

Local Home Care Cooperative Members Polish Skills at National Conference

Dana Howarth and Burt Patterson, administrators of Heart is Home Cooperative Care, home care cooperative, in Bernalillo and Hobbs, NM attended the inaugural National Home Care Cooperative Conference in Dulles, VA. More than 60 home care cooperative members and developers from across the U.S. representing eight of the country's nine established home care cooperatives attended the meeting at the headquarters of the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation.

With a strong focus on education, the conference outlined how the home care cooperatives can become employers of choice by bolstering their recruitment, retention and training strategies. Conference presenters also addressed marketing to caregivers and clients, human resources and governance and finance. The conference was a unique opportunity for caregivers to network and collaborate with likeminded cooperators—sharing the resources, ideas and insights the sector needs to grow.

“I am grateful to have had the opportunity to attend the inaugural National Home Care Cooperative Conference and to have been in the same room as members of home care co-ops that been successful businesses for many years, and some for decades, it reassured me that Heart is Home could be a life-changing opportunity for New Mexico's caregivers” said Dana Howarth, administrator for Heart is Home Cooperative Care.

While key to keeping seniors and the disabled out of nursing homes and hospitals, home care providers working at traditional agencies are some of the lowest paid and most exploited workers in the U.S., said David Hammer, Executive Director of The ICA Group, an organization that works to curb job loss and create stable communities by developing worker cooperatives.

“On a whole, the home health care industry views caregivers as commodities,” Hammer told conference attendees. It's not surprising, then, that the industry experiences a more than 60 percent average annual turnover, according to the Paraprofessionals Healthcare Institute.

During a presentation that spanned both opportunities and challenges facing home care worker, Hammer said home care cooperatives are poised to upend the industry by optimizing wages, training and career advancement opportunities for worker-owners.

“Co-ops have an obligation to provide the best jobs,” he told attendees. “We need to be smarter than the competition.”

Bronx, NY-based Cooperative Home Care Associates, the nation's largest worker cooperative, is doing just that. Workers there receive competitive wages, regular hours and family health insurance. The organization has chipped down that 60 percent average turnover rate to just 15 percent. The other seven home care cooperatives represented at last week's conference—along with four emerging co-ops—have similar stories of worker empowerment and job satisfaction.

Victoria Sprong, Caregiver Coordinator at Circle of Life Caregiver Cooperative, in Bellingham, WA began working as a caregiver as a young single mother and found empowerment, stability and leadership opportunities by joining a cooperative. In her presentation, she urged home care co-ops to create and market “a culture of ownership”—something she found unique and appealing about cooperatives.

“Make it clear that your members belong to something bigger than clocking in and clocking out,” Sprong said. “A connection to the larger cooperative movement can be very powerful.” And a sense of ownership in the business means worker-owners are more likely to invest in their jobs.

During her presentation, Deborah Craig, a Cooperative Development Specialist at Northwest Cooperative Development Foundation, advised attendees to target younger generations when recruiting caregivers.

“Not only is our population aging in general, but our current caregivers will be aging out of these jobs in the next ten years. We really need to be bringing younger people into this industry,” she said.

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