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## **Aging population will put big strain on health care workforce**



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The aging population, shifts in the way the elderly are cared for and the financial strain many providers are under have combined to put pressure on workforce development.

[Richard Herrick](#), CEO of the New York State Health Facilities Association, said labor costs can make up as much as 75 percent of a provider's budget. When finances are tight, training is often the first thing cut. And money is especially tight with cuts in Medicaid, which pays for most nursing home stays, and Medicare, which covers home care and rehab.

"But you need to keep the skills up, so there is huge tension around that issue," Herrick said.

It could get worse. The **U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics** projected nursing home employment would rise by 25 percent between 2010 and 2020, while the home health care workforce could grow as much as 80 percent. And those jobs will be different than those of the past, demanding greater skill levels.

For example, because people are staying in their homes longer, home care nurses must deal with diabetes, Alzheimer's and other chronic diseases that in the past were handled in nursing homes.

"They also must have greater pharma knowledge, because patients are on as many as 20 medications," said [Jo Ann Costantino](#), CEO of The Eddy, the senior care arm of Albany-based **St. Peter's Health Partners**. "And they need to be knowledgeable about wound care because patients are getting moved out of hospitals sooner."

Even non-nurse home health aides are being asked to do more.

"These are the people who are spending the most time with patients," said [Joanne Cunningham](#), president of the Home Care Association of New York State. "The nurse may come once or twice a month, the aide comes every day. And she is not just in the living room. She is checking the cleanliness of the bedroom, looking for dangers in the bathroom, checking the cupboards and fridge in the kitchen."

Nursing home employees also need greater skills than they had in the past. Because people with chronic conditions are at home or in assisted living communities, those in nursing homes have the most acute, often end-of-life, needs. Employees also are being asked to adapt to new technology, including electronic medical records.

With providers strapped for funds, associations like those Herrick and Cunningham head are doing what they can.

"We are continually looking for grants—state, federal, private—to fund workforce development programs," Herrick said. "The more we invest in workforce training the more successful we are in retaining people."

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