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Op-ed: How to solve New York's health care staffing crisis

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Bloomberg

A pharmacist administers a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine to a resident of the Brooklyn Center for Rehabilitation and Healthcare nursing home in Brooklyn.

New York's health care system is caught in a paradox. We face an ongoing **workforce shortage**, specifically in senior care, while largely failing to provide career pathways into health care for young adults from underserved communities.

NYC CROSSROADS

In New York, nearly 3.5 million residents are over the age of 65 – and that population is growing faster than any other group. Skilled nursing facilities are faced with two overlapping crises: severe staffing shortages and an epidemic of loneliness among their residents. These challenges mean older adults are not getting the care they need, and they are suffering from a lack of social interaction and community.

Our workforce shortage is illustrated by openings for Certified Nursing Assistants who provide vital daily care to their patients, whether that's helping them bathe or eat, or monitoring vital signs and reporting any changes in a patient's condition. When CNAs provide care, they're not just performing these clinical tasks, they're building meaningful relationships that can improve health outcomes in older adults.

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This is a critical position at skilled nursing facilities, yet New York currently has an estimated 13,000 openings for CNAs – over 5,000 in New York City alone – and the state Department of Labor projects an additional 15,000 positions will be needed by 2030. Each unfilled position represents an older New Yorker who may not receive the care they deserve, and a young adult who may not have access to career pathway resources.

In addition to the pressing need for care workers, [studies](#) still show a lack of diversity in the nursing workforce – emphasizing the urgency of getting more people from different backgrounds and communities into the field. If we don't work to reverse the course of these trends, multiple generations of New Yorkers will be left behind.

More CNAs means better care for our growing older adult population and a brighter future for young New Yorkers. The average starting pay for CNAs is approximately \$21 per hour, meaning they can earn \$10,000 more per year than those working full-time at minimum wage jobs.

But in order to get young people into these good-paying jobs and help older adults receive the care they deserve, we need concrete solutions – like workforce development programs that can bridge that gap.

One example is the [SkillSpring](#) program, created by [The New Jewish Home](#) – a non-profit health care system for older adults in New York. SkillSpring has transformed over 1,300 young New Yorkers from underserved schools and communities into skilled health care professionals. SkillSpring's young adult program serves New Yorkers ages 18 to 27 from underserved communities who face significant barriers to employment. Of participants, 42% have experienced homelessness, 40% live in public housing, 31% lack high school diplomas, and 45% are young parents.

Through this free, intensive three-month program, participants train to become CNAs. SkillSpring provides comprehensive support including daily Metro Cards, childcare assistance, and one-on-one professional development. Graduates are *guaranteed job offers* from partnering skilled nursing providers, creating an immediate pathway to stable employment and relieving understaffed facilities.

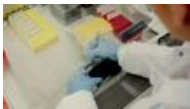
Many of our participants report that connections with older adult residents and patients make their CNA careers fulfilling and encourage them to remain in eldercare – especially the nearly 50% of multi-lingual participants who can connect in their residents' native language. The power of these relationships comes alive in stories like Zoe's, a young mother from Brooklyn who recently completed the SkillSpring program. From classroom sessions to clinicals, she learned about anatomy and patients' rights – giving her a strong understanding of how to be an effective caregiver. Through hands-on training, she fostered genuine connections with residents, even visiting one of our residents for Thanksgiving to ensure they were not alone for the holiday. We know there are motivated, compassionate young people across New

York just like Zoe, who are ready to take on the responsibility of caring for older generations and creating a brighter future for themselves – but we have to build an environment where they can thrive.

With our aging population growing and the shortage of health care workers reaching critical levels, we can't afford to maintain the status quo. Investing in workforce programs like SkillSpring builds careers, strengthens communities and improves the quality of care for older New Yorkers.

Nicole Cash is senior director of The New Jewish Home's SkillSpring program.

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