



Nurse Residency in Long-Term Care A CASE STUDY

Like many long-term care facilities, Attic Angel Place experienced turnover among its nursing staff. Their rate was much lower than the industry average, says Director of Nursing Services Lisa McGlynn, but it was still higher than the organization wanted it to be. Knowing that nursing turnover affects quality and cost of care, Attic Angel prioritized improving nursing staff retention and included it as an annual quality improvement goal. So when the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Nursing’s Center on Aging Research and Education (CARE) offered Geri-Res, its new long-term care residency program, free of charge to area organizations as part of its final testing phase, Attic Angel signed on.



The Challenge

McGlynn has worked in long-term care nursing at Attic Angel for 20 years, so she knows longevity in the field is not impossible. Yet she also knows that geriatric nursing practice presents obstacles that are often unsurmountable to early-career nurses. Patient loads are high while care—both direct care to residents and support to the family—can be technically and socially complex. While many clinical settings offer extended formal training programs, organizations like Attic Angel place do not have the capacity to replicate the year-long residency programs that are becoming standard at many hospitals. New nurses quickly find themselves in unfamiliar situations and often lack the critical thinking skills they need to identify solutions or resources. Compounding this is the fact that nursing practice in long-term care settings is also more isolated than it is in hospitals, where nurses have extensive, immediate access to medical specialists along with physical therapists, respiratory therapists, and more.

"In long-term care, you don't have all of the support systems available to you in the hospital," McGlynn said. "It's a lot harder than people recognize. There are no doctors here. There are no specialists. It's you. You are each specialist."

For many new nurses, it is a recipe for frustration, dissatisfaction, and disappointment that drives them away. Yet McGlynn knows the autonomy of geriatric practice and the opportunity to establish and sustain relationships with residents can be richly rewarding. The key is getting new nurses over those early hurdles so they can settle in and feel successful.

The Solution

That is why Geri-Res caught McGlynn's eye. Geri-Res is a 16-module long-term care residency program developed by experts in nursing research and practice and modeled on successful hospital residence programs in place throughout the country. The goal is to better prepare nurses for long-term care practice so they feel comfortable in the setting and competent and supported in their work.

Geri-Res uses a blended delivery format of online learning along with organizational administrators and trained coaches who implement the program onsite after extensive preparation and with ongoing support from the CARE team. Over the course of 16 weeks, nurse residents and their coaches work through the 60–90 minute modules as part of their paid orientation. The modules include readings, exercises such as chart reviews, and assignments that connect new nurses with colleagues and leaders throughout the organization as they work through problems or develop evidence-based recommendations for practice improvements.



Having a leadership team supporting staff development, and committed to the implementation of the program, is a huge factor in the success of the new nurse. Lisa and Betsy were champions of the process and showed their team they were investing in them, fostering a culture where nurses can thrive. "

Kimberly Nolet, Research Manager, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Nursing.

The Implementation

Betsy Gerhardt is an Attic Angel nurse and one of the Geri-Res coaches. She volunteered to participate because she understood the challenges new nurses face, and she "wanted to help them connect the dots."

Geri-Res did that and more. Both Gerhardt and McGlynn recognized improved critical thinking skills in the nurse residents even before they completed the program. By the end, McGlynn says, the residents were on par with peers who had been practicing at Attic Angel for years. They could see the improvements in assessment, charting, and even initiative. The nurses came to their managers with fewer questions and more solutions. "It wasn't 'What should I do?'" Gerhardt said, "It was 'I did this and I'm letting you know.'"

Both Gerhardt and McGlynn were impressed with how well and how quickly Geri-Res worked to develop competence and confidence in the nurse residents. What surprised them was the effect the program had on the rest of the nursing staff and the organization as a whole. The program fostered a culture of inquiry among the staff. Nurses were talking to each other more and seemed less afraid to ask questions. They began to perceive their uncertainty less as signs of inexperience or lack of skill and more as opportunities for learning and growth. Nurses openly expressed interest in participating in the program in the future.

"They want to be a coach. They want to be a part of it," Gerhardt said. "They see what it brings."

McGlynn agrees. "It's a good way for a nurse to make an impact and make change in the workplace," she says. "How often do you really get to say that?"

Gerhardt credits the quality of the program itself, and points out that the organizational preparation, the coach training, the modules themselves, and the ongoing support throughout implementation were essential to their success. She particularly likes the pacing.



The one-module-per-week approach, she says, afforded coaches and residents the time to refresh concepts learned in school, to explore topics and ideas that might not seem relevant to their current practice, and to better understand the context of nursing practice in long-term care. All of it—reviewing what they thought they already knew, learning things they might encounter in the future, and understanding how their processes affect the cost of care or even Medicare reimbursements—helped the nurse residents better understand and appreciate their role in the organization. Also, the reminder that sometimes if they slow down and take their time, they can figure out whatever challenge is in front of them. When they do that, Gerhardt says, "It's not new. It's not scary."

The residents were able to embrace the learning process, Gerhardt says, because Attic Angel demonstrated enthusiasm for Geri-Res throughout the program. "They appreciate, too, that we're investing in them," Gerhardt said. "They're noticing that we care. Even the seasoned nurses are appreciative of it."

The best part was that Geri-Res worked. Not only did the nurse resident skills improve and the nursing environment grow more collaborative, but the short-term turnover rate significantly decreased.

"I thought we had a really good orientation program," McGlynn said, "but Geri-Res has just been amazing."

UW–Madison School of Nursing graduates demonstrate excellent clinical knowledge, and the school is highly regarded in the community. You know when something is coming from the UW it has been thoroughly researched."

Lisa McGlynn, Director of Nursing Services at Attic Angel Place

The Results

The results were overwhelmingly positive, and Attic Angel identified numerous direct benefits for participant nurses and coaches as well as indirect benefits for their nursing colleagues and for the organization. These included the following:

- **Improved competence.** Growth was particularly evident in assessment and charting, although improvements included a better understanding of geriatric nursing practice overall.
- **Greater awareness of the complex regulatory environment.** McGlynn says that when the nurses understood why processes existed — and how these processes helped Attic Angel meet regulatory requirements to protect nurses and promote resident well-being — nurses followed these processes and documented them more systematically.
- **Demonstrated growth in decision making and critical thinking skills.** Where newer nurses might simply record assessments or bring basic questions to nurse managers, Geri-Res nurses took assessments, made decisions, and, when necessary, communicated their actions to managers. The improvements in critical thinking and decision making were evident upon completion of the program and mirrored growth that typical Attic Angel nurses took three to five years to demonstrate.
- **Increased initiative.** Upon completion of Geri-Res, nurses asked fewer questions about what they should do and instead made appropriate decisions, took action, and informed their supervisors.
- **Greater confidence in their work.** Instead of feeling uncertain and overwhelmed when they didn't have an answer, nurses grew to recognize that it is appropriate to not have all the answers all the time. Instead of feeling inadequate in their preparation and skills, nurses looked to fill knowledge and skill gaps as a way to deliver better care, enhance their learning, and develop their skill sets.
- **Fostered a culture of inquiry.** Even nurses who did not participate as residents or coaches demonstrated increased curiosity in the program and eagerness to learn.

- **Fostered mentorship and collaboration within the nursing staff.** Nurses reported less isolation and greater awareness of being part of a team and having colleagues who could serve as resources and provide support.

Shaping the Future of Long-Term Care Nursing

Exceptional care and quality of life are products of a highly skilled nursing staff. It's not surprising that early-career nurses might not yet have all the skills they need, so how can they get there?

Research shows that residency programs improve nurse preparedness for safe and competent practice, improve nurse retention, increase confidence, and lower costs.

Geri-Res is a residency program for the new long-term care nurse, expertly developed at the Center for Aging Research and Education at the world-class University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Nursing by long-term care nurse practitioners and researchers. Because we know that when nurses love what they do, and know they are doing it right, they're greatly improving care and impacting lives.

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