

2017 OPTIMA Award: Under one roof

November 21, 2017 by Nicole Stempak, Senior Editor

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As part of a new program, students work and live at St. Joseph's Rehabilitation & Residence in Portland, Maine. Photo courtesy of Cindy Shain Photography.

It's almost 6 p.m., and that means it's time for Jerry to wheel over to the front desk, grab the remote and click on the flat-screen TV. Only today, Ebony Dukes catches him in the hallway first.

"I've been looking for you," she says.

They have an intimate exchange filled with laughter and rapid-fire quips as she tells him about her day, which included a visit from family.

Dukes, 19, is a certified nursing assistant (CNA) at St. Joseph's Rehabilitation & Residence in Portland, Maine. She also resides there as part of an intergenerational living program.

The 2017 OPTIMA award winner for Excellence in Resident-Focused Care found an innovative way to address its chronic staffing shortage now and encourage students to consider a career in long-term care in the future by opening its doors to college students.

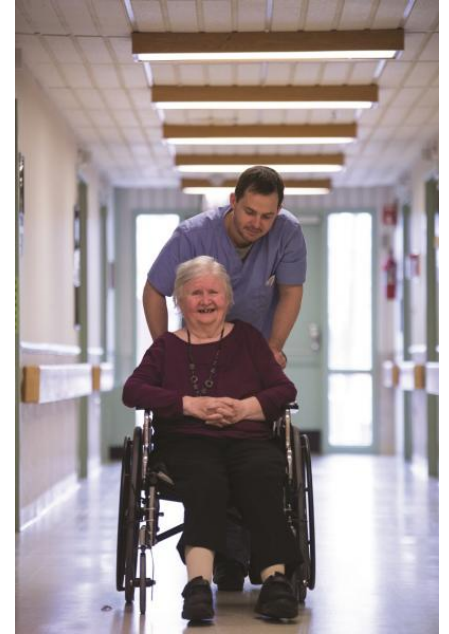
The excitement in the hallways is hopefully a sign of things to come.

Growing gap

Healthcare is a booming industry fueled by baby boomers retiring, longer life expectancies and growing rates of chronic conditions.

And, as consumer demand increases, so does the need for skilled workers. Healthcare's support occupations (23.2 percent) and healthcare practitioners and technical occupations (15.2 percent) will account for 14 of the 30 fastest-growing jobs and are projected to contribute about one-fifth of all new jobs by 2026, according to the Employment Projections: 2016-26 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"You can look at the national trends, and there's some statistic that would say we don't have enough young people going into aging services," says Peggy Farrington, MPH, MHA, CDP, CADDCT, St. Joseph's CEO and administrator. "The aging population is something that we've talked about for over a decade, but what are we actually doing about it?"



The intergenerational living program offers young adults an opportunity to learn more about the long-term care industry while giving them a place to live and work while going to college. Photo courtesy of Cindy Shain Photography.



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Skilled nursing providers are in dire need of new ideas for finding workers, particularly in Maine. The Maine Department of Labor's Center for Workforce Research and Information (CWRI) estimates that between 2014 and 2024, nursing assistant employment will grow 9.2 percent. Total overall employment in Maine is expected to increase 0.8 percent.

The industry will continue to grow, with an expected 84 annual growth openings and 207 annual replacement openings. The CWRI 2015 job vacancy survey anticipates 921 job openings for nursing assistants, the fourth highest vacancy rate.

Compounding the staffing crisis is an aging workforce. The nation's median age has increased nearly a decade since 1970. The impact is felt hardest in Maine, the oldest workforce in the nation. The median age of Maine workers is 44.5 years old, nearly seven years above the U.S. average, according to a Maine Workforce Outlook: 2014 to 2024 report from CWRI.

Many thanks to Omnicare, the program sponsor of the 2017 OPTIMA Award for Excellence in Resident-Focused Care.

Furthermore, Maine's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 3.7 percent in September 2017, lower than the national rate of 4.2 percent and reached a 40-year low earlier this spring.

In other words, it's the mother of all silver tsunamis in Maine: Providers need to hire more workers to maintain census or grow, which the baby boomers will necessitate. Healthcare jobs are increasing in demand, and the pool of people to fill them is shrinking.

Costly problem

The growing need for healthcare workers is putting a strain on providers and employees while threatening residents' quality of care. St. Joseph's had a chronic staffing shortage, particularly for certified nursing assistants (CNAs).

They tried what everyone else was doing—sign-on bonuses, shift differentials, wage increases—but realized that wouldn't solve their problem in the long run.

"We were really just stealing the CNA from a facility down the street," Farrington says. "We'd pay 25 cents more. Then they would do it. They may be our competitors for the market, but they're also our colleagues, and we're all in need of CNAs."

HR Director Jon Dahms says they post openings on their website and several online job boards local to Maine. They've tried radio ads and even direct mailing. But still, the vacancy rate consistently hovers around 25 full-time equivalent openings.

St. Joseph's, like many other providers, relies on staffing agencies to fill the gap. But the turnover isn't good for residents who benefit from consistent staffing. It's also costly.



The intergenerational living program has primarily spread through word of mouth. Students recruited their friends, siblings and even boyfriend's sibling. Photo by Nicole Stempak

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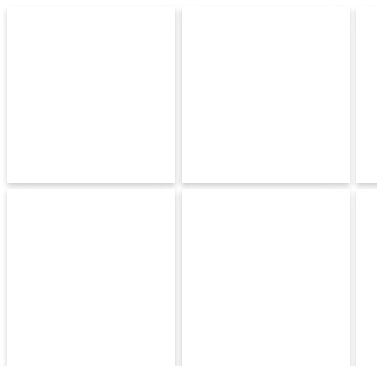
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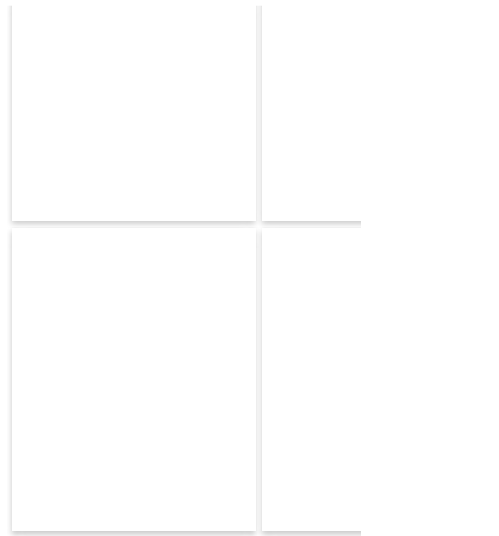
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