



## Strengthening our Response: Support Home Care Workers and Protect Consumers with Long-Term Care Needs

### Summary

Home and community-based services (HCBS) are a critical yet often overlooked part of the health care system that enables older adults and people with disabilities to live independently in the community. Low pay and minimal training mean that there is a severe shortage of home and personal care workers. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these existing issues. Home care agencies are experiencing extreme [shortages in personal protective equipment \(PPE\)](#) while demand for their services [increases](#), leaving both workers and the clients they serve highly vulnerable to COVID-19 exposure. To protect them and to ensure consumers receive high-quality, person-centered care, policymakers must invest in the home care workforce, providing them with the resources they need to work safely and minimize risk. Congress should **prioritize home care workers and their employers in PPE distribution, improve wages and workplace protections for home care workers and provide funding that enables states to expand HCBS services.**

### The Problem

People with complex health needs, including older adults and people with disabilities, are at greater risk for experiencing complications from the COVID-19 virus and face a number of barriers to getting services that meet their health and social needs. Now more than ever, it is essential they are able to access the HCBS they rely on to stay healthy, independent, and at home. Every precaution must be taken to limit their risk of exposure from a visiting care worker.

The workforce tasked with supporting the health and independence of older adults and people with disabilities is long overdue for safe and fair workplace conditions. Home care workers are [disproportionately immigrants and women of color](#) (especially Black, Latinx or Hispanic people), often earn minimum wage and receive few employer-sponsored benefits such as paid sick leave or premium pay. According to a recent PHI [report](#), one in four home care workers live in households below the poverty line and earn a median annual income of \$13,300. Low wages mean workers [often struggle](#) to find adequate child care and safe transportation to their jobs.

Despite being the critical workforce that makes it possible for older adults and people with disabilities to live independently, **home care workers do not receive adequate wages, benefits or workplace protections.** The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the dangers of neglecting this workforce any longer. Home health workers of color, especially Black workers, are experiencing the [severe health consequences](#) of structural racism. Having to work without sufficient PPE only increases their risk of COVID-19 exposure and further endangers the communities they live in and the consumers they support. Congress can take action to support both patients and the frontline workforce.

### The Solution

In order to protect older adults and people with disabilities, Congress must work to ensure home care workers have adequate supports and protections. There is a clear rationale for why home care workers are so vital in this moment:

- People with complex needs are [already at risk](#) of disability-based discrimination if they seek medical care for COVID-19. Now more than ever, it is essential they are able to utilize the home health care they rely on to stay healthy, independent, and at home.
- Home care results in [good outcomes](#), reducing anxiety for patients and giving health workers a lens into a person's home context to consider other factors that influence their health such as food access and housing security;
- Home care is one of the fastest growing supports to the health care system – the number of adults over [85 is expected to triple by 2050](#), leading to a surge in demand of home care workers – investing in them now will build infrastructure for a fast-growing labor force.

There are several steps that congressional leadership should pursue to ensure that home health workers are prioritized and valued. Congress should:

- **Recognize home care workers as an essential part of the health care workforce by prioritizing home care workers and their employers in PPE distribution.** Congress can increase production of PPE for health care and essential workers as included in the [HEROES Act](#), which would ensure home care agencies and independent providers can access urgently needed PPE for their workers.
- **Improve wages and workplace protections for home care workers.** Congress must provide wage increases, premium pay for high-risk care work, overtime pay, and paid sick, family and medical leave to workers. The HEROES Act provided a step in the right direction. Specifically, the bill requires the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration to issue a temporary standard to protect front-line employees from exposure to COVID-19 and includes premium or hazard pay. Investing in the home care worker workforces is a dual investment in the economy and public health by reducing reliance on congregate care.
- **Prioritize funding that enables states to expand HCBS services.** The HEROES Act begins to address this lack of resources with a 10% temporary increase in the FMAP for Medicaid HCBS providers, but these changes should remain after the emergency period. States can use this new funding for improvements that eliminate waiting lists and increase benefits and wages for home care workers.

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