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TOPIC: Long-Term Services & Supports

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Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience on the topic of providing long-term services and supports to our nation's elderly.

My name is Arnold Nicholson and I have worked in many professions and worn many different hats in my life: teacher, paralegal, marketing manager, certified nursing assistant, security guard, and homecare worker. I have been a homecare worker for the past 6 years, and homecare is my way of giving back and caring for those who can't care for themselves.

Homecare workers love what we do; but what we do doesn't love us back. The extremely low-wages, absence of the most basic benefits like workers compensation coverage, and the lack of job training all shows a lack of respect for both caregivers and for the seniors we serve.

I have cared for two elderly gentlemen during my career as a homecare worker; one was a stroke survivor and the other was a brain cancer patient. I attended to their physical, emotional, and social needs. I washed them up in the morning; gave them showers, dressed them, brushed their teeth and combed their hair. It was my job to ambulate them -- move them and stand them up to keep them limber and avoid stiffness from immobility. I fed them their meals, sometimes by hand if they couldn't feed themselves. I accompanied them to their appointments and made sure they took their medications. I also made sure that they had the comforts inside their home that they desired to have: I took them for walks in their wheelchairs, or placed them in their favorite chairs to watch a favorite TV show.

At the end of the day, seeing that I brought satisfaction and a high quality of care into their lives was rewarding to me. When you care for someone day-in and day-out, there is a bond that begins to develop, they start to see you as one of their own.

This is honorable work that allows us to give our patients a high quality of care, but we're not getting to enjoy the same quality of life through wages or benefits that would allow us to care for our families. Caring for the two elderly gentlemen, I made between \$10 and \$11/hour. As a result, I had five jobs total, working two additional CNA jobs plus a job in security. I was easily working 80 or 90 hours a week to make ends meet.

At the end of the day, it leaves you kind of disappointed because you're always trying to figure out what else you can do to make ends meet. You have to figure out how to survive, but working those kinds of hours start to wear you down eventually. After so many hours at work, mental and physical fatigue starts to set in. When you get tired, it can hurt the quality of care you are able to provide.

Working multiple jobs – none of which pays a living wage – also means that a minor setback becomes a major one. My car has been down since last Friday, which means that I'm trying to catch a combination of public transportation and taxi cabs to get to my clients. When a client lives in an area where public transit isn't easily available, I have to do a layover with family in the area because I don't have the luxury of driving home at night.

In addition to the financial stress of trying to make ends meet, being a homecare provider carries with it a huge amount of responsibility. You are in there by yourself, and you really have to know what you're doing because you don't have a team to back you up. You have to have the body mechanics down – how to move the patient, how to stand, how to pivot so that you don't hurt yourself. In the consumer-directed homecare field, we don't have workers compensation insurance – so if we get hurt, we're on our own, completely without protection.

Finally, we need better training. Training is very important because if you don't have it, you can inadvertently hurt yourself or your client. I was fortunate enough to have already received training through my CNA certification, but the training for being a homecare worker was almost nonexistent. You need the heart to do this kind of work, but you also need the skill set and the knowledge to do it safely.

It's not that we don't love what we do as homecare workers; it's that what we do doesn't love us back. There is a very high turnover level due to the low wages and lack of benefits or training. The homecare field is constantly losing good people because while we're providing a good quality of care and life for others, that is not being reciprocated for us. We, as homecare workers, have no choice but to constantly be on the hunt for a job that will better allow us to care for our families.

As a homecare worker, you have to love the people you care for and love what you do. We are just asking for the same dignity and quality of life in return.