

Workers Are at the Heart of BJBC

Direct Care Workers, in Their Own Words

by Erin King

Better Jobs Better Care (BJBC) is all about direct care workers—their empowerment, their training and the culture in which they work.

BJBC is also about the development of direct care workers' leadership qualities. The five BJBC demonstration projects used a variety of ways to achieve this—creating and strengthening direct care worker associations, involving direct care workers in policy and practice changes and implementing leadership trainings. Some of the individual transformations were extraordinary.



Kathy Lynds

At the final meeting of the BJBC grantees in June 2006, six of these remarkable individuals addressed the group, inspiring one attendee to remark, “These very eloquent workers remind us why we are doing this work.”

These dynamic women brought years of direct care work with them. They spoke candidly about their work and the effect BJBC has had on their jobs and their lives.

For Kathy Lynds, participating in curriculum development, workshops and legislative forums through BJBC has enhanced her work at a Vermont nursing home: “Being involved in BJBC, my love for the residents and pride in my work all have helped make my job more satisfying and a lot easier to get through during the tough times.”

Lynne Marie Villareal, working at a Vermont home-health agency, found that her job responsibilities have changed for the better as a result of her involvement with BJBC. She now participates in peer-mentor training, leads training sessions with other staff and has coordinated a skills fair for other direct care workers.

Cynthia Petree, who works as a resident care director in a North Carolina assisted living facility, found the coaching-supervision training she took through BJBC invaluable. The training teaches supervisors how to help other employees develop their own problem-solving skills while still holding them accountable for their actions.



Lynne Marie Villareal

Because of the training, Petree knew what to do when a certified nursing assistant (CNA) suddenly walked off the job.

“The training taught me to first take the time to find out what happened and work with both the CNA and management to resolve the problem,” Petree said. “She was able to keep her job. It made all the difference.” She hopes to take what she learned from this and initiate changes throughout her facility.



Cynthia Petree

Linda Buehler started a support group for direct care workers in her Pennsylvania nursing home. The group provides a place where workers can find mutual support and guidance. To show their commitment, the workers, along with their staff advisor, crafted a mission statement and pledge that they recite at the beginning of every meeting, held twice a month during all shifts. One of their proudest achievements was developing a program to welcome and support new workers. It has made all the difference. Because of Buehler's leadership, the administrator and director of nursing services now include workers in focus groups and policy changes and make a point of

soliciting their ideas and input.


The panelists also talked about how BJBC has helped them personally. Lynds said BJBC has helped develop her public speaking and training skills, while Petree feels BJBC has made her a better listener. These feelings were echoed by Joyce King, a home care worker from Iowa, who was a member of the audience. King said she has “gained more confidence in my communication and leadership skills.” Michelle Read from Oregon summed it up best when she said, “Thanks to BJBC, we see our value and know our worth.”



Linda Buehler

Despite the difficulties associated with being direct care workers, the panelists agreed that what keeps them coming back every day is their relationship with the residents. For Petree, “No matter what kind of day I'm

having, the residents make it for me.” That sentiment was echoed by Karla Happel from Iowa, who feels that direct care work is “the only job where you really get rewarded every day.” Villareal finds the work “healing.”

At the end of the session, Dolly Fleming, program director of the Vermont demonstration project, summed up the feelings of many in the audience when she said, to resounding applause, “I am an executive director, but I aspire to be a direct care worker. There is such beauty, dignity and sacredness to the work.” 

This article is adapted from Insights, the quarterly newsletter of Better Jobs Better Care. Erin King is a former intern with AAHSA's Institute for the Future of Aging Services. For more information on Better Jobs Better care, visit www.bjbc.org.