



Assisted Living: It's time for change

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ASSISTED LIVING is an alternative to long-term care for adults who can live independently and make decisions on their own behalf but need a supportive environment due to health challenges. This support includes help with meals, taking medication, or other day-to-day activities.

HISTORY

Assisted Living (AL) was created in 2002 under the BC Liberal government’s Continuing Care Renewal Plan to help reduce wait times for long-term care. Initially, AL residents could choose to have up to two prescribed services, such as laundry and housekeeping.

In December 2019, Bill 16 amendments to the Community Care and Assisted Living Act (CCALA) were enacted. These amendments removed the limit of two “prescribed services,” now defining AL as premises in which housing, hospitality, and any number of seven “assisted living services” are provided. This means that AL workers (ALW) have a lot more work to do without appropriate supports to help them do it.

Although AL was designed to provide adults with a lower level of support than they would receive in long-term care, the reality of AL has changed drastically since 2002. Due to residents’ rising complex medical needs, AL workers’ responsibilities have increased, without that being reflected in their wages.

During COVID-19, these challenges have been exacerbated, increasing members’ workloads and responsibilities even further. As some

“Care aides are challenged to juggle both cleaning and care work due to higher needs residents.”

DOROTHY NELSON,
*Assisted Living worker,
Vancouver*

residents experienced challenges and declines during the pandemic, AL workers stepped up, often without the staffing and other support they needed.

It is time to fix the problems in Assisted Living and make sure that workers have safe working conditions and wages that reflect the complexity of their work.

CHANGES IN ASSISTED LIVING AND CHANGES IN WORKING CONDITIONS

A lot has changed in Assisted Living since 2002, including the needs of residents.

- It is time to review the AL assessment process to ensure BC's seniors are in the most appropriate living arrangement to meet their changing care needs.
- ALWs have more work responsibilities and an increasing workload due to the complex needs of residents. However, wages have not increased to reflect these changes.
- ALWs are experiencing unsafe working conditions and more risk of injury due to short staffing.

CORE ISSUES

AL has evolved from when it was first conceptualized, and with it, workload and responsibilities for workers have evolved too.

Staffing levels are a chronic issue resulting in unsustainable workloads. The present and future needs of the workforce need to be addressed.

ALWs are increasingly forced to make decisions about the medical needs of residents beyond the scope of their job.

Staff often work by themselves during evening and night shifts. During night shifts, ALWs also oversee night security, resident night checks and tend to arising emergencies in addition to their normal duties. This is an overwhelming amount of work that is impossible for one worker to do. It also forces ALWs to exercise a considerable amount of discretion if a resident falls or experiences challenges.

Workplace injuries are an increased threat due to unsustainable workloads. Assisted Living workers need strong Joint Occupational Health and Safety (JOHS) Committees at their sites to ensure their right to safe work.

“There’s a lot of staff turnover because residents with higher care needs are not properly assessed and are allowed in our facility. Previously, residents did the majority of their own care, now they can’t, and it’s creating huge workload issues.”

TAMMY GARBUTT,
*Assisted Living worker,
Osyoos*

Although ALW's workload has increased and has become more complex, wages have not changed to reflect that. The Province needs to standardize wages and benefits to a provincial standard, to better reflect the complex and important work ALWs do.

HEU RECOMMENDS THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT:

Improve the assessment process for residents

- Since AL was created in 2002, there have been significant changes in AL worksites. More residents have more complex needs, which in turn means members have more responsibility and a higher workload.
- The Province needs to create a screening method to ensure that AL is the appropriate level of care for residents. As residents' care needs change, there needs to be a plan in place to ensure they receive the care they need.

Address increasing workload issues

- As resident needs have changed, so has workload. ALWs have more duties and responsibilities now than ever before.
- Members are forced to exercise their discretion beyond their job's scope of duties.
- Increase staffing in AL and ensure staff have the training they need.

Implement standard wages and benefits to a provincial standard

- The wage difference amongst Assisted Living workers is almost \$5 an hour. The lowest wage in a private but subsidized facility is \$19.16. The comparable wage in the Community Health Agreement is \$23.99.
- Wage inconsistencies exacerbate short staffing. Increase wages and benefits to a standardized provincial level to address high turnover rates and shortages.

Address workplace injuries and risk factors

- With increased responsibilities and more job duties, workers face higher probabilities of workplace injuries.
- The safety and wellbeing of workers needs to be a priority. Analyze worker injury rates, and establish JOHS committees in all AL worksites.



Address the present and future needs of the Assisted Living workforce

- Create a recruitment and retention strategy rooted in making jobs in AL good jobs.
- Ensure that consistent training and educational opportunities are available to all AL staff.

IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

- The pandemic has increased workload immensely. Workers took on more tasks, including bringing food into rooms, taking temperatures and documenting, and providing more emotional support for residents.
- The pandemic greatly exacerbated short-staffing. Many sites lost staff due to single-site orders; moreover, not many sites hired new workers. This resulted in many staff burning out. Assisted Living workers expressed that there is a lot of overtime, often, almost too much.

THE SOLUTION

It is time to fix Assisted Living by:

- Providing more support with equitable staffing levels, which include having multiple staff on every shift and training that reflects their increased duties.
- Implementing a recruitment and retention plan that both addresses staffing and education and training.
- Improve wages to reflect increased job duties and workload.

Assisted Living workers deserve to have safe, respectful working conditions.

ABOUT HEU

Established in 1944 at Vancouver General Hospital, the Hospital Employees' Union is B.C.'s largest health care union, with more than 50,000 health care and community social services workers across the province in hospitals, assisted living, care homes, community agencies, and First Nations health centres.

HEU represents more than 7,500 members working in Assisted Living services at 67 locations in B.C.

