

STAFFING BY CONSISTENT ASSIGNMENT

Consistent assignment, also known as primary or permanent assignment, refers to the same caregivers (RNs, LPNs, CNAs) consistently caring for the same residents almost every time they are on duty, at least 80 percent of their shifts. It isn't a very popular or well-known practice, as only about 10 percent of the nation's nursing homes use it.

Instead, most facilities use a very different approach to scheduling, by rotating staff from one group of residents to the next after a short period of time. The reason why rotating staff is a much more popular practice can be traced back to some commonly held beliefs:

- Everyone should be trained on every unit and available everywhere so that staff shortages can be covered;
- Some staff will be "stuck" with "hard-to-care-for" residents; and
- If friends work together, the work won't get done.

Contrary to these beliefs, some recent Center for Medicare and Medicaid-funded studies revealed that inconsistent assignments actually exacerbates instability in staffing, conversely consistent assignments fosters stability. In fact, call outs and turnovers were reduced when meaningful relationships developed in which workers knew they were being counted on and responded by making sure that the care that was needed was given. The research also concluded the following:

- Staff members who care for the same residents form a relationship and get great satisfaction from their work.
- When staff members care for the same people daily, they become familiar with their needs and desires in an entirely different way. Their work is easier because they are not spending extra time getting to know what the resident wants; instead they know from their own experience with the resident.
- When staff and residents know each other well, their relationship makes it possible for care and services to be directed by the resident's routines, preferences and needs.
- Residents who are cared for by the same staff members come to see the people who care for them as "family."

Managers who are considering switching their staffing practice from rotating to consistent assignments should be aware that communication is the key to success. The Quality Partners of Rhode Island recommend the following process for managers to follow when making the transition.

1. Call separate meetings on each nursing unit with all of the CNAs from the day and night shifts.
2. Begin the meeting by explaining that nursing homes that have switched to consistent assignment have improved quality of care and life of the residents and the quality of work for the staff. Suggest that they pilot test consistent assignment and see how it works.
3. Place each resident's name on a post-it note, and place all of the notes on the wall.
4. Next, ask the group to rank each of the residents by degree of difficulty, with number 1 being relatively easy to care for; number 3 in the middle; and number 5 being very difficult to care for (such as time consuming or emotionally draining).
 - a. Let the CNAs discuss each resident and come to an agreement.
 - b. Write the number on the resident's post-it note.
5. Then, allow the CNAs to select their assignments.
 Assignments are fair when the numbers assigned to each resident add up to the other totals of the other CNA assignments. Therefore, if one assignment has six residents and another has eight residents, but the degree of difficulty numbers total 27, then the assignments are fair. Relationships with residents are important and should be part of the decision-making process. The sequence of rooms is less important.
6. Meet every three months to reexamine that the assignments, based upon degree of difficulty, are still fair.

The results of these Center for Medicare and Medicaid-funded studies confirm that staffing by consistent assignments is a foundation for nursing home quality improvement.

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