing I had a car, that was pretty much [pretends to hit and skid her hands], “Here, you go!” I almost quit, but I’m too darn stubborn. It was very, very overwhelming. And, I mean, this place is huge…. And just forget about getting to participants’ homes. They’re all over Onondaga County…. It was crazy…. Once I got into it and got it all figured out, and started making some acquaintances … so they could help me out with where to go, if I had any questions, things like that, it got a little easier, because I’m not shy. But I can’t imagine not being outgoing. These people would walk, without somebody they could turn to. When I saw what this [peer mentoring] was all about, I was like, “It’s about time.”

Leadership Team: A first step was the establishment of a leadership team that consisted of representatives from Loretto/PACE CNY, Project Home, PHI, and the SEIU/1199 Training and Upgrade Fund. The leadership team met monthly and provided guidance on the development, implementation, and evaluation of the mentor program, including selection criteria, key responsibilities of the mentors, and organizational and support needs.

As part of the preparatory work for the peer mentoring program, PHI conducted exploratory research at PACE CNY, interviewing supervisors, schedulers, GCWs, and other stakeholders. Not only did the process yield findings essential to crafting the program, but it also gave PACE CNY staff a chance to voice their opinions and to hear some of the RRPIT’s preliminary ideas. In general, the interviews revealed a high level of enthusiasm and support for the peer mentoring program, with many noting that it was “long overdue.”

The Mentor Position: Peer mentors provide leadership and support to other staff members, particularly new and struggling home health aides, to improve job satisfaction and retention statistics. Their responsibilities include attending a monthly booster and support meeting; providing shadowing opportunities for the new mentees; and being available to answer questions and provide constructive feedback, information, and ongoing support both by phone and in-person.

Peer mentors receive a monthly stipend of $60. In addition, they receive $25 a month for the first three months with a new mentee for personal off-hours phone time.

Recruitment and Training:
Candidate mentors were recruited within PACE CNY. Through the leadership team, PACE CNY was able to negotiate with the union for a rigorous selection process. Applicants completed a lengthy written application and then participated in an interview conducted by the leadership team. Candidates had to have been employed by PACE CNY for one year with a good work performance and attendance history. In the first year of the program, of the 24 GCWs who applied to the mentor training program, 6 were selected.

Choosing the right GCWs to become mentors has been key to the success of the program.

PHI conducted the training for the first cohort of mentors: three days of training and three follow-up “boosters” (or refresher training). Holava observed all sessions and debriefed with PHI after each session. In this way, she was prepared to provide ongoing training and support to current and future peer mentors.
The training employed adult learner-centered principles (see box) to teach interpersonal communication skills, problem solving, and building positive relationships, with particular emphasis on listening skills, considered the most essential element of mentoring.

**Adult Learner-Centered Training**

- Assumes learning is active, not passive
- Focuses on the learning process of the trainee
- Takes into account diversity in learning styles
- Uses trainers as facilitators rather than experts imparting knowledge
- Employs role plays, case scenarios, small group work, and other interactive learning
- Relies on learning, practicing, and reflecting on the learning experience
- Draws upon participants’ own experience for learning
- Is particularly effective with “nontraditional learners”—those who do not learn well through lectures and reading

Choosing the right GCWs to become mentors—those that “have the passion to help people”—has been key to the success of the program, according to peer mentor supervisor Shelley McCann. Peer mentors often find that passion rooted in their memories of what it was like to be a new employee. Peer mentor Deidre Johnson notes, “I know how it is when you first come in and they just put you out there and you really don’t have anyone to talk to. [With] a mentor … you can be in a comfort zone.” Fellow mentor Kathy Van Slyke agrees: “You got to remember that first time you walked through the door. Stop and remember that for a second…. Even if they do have experience as an aide … every [employer] is different. No matter what your skills are, trust me, it’s still going to be different in how they like things done.”

**Program Implementation:** Every new GCW is assigned a mentor, regardless of whether or not she has had prior experience working as a home health aide. After an initial face-to-face meeting, mentors are required to check in frequently with their assigned mentees and to log these encounters on record forms that are submitted to McCann, who follows up if any problems are noted.

During the enhanced orientation, new hires shadow multiple mentors in order to expose them to a range of clients and settings. They shadow their assigned mentor at least once. Mentees also receive contact information for all the mentors, so they are free to contact any of the mentors should they have a question.

Mentors serve as advocates for their mentees. If they feel a mentee needs additional time to settle into a job or to learn a particular skill, mentors can request it. They are encouraged to bring ideas and solutions to supervisors, who in turn take these suggestions seriously. McCann notes, “[S]ome of [the mentors] will say, ‘This mentee was with me … and you know she needs some help with the lifts, so do you think you could put her with me again?’ It’s like they are telling me the problem and they are bringing the solutions as well—many times solving potential problems long before it would have even been noticed in the past.”

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**Mentors are encouraged to bring ideas and solutions to supervisors, who in turn take these suggestions seriously.**

Once the classes and shadowing are over, mentees have their schedules protected from reassignments.
Mentors and mentees alike praise the program. “The mentor program was great,” says Tami Irish, who completed her orientation in May 2009. “It made me feel confident … that there was always someone to call if I had a question or any kind of problem.” Mentors similarly have seen the difference the program has made. Peer mentor Deirdre Johnson observes that “more people are staying. … If you put someone out there [without support], they feel frustrated and just quit. Now [they’ve] got someone [they] can talk to about even their [own] problems or the job problems.”

A career ladder for experienced GCWs: Geriatric Care Worker II

With the start of the peer mentoring program, retention rates rose for new employees as well as peer mentors. However, for GCWs with two or more years of experience, retention continued to slide. “I analyzed who came and went. Why did they leave?” explains Holava. “The peer mentored aides were, of course, staying amazingly longer than they’d ever stayed before. And who was leaving? The more experienced people. And why was that happening? Sometimes it had to do with salary. Sometimes it had to do with [boredom]. They wanted more challenges. Sometimes they felt there was a lack of recognition. And we said, ‘we’ve got to do something for these people.’”

However, it was not entirely clear what the new senior position should look like. Noting their initial unrealistic expectations, Abulencia says, “We had initially wanted these folks to walk on water.” As they thought about possible options, they thought: “[W]hat can we do that might be meaningful and helpful and give [experienced GCWs] a sense of pride in what they know?... [W]e thought we would enhance the skills they have because we don’t want to change them into nurses. They’re home health...
aides and they’re good home health aides. These are the best of our home health aides.”

It was PACE’s experience with a difficult client that in the end solidified the thinking around a senior GCW position—the geriatric care worker II (GCW II) [see “Mary’s Story” in sidebar].

The GCW II Position

GCW IIs maintain their GCW responsibilities, carrying their own caseload of individual PACE clients. Their promotion to a GCW II carries with it the responsibility of serving as a resource for GCWs and nurses caring for challenging clients.

Each client’s care team can request the support of a GCW II. This support may take many forms. For example, they may shadow another GCW who is having particular difficulty with a client, in order to model behavioral management skills and provide advice. They also participate in care planning meetings and may work with the nurse case manager to make any necessary changes to a client’s care plan. They provide advice on how to handle end-of-life cases. Finally, they maintain a log of their interactions with clients requiring special attention and of the guidance they provide to other PACE staff.

Recruitment and Training

GCW IIs must have one year experience with Loretto/PACE CNY and have an excellent performance record. They must have demonstrated a cooperative teamwork approach in the care of clients; an ability to interact positively with clients, family members, staff members, supervisors, and the general public; and a calm, positive approach to problem solving.

Mary’s story

For Abulencia and Holava, it was Mary [not her real name], a challenging client, who brought clarity to the question of how to provide more seasoned aides with an opportunity for growth. Abulencia explains:

We had a very difficult … lady who had no family and she had pretty significant psychiatric issues … but she was lucid, too, so she would have some very good moments.... She really was a tormented soul. The staff kept wanting to move her out of the Maltsas [a Loretto housing unit] and into the nursing home. And I kept saying, “Why? What are they going to do? So you don’t have to deal with it anymore?”

So we formed a team of the home care nurse and the Day Center folks—people from PACE—and the aide who was caring for her. And we started to get more consistent assignments... because what scheduling was doing was trying to share the pain. I looked at a week’s schedule for this lady and she had 25 aides. I said, “No wonder she’s crazed.”

We got that under control and we invited the aides into these meetings and we held them once a week at one o’clock and the aides weren’t coming … and we couldn’t figure out why. I guess they didn’t really feel empowered to come into that group and speak and share their feelings. So we began to schedule them for sure at one o’clock [working it formally into their schedule, telling them]: “This is where you have to come, to the conference room, and be a part of the group.” And then it began to work very well. And they had a lot to offer. That’s how I see [geriatric care worker IIs] working. It was really Mary who drove my desire to have resources available to the aides caring for those often very challenging people.
GCW IIs apply for the position and if accepted receive an additional 32 hours of training in behavior management, dementia, and end-of-life care as well as two follow-up day-long booster sessions. As with the peer mentor training, much of the GCW II curriculum, designed by PHI, focuses on listening skills; exploring options; learning when to stop, take a step back and try again with a client; and problem-solving skills.

For the GCW II position, PACE CNY established a salary increase of about $1 more per hour.

Compensation

In the 1990s, the PACE program had negotiated with the union for the home health aides serving PACE clients (GCWs) to take on additional responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, and driving, in exchange for an hourly wage 5 percent higher than that of home health aides working in other Loretto programs. For the GCW II position, PACE CNY negotiated with the union to establish a salary increase of about $1 more per hour, or two salary grades above the GCW position.

Program Implementation

Since 2009, PACE CNY has promoted eight GCWs to the GCW II position. During monthly group meetings, the GCW IIs review the special skills in which they have been trained, discuss challenges, and exchange ideas about possible solutions to problems.

Implementation of the new position has been somewhat challenging because, to work effectively, other PACE CNY staff must understand the role of the GCW II and request their assistance. In the beginning it was tough to get the PACE interdisciplinary team and supervisory and RN case managers to recognize and seek the services of these specialized aides. In response, PACE leadership organized a meeting to re-introduce the GCW II within the organization and explain their responsibilities. Now GCW IIs appear to be more confident in promoting their skills and expertise directly, approaching case managers, nurses, and peers to offer assistance and, thereby, raising awareness of GCW IIs as resources.

“We still need to figure out how to put more structure around this position,” notes Abulencia. As with any relatively new initiative, there is a need for ongoing development of systems, further clarity of roles, and assessment of effectiveness. The initiative has, nevertheless, presented the opportunity for career advancement for the GCW, and has allowed the agency to have seasoned home health aides available “not to take all the hard cases, but to support others in the care.”

A supportive work environment

In addition to creating new positions that provide opportunities for professional growth of frontline staff, PACE CNY has focused on creating an environment that encourages open communication, collaborative problem solving, and respect for the geriatric care workers.

PACE CNY has focused on creating an environment that encourages open communication, collaborative problem solving, and respect for the geriatric care workers.
Coaching and Communication

Good communication skills are often a key ingredient to successful initiatives within the home care industry. Staff at PACE CNY praise the program’s open communication and supportive environment. GCW Ashley Height observes: “I will talk to my [clients’] nurses and my boss will talk to them and we’ll all just kind of be a team and talk together. …Everyone here just communicates together.”

Abulencia feels that the way in which communication takes place is critically important.

In addition to the many formal opportunities for communication that PACE CNY has put in place—both face-to-face and via the telephone—Abulencia feels that the way in which communication takes place is critically important. That is what interested Abulencia in the PHI Coaching Approach™ to Supervision.

The PHI Coaching Approach to Supervision helps organizations build core skills that support a healthy work environment: active listening, self reflection/self management, clear communication without blame or judgment, collaborative problem solving, and participatory leadership. These skills enable leaders and staff to increase participation, solve problems, hold one another accountable, and develop and continually improve systems.

PHI introduced its Coaching Supervision™ training to PACE CNY departmental leaders and managers in 2007. In 2008, Holava and assistant staff educator Karen Anthony attended a nine-day train-the-trainer seminar. There, they gained practice in coaching skills, as well as learning techniques for teaching those skills. They received a trainer’s manual with a curriculum, handouts, and video, as well as other materials to support their training of supervisors at Loretto. Upon returning, they have trained 56 PACE managers, supervisors, and professional staff in the coaching skills.

Additional Loretto staff, from outside the PACE program, attended a coaching training session in the fall of 2009. As part of a corporate-wide initiative four trainers are now moving this important concept across the entire organization, including 13 “Green Houses” that Loretto is in the process of building and staffing. To date, 55 additional Loretto staff have been trained.

Staff speak positively of the importance of coaching. Christine Redmond, PACE CNY’s Director of Scheduling and Payroll, credits the PHI Coaching Supervision training with helping to improve the communication skills that supervisors use in correcting staff errors. Indeed, Abulencia remarks, “I believe coaching is really paramount for us to move forward. Because we really have to change our workforce … and I think it takes coming at it from all angles.”

“Communication and support seem to be unique to the Loretto work environment.”
– GCW Ashley Height

GCWs acknowledge the respect with which supervisors and peers listen to their comments. “Communication and support seem to be unique to the Loretto work environment,” says GCW Height. “The way they work together isn’t found in a lot of places.” Peer mentor supervisor McCann notes that she welcomes staff suggestions, valuing their efforts at problem solving and respecting that their initiative is indicative of a high level of trust. She says, “I want them to
trust that if they come to me, I’m going to listen to them. I’m going to say, that’s a good job. Go for it. I trust your judgment. Let’s do it.”

The open communication applies to personal and family matters that can sometimes make it challenging for GCWs to meet their work responsibilities. According to Redmond, “We try to let them know we are approachable. If they have car issues, a child care issue, if they have whatever issue, talk to us. Let us know what it is. Communicate with us and let us help you.”

**Ongoing Staff Training and Education**

For staff, new and old alike, training and education are what PACE CNY does best to improve employee satisfaction. PACE CNY incorporates education and training throughout the GCWs’ work, finding any opportunity to keep staff challenged. GCW Corin Oley explains: “They provide training all the time. They do onsite training programs. They have you take tests on the computer just to continue to have knowledge of [that training]. Even things that I was trained when I first started I have to do in-services on. Just so it stays fresh in mind. A lot of places don’t do that.”

PACE recognizes the great variety of learning curves and the need to reinforce retention of learning material and reinforcing. According to peer mentor Kathy Van Slyke, “It’s okay to make mistakes. The important thing is not to let it happen again, so they go over how to fix the problem.” GCW II Lisa Emert agrees: “If you are not sure about something or want to learn something new, there is never a problem to retrain you.”

Loretto offers tuition reimbursement for employees seeking degrees or other certification. Continuing education and college preparation courses are also offered to staff through the union training fund. For example, aides can receive financial support in seeking nursing degrees.

**Other Staff Benefits**

- **Flexible Scheduling** – to accommodate staff with family obligations (children; ill parents or grandparents)
- **Health insurance** – provided to full and part-time workers; employee contribution depends upon tenure
- **Employee Recognition Program** – those who excel in their job performance receive $100 and recognition at a staff meeting
- **Local discounts** – Loretto negotiates affordable uniform options and oil change and tire discounts
- **Employee assistance program** – to help employees deal with any personal issues
- **Memorial services and reflection time** – organized to allow staff to grieve and heal after losing a client to whom they have grown close

**Experiencing tangible results**

Since 2007, PACE CNY’s efforts to increase staff retention through peer mentoring and an opportunity for career growth through GCW II has produced eight GCW IIs and eight peer mentors. Of the GCW IIs trained, seven still remain employed by PACE CNY. One peer mentor has stepped down due to health reasons and
two have retired. Between 2008 and June 2010, 85 PACE new hires have been mentored.

Retention data from 2006 to 2009 (below) show considerable improvement in the percent of new GCWs retained during their first six months of hire. In 2005, retention in the first six months was estimated at 52 percent. With the institution of the RRPI and enhanced orientation training in 2006, the program began to see improvements, with 72 percent retained through their first six months. The mentor program became active in March 2007 and retention for that year rose to 76 percent. The data for 2008 place the average retention rate for the year at 82 percent. Retention rates declined for 2009, with the yearly average at 71 percent, but this level is still much higher than the baseline rate for 2005. Holava believes that the departures, mostly concentrated in the first nine months of the 2009 calendar year, were unusual, with several GCWs being asked to leave as a result of either “attendance or poor performance.” Data for the first six months of 2010 indicates that retention for newly hired GCWs is now at 90 percent.

PACE staff are well aware of the positive retention numbers. Many speak of how they themselves have been responsible for keeping someone at PACE, or of how they decided to remain because a mentor helped them. For mentee Ashley Height, for example, it was her mentor’s support that kept her at PACE:

The mentoring kept me here because at first there were a couple of problems. A few people were telling me how to do things and it wasn’t the correct way. And I just got really frustrated and I wanted to quit. But then when I called my mentor and she helped me through it and taught me the right way to do things, then it just worked out.

Redmond observes a more positive attitude among newcomers in general to the program:

The newer staff are coming in much happier, much more settled. More comfortable and confident in what they are doing in their job and I think more open because they feel a real sense of comfort with the mentors and with Shelley [McCann].

In a few cases, GCWs have gone on from shaky starts to excel in their performance. Once, McCann, one of the mentors, and the aide supervisor intervened on behalf of a new GCW on the verge of being fired. Because they had taken the time to get to know her, they knew she could do the job. “We all got to
know her,” notes McCann. “It was like, no, she’s so much better than this, this is just a mistake. She’ll learn. She’ll move on.” They fought for her and things eventually turned around for her. “We helped save her job,” says McCann, “…and I think it’s all because of the mentor program. And she’s one of our best aides today. And she’s one of the ones I want to see become a mentor down the road. …She’s awesome!”

Among mentors and GCW IIs alike, Holava and Abulencia have seen how these advanced GCWs have emerged as leaders. They perceive a greater sense of pride and confidence among both groups. Some have even created their own business cards. In the case of peer mentors, a few have represented the program outside of Loretto, alongside Holava, at the National PACE Conference. “There were a lot of questions for them and they felt empowered,” she says. “It has given them an opportunity to add meaning to their roles and another focus.”

Mentors and GCW IIs have indeed sensed changes in themselves. “I know it’s helped me be a better aide,” says mentor Van Slyke. “It’s made me more patient. It’s made me not take things for granted.” Like Van Slyke, GCW II Lisa Emert has found patience, but also new learning: “I have found that it gave me more patience … more understanding of how the aging process works.” These aides feel they are making a positive difference in the work of their peers and the lives of their clients.

Abulencia believes that the efforts on retention have saved PACE money, though she has not yet undertaken any formal financial analysis. The program has reduced staff turnover, which undoubtedly translates into a savings in terms of recruitment, overtime, and agency use. In fact, home health agencies working with PHI have reported an average cost of $4,200 to replace each lost worker. For PACE CNY, an improvement of retention representing between five to nine GCWs per year staying in the job means an estimated savings of $70,000 to $80,000 over a three-year period.

Lessons learned

Too much focus is often placed on the content of new initiatives, with little regard for the process. Abulencia admits this was PACE CNY’s initial thinking before engaging PHI for its initiatives: “We said to Peggy [Powell—PHI’s National Director of Curriculum and Workforce Development], ‘Okay, give it to us. We want the plan.’ And Peggy said, ‘No, we’re going to develop the plan together.’”

For staff at PACE CNY, the preliminary work of building a foundation has proved critical to the success of its workforce initiatives. McCann notes, for example, that the program would have stalled without the support of managers: “You’ve got to have buy-in from the upper people. You can’t just have supervisors buy in without the directors and the VP buying in. It’s not going to work.”

Meetings and time invested at the onset stimulated dialogue with all stakeholders, fostered buy-in, and cleared a major barrier. Abulencia remarks, “I think that preliminary planning work is really huge, including working with the union, working through how we would select the candidates, working through job descriptions.” She concludes, “Because we spent that time, we had pretty good buy-in.”

Abulencia and Redmond speak of the importance of suspending assumptions and truly listening to
Staff, “looking underneath” to get at the true needs and motivations of employees. Part of digging deeper involves creating a non-threatening environment and opportunities for people to speak. The skills acquired through PHI Coaching Supervision help to facilitate such engagement. In addition, PACE has made data collection and check-in an essential part of its planning process, using exploratory data to design programs and reviewing its retention data periodically to identify areas for strengthening.

As Abulencia explains, essentially summarizing the program’s recipe for success, “PACE has been doing well with improved retention and enhanced satisfaction for both employees and participants, and I think that became evident [at the corporate level]. And we kept saying, ‘PACE is doing well because we have a peer mentoring program. Because we have a retention committee. Because we’ve put these initiatives in place and we support them and we’ve put financial resources through education to support our employees.’”

Endnotes:


2 Powell 2006 Loretto Project Home PACE CNY Peer Mentor Program Design: Staff Interview Highlights

3 To learn more about PHI’s peer mentor curriculum, go to: http://phinational.org/training/resources/peer-mentoring/

4 PHI. 2006. Adult Learner-Centered Training: An Introduction for Educators in Home and Residential Care. To download or order copies of this guide, go to: http://phinational.org/training/resources/alct/

5 For more information on the GREEN HOUSE® Project, go to: http://www.ncbcapitalimpact.org/default.aspx?id=664

About the Authors PHI Evaluation Specialist Inés Escandón, MPH, authored this case study with PHI Director of Evaluation Marcia Mayfield, MPH.

PHI (www.PHInational.org) works to improve the lives of people who need home and residential care—and the lives of the workers who provide that care. Using our workplace and policy expertise, we help consumers, workers, employers, and policymakers improve eldercare/disability services by creating quality direct-care jobs. Our goal is to ensure caring, stable relationships between consumers and workers, so that both may live with dignity, respect, and independence.