

**Executive Summary**  
Older Workers in Direct Care: A Labor Force Expansion Study  
A Better Jobs Better Care Project of  
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and  
The Atlantic Philanthropies

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**The entire research report and Microsoft PowerPoint® presentation of the findings can be downloaded at:**

[www.SPECAssociates.org](http://www.SPECAssociates.org)  
[www.OperationABLE.org](http://www.OperationABLE.org)

**Overview:** Two converging dynamics in our society point to the critical importance of finding ways to attract older workers to jobs in long term care. First, labor shortages in the long term care industry are already apparent and are reaching crisis levels. Second, America is graying and many older Americans are confronting serious economic problems.

This study examined whether the older worker is a ready but untapped source to alleviate a percentage of the shortage in the long term care workforce. It examined the kind of work older workers are suited for, and if they want to do paraprofessional work in nursing homes and home health agencies when certain conditions are met. An examination of how mature workers view direct care employment in nursing homes and home health agencies can significantly contribute not only to recruitment strategies and workforce designs to attract and retain older workers, but also to policy and program development that affects training and subsidized employment dollars.

Many employers have concerns about hiring older workers. Their concerns are diverse: fears regarding loss of productivity, concern for higher employee health insurance costs, fear that absenteeism will rise, and in some cases, simple ignorance regarding the abilities and potential of older workers. What is not known is whether employers in long term care have these same perceptions of older workers. This study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the perceptions that long term care employers have about older workers, and how they might translate into recruitment methods, training programs, retention strategies and public policy.

Employers interested in hiring older workers can take advantage of federal dollars to help offset their training costs. Two federal streams of dollars are potentially available to assist low income older adults. Nationally, a portion of the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) can be used for training adults age 55 and older who are at or below 125% of the poverty level. Also, the federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) provides employment and training dollars through one stop career centers for individuals at all income levels and various age groups. This study examined the extent to which long-term care employers access these public workforce development dollars.

**Study Design:** Between September, 2003 and August, 2005 Operation ABLE of Michigan worked with Operation ABLEs in six other states and with the research firm, SPEC Associates, to survey representatives of nursing homes (NH), home health agencies (HHA) and low income participants in Operation ABLE workforce development programs.

The six other Operation ABLE agencies that participated in the study are:

1. Operation ABLE of Greater Boston
2. Operation ABLE of Southeast Nebraska
3. Vermont Associates for Training and Development (an Operation ABLE serving Vermont)
4. National ABLE Network (representing Chicago and some of Los Angeles and Vermont)
5. Jewish Council for the Aging (JCA) of Greater Washington (a unit of JCA functions as an Operation ABLE serving Maryland)
6. Career Encores (an Operation ABLE in Los Angeles)

To complete this study, the research team:

1. Conducted preliminary focus groups for the purpose of designing three telephone survey questionnaires. Focus groups were conducted in Michigan, Nebraska and California with nine representatives of NHs, 17 representatives of HHAs and 40 low income mature workers from Operation ABLE programs.
2. Randomly sampled 891 NHs and 642 HHAs from the list of Medicare and Medicaid certified agencies available from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services.
3. Completed telephone interviews with representatives of 615 NHs (69% response rate) and 410 HHAs (64% response rate).
4. Completed telephone interviews with 1,091 participants (85% response rate) of Operation ABLE programs whose income levels were at or below 125% of poverty. Of these, the 696 respondents who are 55 years or older (mature workers) were the focus of the analysis because it is this aging workforce that is of interest to consumer organizations such as AARP, and is the target of special federal initiatives for the aging such as the SCSEP.
5. Conducted focus groups in Vermont, Illinois, Massachusetts and Maryland with 12 representatives of NHs, 12 representatives of HHAs and 48 Operation ABLE participants for the purpose of interpreting the survey results.

**Major findings:** This study yielded eight key findings:

#1: Mature (55+) workers are interested in paraprofessional health careers

A large percent (43%) of mature workers expressed an interest in direct care work and 60% want to work at least 30 hours a week. The majority (55%) of all surveyed said that they would attend a 75-hour certification training program and almost all (86%) are interested in career advancement opportunities. More than half of the survey population are interested in working in a nursing home or institutional setting (57%) or in someone's own home (69%).

#2: Employers in nursing homes and home health agencies have very positive perceptions of mature workers

The majority of survey respondents reported positive differences between direct care workers who are 55+ compared with their younger counterparts. Fifty percent or more of the NH and/or HHA employers said that mature workers are *more likely* to: be loyal to employers; be independent, self-directed or self-disciplined; have practical knowledge and skills; understand clients' situations; be patient with clients; be a team player; be motivated to do a good job; solve problems independently; desire to care for the sick, elderly or disabled; gain the trust of clients; and communicate well with

clients. Fifty percent or more of the NH and/or HHA employers said that mature workers are *less likely* to: leave within 10 days of training; leave within 90 days of hire; have background checks; have care giving responsibilities that interfere with work; be absent from work; and leave to take a job with higher pay or benefits. There was a less positive perception among most NH (59%) and HHA (57%) employers that mature workers are not willing to use technology such as the computer or a palm pilot.

### #3: There are real and perceived deterrents to hiring and recruiting 55+ workers

While employers had very positive perceptions of their 55+ direct care workers, inconsistencies in the survey data and comments from the interpretive focus groups suggest that there are real and perceived deterrents to hiring mature workers, including: (a) some employers believe that health care costs would increase, (b) some employers believe that laws regarding age discrimination restrict their ability to target recruiting toward mature workers, (c) many workers in this sample rely on public transportation to get to work, (d) the majority of employers believe that older workers are unwilling to use technology, (e) workers had concerns about the cost of CNA certification training, and (f) workers' wage expectations were higher than the national average for direct care work.

### #4: Frontline jobs in home health agencies are more conducive to the needs and interests of mature workers than are direct care jobs in nursing homes

Older workers reported an interest in jobs both in nursing homes/institutions (57%) and in "someone's own home" (69%). However, when asked about specific job tasks, older workers preferred tasks involving emotional support (76%) and supervision of clients (69%) over hands on tasks (28%). Home health agencies (48%) are more likely than nursing homes (19%) to differentially assign work based on the physical abilities of workers. HHAs (50%) are also more likely than NHs (25%) to differentially assign clients based on other characteristics of the workers.

### #5: Employers wanting to hire mature workers should consider new avenues for recruiting

Mature workers seek job opportunities in many of the same places that employers advertise. But workers in this study also seek job opportunities in places unlikely to be used by employers such as senior centers, ads in employment guides, employment and training organizations, unemployment offices and places of worship.

### #6: Frontline jobs of greatest interest to mature workers seem to be the least plentiful job positions in nursing homes

Mature workers tend to be more interested in the job positions of activity aide (74%), medication assistant (67%) or rehab aide (58%) than in the job of direct care worker (43%). Unfortunately, employers in focus groups reported that frequently there is *only one* staff person with these job positions in their nursing homes, and that these job positions are often given as "perks" to frontline workers who have seniority.

### #7: Stereotypes about physical capacity should not dissuade employers from looking at mature workers for frontline work

More than 50% of mature workers reported being able to have functional capacity needed for jobs in direct care such as lifting 25 pounds, walking about a mile, stooping to the floor and reaching overhead. Although employers in focus groups cautioned that these results were probably liberal estimates because the survey questions did not ask whether these functions could be done day in and day out, employers also indicated that age is not the major criteria that they use when assessing

functional abilities of potential workers. Employers also reported that many functional limitations could be minimized by the appropriate use of mechanical aides.

#8: Employment and training organizations can reduce technological barriers to employing mature workers in nursing homes and home health agencies

Employment and training organizations such as Operation ABLEs specialize in technology training. Given employers' perceptions that mature workers are less willing to learn technology, Operation ABLEs and similar employment and training organizations could become the training ground for teaching mature workers technology skills needed in nursing home and home health care settings.

**Implications:** Research results suggest the following steps that Operation ABLEs can take to promote the use of mature workers for frontline jobs in nursing homes and home health agencies:

- Learn about the technology needs of nursing homes and home health agencies and integrate these new technologies into Operation ABLE training programs
- Educate ABLE participants about employers' perceptions and how to use them in their job searches
- Educate employers about the value of mature workers in nursing homes and home health agencies, and ways to recruit them
- Educate policy makers about the value of linking mature workers to direct care jobs and how Operation ABLEs can facilitate this

Research results suggest the following steps that policy makers can take to support the use of mature workers in frontline jobs in nursing homes and home health agencies:

- Support efforts to increase and enforce training of frontline workers in the use of mechanical aids
- Investigate ways that the Senior Community Service Employment Program and Workforce Investment Act adult programs can support the preparation of mature workers for jobs in nursing homes and home health agencies
- Examine faith-based initiatives as a source of public funding for recruiting mature workers through places of worship

Future research questions include:

- How many "ABLE-like" mature workers are there in programs similar to Operation ABLE and in the general population?
- What is the best way to find mature workers inside and outside of the employment and training provider network?
- What percent of the gap in frontline workers can mature workers fill?
- What is the best use of Operation ABLEs in helping interested participants and employers fill the need for frontline workers in long term care?