



CNA turnover at 3.9%, and falling

Christian Living Communities in Englewood, CO, first opened in 1972 and today owns, operates or manages 26 communities in seven states. It also oversees Cappella Living Solutions. With that growth, CLC has faced challenges, including the need to retain exemplary employees, including its certified nursing assistants. Whether it's a comprehensive mentor program, wage increases or free CNA classes, CLC has made huge strides in retention. Chief Operating Officer Camille Burke spoke recently with *McKnight's* Deputy Editor Elizabeth Newman about how they did it.

Q: What made CLC invest in certified nursing assistants?

A: We have typically been 5-star communities, but we did see our skilled areas were not as sharp as we'd like to be during mock surveys. In the mid-2000s, our retention for CNAs was around 45% for first-year workers.

We knew that was an area where we could improve. We know that if someone made it to employment for a year, we sometimes kept them for a lifetime.

Q: What was one of the first ways leadership addressed this challenge?

A: We created a mentor program in 2011. I know a lot of communities have those, but our mentor program is a little bit more in-depth. It's formalized and structured. The mentors apply, and they get to make extra money. They receive quarterly bonuses. It's part of a career ladder for CNAs.

What I really like about it is that there is an immediate bond between employee and their mentor. Their first day of work and beyond there is someone they can ask, about those little intangible things in a neighborhood.

Also, having it be CNA-to-CNA,



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rather than having a nurse-to-CNA, really gives it some special power. It's instilling confidence to be the best CNA possible.

The mentors walk around proudly because they are wearing a sign that lets everyone know they are a mentor. We also bring them in front of the management team when they graduate from the mentor program. The program has been celebrated, and has become a part of our culture.

Today, our retention of CNAs in their first year is eight-five percent. We now have the mentor program in all of our communities, in all seven states. We just completed that task of doing virtual training with the mentor program, or in person when it made sense.

Q: Why did you decide to raise CNA wages last year?

A: For the first time, we began hearing from people that they were leaving because they couldn't afford to live here. We weren't paying a living wage for Denver. We knew we were competing against the marijuana industry, Amazon and fast food restaurants.

The commitment and analysis was that we wanted to get people to \$16.50. We did an analysis and knew it would be an \$800,000 commitment beyond our regular wage increases.

Q: How did you find a way to make that happen for your CNAs?

A: The numbers have to work in a budget. We had to sacrifice other items. We made tough choices, like having to defer capital improvements. We had to say this was more important than, say, remodeling a breakroom, and deferred other projects.

Our turnover last year for CNAs was 3.9%, and in the first four months of this year it's



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“*It's worth investing in your culture because it helps you recruit.*”

1.87%. We believe the decision really made an impact.

Q: What has CLC done to help with education?

A: We've begun offering free CNA classes for our workers. We supply the meeting space and partner with Aurora Community College for the instruction. We've had our housekeepers and dining services people taking advantage of these free CNA classes.

We've also been excited to offer Drive Culture webinars, where we invite people to a seven-series webinar. They are just spectacular, and reflect a culture of learning.

Q: You mentioned the mentor program as a career ladder: How have employees sought ways to be promoted or take the next step?

A: We encourage people who

want more. Here's one example: We had one CNA who wanted to make more money and went to work for Uber. He was out driving and decided "my heart isn't here; my heart is with CLC." He came back and we talked through it, and we said, "How about becoming an LPN?"

We offered a \$6,500 scholarship for his studies to become an LPN, and he's still with us today.

Q: What about student loan debt reduction?

A: Right, it's been in the news a lot about how adults can't pay back their student loans. Our leadership got together and asked if we could offer some type of relief. While it's not as robust as we'd like it to be, it's something.

We offer \$1,200 for student loan debt relief and have had 18 people who have participated. Of those, 16 are still with us. But we have \$10,000 budgeted and have only spent \$6,500. We have

to get the message out that we want to help.

Q: How do you find buy-in with new programs?

A: There is an element of risk with some of our executive decisions. It's a calculated risk. Above all else, leadership has to be involved and own it. Too many other ideas can cloud your eyes.

Really and truly, culture is everything for us. It's a culture of being kind to one another. We wanted to get rid of the idea of the old eating the young and not treating them well.

Q: What's next?

A: I have a vision for recruiting better. Good retention starts with recruiting. We've started using artificial intelligence. With this platform, we'll be better able to identify which person is a better match for what department.

We're implementing software that will allow us to ask questions up front. There are no right or wrong answers. It's a way to say, "Maybe this CNA would be better in this neighborhood." This will help us with recruitment.

Q: How have these efforts paid off?

A: We have some of the top talent in the industry working for us. We're attractive because of culture — people want to come to work for a culture that fits them.

I had an executive director opening recently. I thought I'd have to do a national search, but within a few days I had five top resumes. It's worth investing in your culture because it helps you recruit, and recruiting the right people helps you retain.

We also are a culture that values new talent. We celebrate the length of tenure, but we also honor the new, and learn how they can make us better. ■