

CAREER LADDERS FOR LONG-TERM CARE WORKERS

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As the Bell Policy Center has detailed in [previous reports](#), there's a growing crisis within Colorado's caring workforce. This sector is comprised of the workers who provide frontline, hands-on care for our kids, our parents, and our aging friends and neighbors. Despite being responsible for the health and well-being of others, these workers are often underpaid, under trained, and lacking needed benefits and career advancement opportunities. Collectively, these conditions make it difficult for our caring workforce to simultaneously support others and meet the needs of their own families and loved ones.

Creating a stronger, better supported caring workforce requires a multitude of interconnected solutions, including increased compensation, better working conditions, and tailored recruitment and retention initiatives. The development of [career ladders](#) — specific paths which allow workers to advance to higher paid and skilled positions within a given field — must also be part of any well-rounded response. While they exist across incomes and sectors, when used to bolster low-paid, entry-level workers like many of those in the caring workforce, career ladders should include components that address the unique barriers and needs of their beneficiaries.

This brief examines how career ladders can be constructed for a specific segment of our caring workforce — long-term care workers who provide direct support for people with disabilities and older adults. Career ladders can be an important mechanism to help these workers move from in-demand low-paying jobs to in-demand higher paid positions. A successful long-term care career ladder system in Colorado must provide this workforce with comprehensive supports, build upon existing infrastructure, and allow for the development of stackable credentials.

The Long-Term Care Workforce

The [long-term care workforce](#), a subset of the health care sector, is primarily comprised of three positions: home health aides, personal care aides, and certified nursing assistants. Collectively, these workers provide services both in individual homes and facility-based settings like nursing or assisted living centers. On a daily basis, this workforce helps with everything from bathing and meal preparation to transportation and medication management. There are [notable demographic commonalities](#) among the long-term care workforce, which as a whole, has lower levels of formal education, is predominately female, and is disproportionately comprised of workers of color.

Long-term care workers are essential for the health and well-being of our older adults. As a result, with Colorado's rapidly [aging population](#), long-term care workers are one of the [fastest growing positions in the state](#). However, despite the need, the field has tremendous difficulty [recruiting and retaining](#) enough qualified workers. For Colorado's older adults and their families, a shortage of long-term care workers can lead to inadequate or inconsistent care.

Why Career Ladders

Career ladders offer tremendous value to workers, employers, clients, and the overall economy. Two of the most important benefits as it relates to the long-term care workforce include:

- **Increased Opportunity for Economic Advancement:** By providing an avenue to increase worker skills and wages, career ladders inherently promote economic advancement. As a result, these opportunities are especially helpful for low-income workers, like much of the long-term care workforce. In 2017, the [median hourly wage](#) of a long-term care worker in Colorado was only \$13.14 — an amount which barely exceeds twice the federal poverty level for a single individual, a standard which has become a [common definition of self-sufficiency](#). In contrast, an individual needs a median [hourly wage of approximately \\$23](#) to fall squarely within Colorado's middle class.

- Concerningly, research also shows low-wage workers with less education are more likely than their better educated peers to remain in the same or similarly paying roles, even when they're in similarly paying jobs. A study from the [Federal Reserve Bank of New York](#) shows only about 5 percent of surveyed low-wage workers moved to a higher paying job within a given year. Comprehensive career ladder programs can help these individuals advance beyond low-wage positions.
- **Increased Retention and Recruitment:** By creating an environment that [enables career advancement](#), workers are more likely to enter and remain in a given line of work. Fostering these opportunities is essential in a field like long-term care where there is a growing workforce shortage. If unchanged, this lack of skilled workers will only exacerbate Colorado's current challenges in caring for the state's older adults.

Essential Career Ladder Components for the Long-Term Care Workforce

Though a concept that spans sectors, career ladders designed for members of our caring economy are more effective when they contain several key components, including:

- **Supportive services and mentoring:** Most long-term care workers are low paid. As a result, finding the additional resources to pursue advancement along a career ladder can be difficult. Supportive services which provide access to or assist with the cost of transportation, tuition, or child care can help lessen resource challenges.
 - In addition to helping with needed services, it's also important to provide these workers, many of whom have limited interaction with the higher education system, with the resources to successfully navigate training systems and opportunities. As an example, this could involve employing navigators to help workers enroll in classes or understand program requirements. EMPATH, a nonprofit based in Boston, developed the concept of [mobility mentoring](#), which is a comprehensive and supported system which helps program participants set and obtain long-term goals.
- **Stackable credentials:** It's important for these career ladder programs to include progressive, or [stackable](#), credentialing systems which allow individuals to build upon and transfer previously developed skills to new opportunities. Stackable credentials prevent individuals from needing to re-take core, skill-building classes. Instead, each successive program builds upon previous work, which in-turn reduces the time and financial requirements for successive positions.
- **Focus on in-demand positions:** Career ladders don't work if they're training workers for positions that aren't in demand. Training workers for roles with too much competition for too few spots costs workers time and money and has little likely reward. As a result, it's important for career ladder programs designed for the long-term care workforce to carefully survey future employment projections and build ladders to fill high-need, in-demand positions.
 - Importantly, career ladders can include [new positions](#), not yet developed but still needed. These new positions can be created to bridge workers' current roles and those that are more advanced and require additional training. In the long-term care field, this could mean creating a new position which allows home care workers to mentor or train new employees.

Any quality career ladder for the long-term care workforce will move workers to more skilled positions with higher pay. However, successful ladders won't necessarily keep workers exclusively in the long-term care field. Instead, programs may move individuals out of the long-term care workforce (strictly defined here as including personal care aides, home health aides, and nursing assistants) and into better paying, but still in-demand health care positions (which may include medical assistants, licensed practical nurses, registered nurses, community health workers, health educators, and occupational/physical aides/assistants). Importantly, each of these positions in the broader health care field are [projected to grow](#) in tandem with our aging population.

Possible Long-Term Care Workforce Career Ladders

Fortunately, the health care field is a prime space for developing and implementing career ladders. Organizations, both in and outside of Colorado, have already mapped out possible career paths for low-wage workers, like personal care and home health aides.

Below are a few possible career paths that could move personal care aides — the long-term care position with both the lowest pay and training requirements in Colorado — to [higher-paid, in-demand positions](#) in the health care field.

Licensed Practical Nurse

| | Personal Care Aide | Certified Nursing Aide | Medical Assistant | Licensed Practical Nurse |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Median Colorado Hourly Wage | \$11.68 | \$15.38 | \$17.14 | \$24.78 |
| Training & Certification Requirements | 20 hours of agency administered training | Completion of state certified CNA training program and passage of CNA certification exam | Employers may require workers to complete a medical assistant training program , though not mandated by state law, and pass the AAMA certification exam | Completion of practical nursing program approved by the state and passage of NCLEX certification exam |

Health Educator

| | Personal Care Aide | Home Health Aide Mentor* | Community Health Worker | Health Educator |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Median Colorado Hourly Wage | \$11.68 | Approximately \$14 | \$18.67 | \$26.46 |
| Training & Certification Requirements | 20 hours of agency administered training | Currently undeveloped agency administered training | Though not mandated by state law, nonprofits and community colleges offer community health worker certification programs | Though not mandated by state law, employers often require a BA in fields such as public health, psychology, or sociology |

*A home health aide mentor role does not currently exist in Colorado.

Assumptions about required training and median wage are based upon [pilot programs](#) in other states.

Occupational Therapy Assistant

| | Personal Care Aide | Certified Nursing Assistant | Occupational Therapy Aide | Occupational Therapy Assistant |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|-------------------------------|---|
| Median Colorado Hourly Wage | \$11.68 | \$15.38 | \$16.08 | \$27.51 |
| Training & Certification Requirements | 20 hours of agency administered training | Completion of state certified CNA training program and passage of CNA certification exam | No additional formal training | Degree from accredited Occupational Therapy Education Program and passage of NBCOT Exam |

Next Steps in Building Long-Term Care Career Ladders in Colorado

Recognizing the need for and value of these pathways, [Colorado leaders](#) have posed different ways to create and implement career ladders for low-wage health workers, like those providing long-term care. We can build upon and grow this momentum by supporting the following recommendations.

Creating standardized, stackable credentials: Though the training for some health care roles build upon one another, this isn't the case across the board. In fact, entry-level personal care aide positions in Colorado lack any standardized training universally recognized across agencies. To create a standardized system of stackable health care credentials in Colorado, we can:

- Standardize entry-level training for personal care aides in Colorado. This will help those at the bottom of the health care career ladder acquire recognized training to build upon. A recent training toolkit by the [Colorado Respite Coalition](#) offers a potential, well-researched model for creating a standardized training curriculum.
- Use the passage of [SB19-238](#) to increase home care workers' access to quality, standardized training. Through this bill, Colorado is developing a taskforce to examine how best to ensure all home care workers receive required training. A positive outcome from this taskforce will move the state forward in developing a standardized, transferrable training system.
- Learn from [Tennessee](#) and [Iowa](#). Both states have proposed and are moving forward with the creation of stackable credentialing systems for their long-term care workers. Colorado can learn from this work and tailor lessons to meet our state's needs.

Key Components of Tennessee's Workforce Initiative

- Develops career pathways for LTC workers by partnering with high schools, vocational schools, and both community and four-year colleges
- Offers participating workers [navigational services](#)
- Has a built-in evaluation system allowing the state to assess progress and implement improvements

Utilizing existing infrastructure: Existing infrastructure, including community and state college systems and social service providers, offer accessible ways to provide resources, educate potential students about available opportunities, and develop stackable curricula. Lessons and replicable efforts may be learned from the work of others, including:

- [Mi Casa Resource Center](#) is a Denver-based nonprofit that offers clients training and support to enable economic success. One of the organization's most notable programs provides participants with stackable credentials and a pathway to career advancement in the financial services sector. Existing programs, like those at Mi Casa, already have partnerships and structures that can be leveraged to create new or more effective career ladders for those in the long-term care workforce.
- Efforts in [Washington State](#) offer perhaps the most advanced illustration of how existing structures and systems can be used to develop career ladder opportunities for long-term care workers. Due largely to leadership from the state's union and connected [training center](#), career pathways for home care workers have been created with the help of community colleges, universities, workforce development centers, and nonprofits. Those engaged in the process have noted these efforts have been successful because of their ability to leverage the expertise and natural networks of each partner.

Key Components of Washington's Success

With a singular and dedicated focus on advancing workers' interests, Washington's home care union has been pivotal in developing supports for LTC workers. It has played a role in:

- Spurring partnerships between the state and university systems
 - Mapping innovative career pathways
- Offering resources, supports, training, and information about career advancement opportunities

Increasing mentoring and supportive services: Successful career ladder programs for entry-level long-term care workers must provide supportive services and mentoring for participants. This should include assistance with the cost of transportation, child care, and tuition, but also navigation help to ensure students understand how to access and take advantage of educational opportunities. Lessons can be learned from existent programs, including:

- The [Strengthening Working Families Initiative](#) (SWFI) is a current program in Colorado. Offering navigation services that help participants access child care and job placement opportunities, SWFI assists individuals interested in obtaining higher education for in-demand positions, including those in the health care field.
- Though not piloted in Colorado, the federal government created a [Health Profession Opportunity Grant](#) program to increase access to health care career pathways. [Individual participants received](#) a range of supports, including financial help with tuition, transportation, housing, and non-emergency food assistance.

Developing public and private partnerships: State government can't create successful career pathways for long-term care workers alone. Instead, the private sector must be an integral partner in developing and supporting this work. Several other states have leveraged private sector ingenuity by:

- Incentivizing the development of public/private partnerships. As an example, Massachusetts launched an [Extended Care Career Ladder Initiative](#), which was a \$5 million effort to support public-private pilot projects aimed at increasing career ladder opportunities for long-term care workers. Participants noted these partnerships helped foster changes which decreased worker turnover, improved quality of care, and increased worker retention rates.
- Working with the private sector to create new [intermediary positions](#). This has included home health aide mentor or liaison roles which task experienced workers with helping new employees acclimate and succeed. While benefiting workers, these new positions have been simultaneously shown to help employers by reducing workforce turnover rates.

Key Components of Massachusetts' Extended Care Career Ladder Initiative

- Part of the state's comprehensive effort to support LTC workforce
- Provides funding to facilitate public-private partnerships
- Encourages collaboration between community colleges, private home care agencies, and community organizations

Moving Forward

Like much of the country, Colorado desperately needs a robust long-term care workforce. However, a combination of factors — poor pay, limited opportunities for upward advancement, difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified workers — holds Colorado back from ensuring these workers (and those they serve) are taken care of. Without action, the current gap between the need and availability of long-term care workers will only grow as Colorado's population ages.

Developing career ladders is an essential way to invest in our state's long-term care workforce. Importantly, the infrastructure — the programs, institutions, and interest — to support successful career ladders for this workforce already exist. This momentum and energy can be built upon and leveraged.

Like the entirety of our caring workforce, long-term care workers are essential members of our community and economy. They provide vital care which keeps our loved ones safe and healthy. We owe it to these workers to ensure they have the supports and resources necessary to succeed.

Key Next Steps: A Summary

Developing meaningful career ladders for Colorado's long-term care workforce will require partnerships across sectors and agencies. Only by leveraging each group's unique strengths will be able to succeed. In practice, this will require commitment and action from:

State Government

With perhaps the largest reach and most influence, Colorado's state government must play a role in developing career ladders for long-term care workers. The state should:

- Coordinate and convene institutions of higher learning, private businesses, and workers to assess training needs, available opportunities, and actionable steps forward
- Support the development of standardized training for entry-level personal care aides
- Encourage the creation and use of new, intermediary long-term care positions. This could include developing new, intermediary, long-term care positions in state statute that have higher Medicaid reimbursement rates and a larger scope of allowable practice
- Examine funding mechanisms to support innovative and sustainable public-private partnerships

Higher Learning Institutions

With both the knowledge and resources to develop stackable credentials, create quality curricula, and offer student supports, Colorado's system of higher learning will be a vital partner in the construction of effective career ladders.

Institutions of higher learning should:

- Work with state and private agencies to develop stackable credentials that meet both worker and employer needs
- Create quality navigational and mentoring systems to ensure students receive the support they need to succeed

Private Agencies

Long-term care career ladders can't work without support from the private sector. Many of these agencies are led by innovators who have an interest in supporting their workforce. To aid in the development of career ladders, private agencies will need to:

- Explore and bring to light innovative solutions that other agencies can learn from
- When possible, support and utilize intermediary positions that allow workers to gain additional skills and experience
- Work with the state and institutions of higher learning to assess needed skills and training, and develop appropriate curricula

Nonprofit Agencies

As trusted and vital community members, nonprofit organizations can also play an important role in supporting the long-term care workforce. This can involve:

- Spreading information to the community and clients about effective training and career ladder programs
- When possible, partnering with the state, institutions of higher learning, and private agencies, to either provide training or supportive and navigational resources to long-term care workers