

Staffing in long-term care: A contingency staffing plan at the time of an ongoing pandemic for preparedness and continuity of care



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The Pennsylvania Department of Health, Long-Term Care Resiliency, Infrastructure, Support and Empowerment (LTC RISE) program provided resources and best practices regarding contingency staffing plans to long-term care facilities. These plans aim to combat staffing shortages and minimize staff burnout to maximize resident health and safety.



The “What”

The Pennsylvania Department of Health, Long-Term Care Resiliency, Infrastructure, Support and Empowerment (LTC RISE) program, which receives funding through the Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) cooperative agreement was started in January 2022 to assist long-term care facilities (LTCFs). This included the Quality Improvement Team (QIT), responsible for infection prevention and facility-wide education initiatives, and the Emergency Response Team (ERT), responsible for outbreak assistance in the wake of a COVID-19 outbreak. With these combined teams, LTC RISE has been able to touch numerous facilities across all of Pennsylvania, helping to minimize infection and maximize resiliency. Staffing is an important but often overlooked aspect of long-term care. Staffing crises go hand-in-hand with outbreaks, especially with outbreaks of COVID-19. When staff shortages occur, the quality of care for vulnerable populations is directly impacted.

Since its inception, LTC RISE has monitored the status of staffing at all facilities. Understanding the resident census and staffing numbers is always important for success of a facility and optimization of care for residents. In the beginning of the program, and with the declaration of the Public Health Emergency (PHE), agency staffing was provided to facilities and contingency staffing and staff sharing was utilized. By implementing these measures, LTC RISE helped combat staffing crises at many facilities.



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However, at the end of the Public Health Emergency and the repeal of various state supports, LTC RISE needed to work with facilities to develop a staffing plan for facilities to maintain the quality of resident care. This plan helped guide facilities to know when to reach out for agency staffing and taught facility leadership how to combat staffing shortages within a facility and focused on minimizing staff burnout. By helping facilities create these contingency staffing plans and making recommendations, LTC RISE was able to assist in combating the staffing crisis at many facilities.

With continued education and development of a contingency staffing plan, facilities not only saw benefit in maintaining a resilient workforce, but they also maximized resident health and safety.

The “So What”

LTC RISE had a significant impact on long-term care facilities by promoting contingency staffing. Many facilities found relief through contingency staffing and explored innovative solutions to combat staffing shortages. The program educated facilities on appropriate staff return times, reducing the spread of infection.

After the initial staffing requests from 37 facilities, follow-ups revealed 19 facilities did not require multiple staffing requests to the state. Of the 18 that did submit multiple requests, 14 of them had at least one deferral as they had sufficient contingency staffing plans in place. With continued education and development of a contingency staffing plan, facilities not only saw benefit in maintaining a resilient workforce, but they also maximized resident health and safety. Having adequate staffing to continue resident care was critical to the success of the facilities, minimizing deficiencies, and continuing the satisfaction of residents and their families.

The “Now What”

Building on LTC RISE’s efforts with contingency staffing, there is room for improvement and expansion. It is important to understand what threshold facilities are used to implement contingency staffing plans and if that threshold should be reassessed over time. Another way to further improve staffing numbers through LTC RISE efforts would be recruitment. Through community engagement with the LTC RISE program, a better understanding of the local nursing programs can be gained. By integrating the idea of care in the LTC field to local education programs, getting new

graduates interested in LTC, and wanting to take positions in LTC even prior to graduation is paramount to minimizing staffing shortages. An educational initiative which is gaining popularity is the burnout training presented by QIT to LTCF staff and administration. Through this training, QIT is providing avenues of support to recognize, combat, and prevent staff burnout. It is the hope of the LTC RISE program that this training, in conjunction with contingency staff planning, will help support staff, improve morale, and provide guidance to improve the staffing pool of the facility.

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