



PROJECT INSIGHTS REPORT

Future-proofing the personal support worker workforce: Toward confidence, competence and resilience

Inclusive Economy, Sectors in Transition

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Personal support workers (PSWs) often lack appropriate professional development opportunities despite playing a crucial role in Ontario's health-care system, especially in the face of new challenges like the pandemic. To address this gap, the University Health Network (UHN) team collaborated with new and existing partners to develop and launch education and advocacy resources to increase PSW competence, confidence and resilience in providing safe and effective care.

Between 2021 and 2023, the UHN team collaborated with five health-care partners to launch three education modules and tested them with 54 PSWs. They also collaborated with four health-care partners to develop and launch an advocacy campaign that focused on educating organizational leaders. This collaborative approach yielded positive results; the modules were well received, and PSWs reported that they felt seen, heard and valued by being engaged in the process. PSWs also reported improved ability to care for their own well-being, communication skills and infectious control practices due to the module tools and content.

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PARTNERS

[University Health Network](#)
[Women's College Hospital](#)

LOCATIONS

Ontario

INVESTMENT

\$203,714

PSWs continue to need professional development and upskilling opportunities, as well as advocacy on their quality of work.

KEY INSIGHT #1

Online training modules can provide targeted, sector-specific training and upskilling, especially to address new and emerging challenges.

KEY INSIGHT #2

Strong partnerships in outreach and inclusion of key stakeholders in the design, development and testing of new resources can lead to strong outcomes and a positive experience for participants.

KEY INSIGHT #3

PSWs appreciate learning modules that are designed by other PSWs and that use scenarios and role-playing.

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The Issue

PSWs are a crucial part of many provincial and territorial health-care systems, especially in Ontario's long-term care sector, where they make up 58.5% of home-care staff. Their work is often emotionally and physically taxing, and this has been exacerbated in recent years due to labour shortages and the pandemic.

PSWs often work without access to professional development opportunities that are available to other care providers—a situation that was especially problematic during the pandemic, which brought on time-sensitive challenges and required improved infection and prevention expertise, especially in long-term care homes.

What We're Investigating

To address this gap, the UHN team created education and advocacy resources for PSWs between 2021 and 2023. The project included:

1. The creation of an educational platform with new modules — developed and tested — on infection prevention and

- control, COVID-19, and wellness and resilience;
- 2. The development and strengthening of partnerships to drive engagement and new initiatives;
- 3. Advocacy for systems changes through education of organizational leaders.

The aim of these project activities was to increase PSW competence, confidence and resilience in providing safe and effective care.

What We're Learning

The UHN team designed, developed and tested the three education modules, engaging five key health-care partners in the process, with staff from the partners' junior, senior and board levels participating. The modules were tested with 54 PSWs, who provided feedback through focus groups to refine the language and focus on the content. Overall, UHN staff, partners and PSWs found the module content relevant to PSW needs. The PSWs who tested the modules felt better equipped to care for their own well-being, improved their infectious control practices, and felt more effective at using communication strategies to better understand client needs, all from using the tools and content from the modules.


Target audiences appreciate being included in processes designed to serve them

Project partners took care to engage PSWs in the development and implementation of the educational modules. Indirect benefits of engaging PSWs in this project included them feeling seen, heard and valued by being engaged in the process. PSWs often work in isolation and are not presented with many opportunities to hear from each other or other colleagues. The group discussions to solicit feedback directly from PSWs created an opportunity for discourse and a sense of connection between the PSWs and validated many

of their personal experiences in the field. Four health-care and training partners were also engaged in the development of the advocacy campaigns, with the University of Toronto and Centennial College contributing students to engage with the process. While it is too early to judge the impact of this campaign, partners agreed that advocacy is necessary, and they valued the opportunity to plan together.



Why It Matters



The Ontario health-care system continues to rely heavily on PSWs to fill crucial care roles in hospitals, long-term care homes, educational facilities, adult day programs and at home in the community. With Canada's aging population, PSWs will continue to be in high demand; recruitment will need to increase, the sector will have to retain the workers currently in the field, and the sector will need to make sure workers have the skills they need to deliver quality care. Success in recruitment and retention will depend heavily on efforts to improve the quality of work for PSWs, which will necessitate ongoing advocacy efforts with provincial, territorial and federal governments.

This project is a promising model for upskilling PSWs when requirements are changing rapidly. It is also valuable for fostering collaboration and partnership in support of shared advocacy goals related to the systemic challenges faced by PSWs, including low wages and poor quality of work.

This project also shows how strong, collaborative partnerships and engagement of end-users through the design, development and testing process for a new skills and training intervention can result in a high-quality product that benefits the target trainee population. Many projects funded by the Future Skills Centre that have been successful and able to demonstrate impact have invested time and money in meaningful consultation and in understanding the population the project is intended to impact. This project made sure to involve PSWs themselves, and this commitment resulted in effective materials that addressed their needs.

What's Next

The resources developed as part of this project continue to be offered by partners as a virtual course, alongside other training resources for PSWs.

The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.

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