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Resources for Nursing Home Professionals

Consistent Assignment: A Key Step to Individualized Care

Research has found that providing residents with the same caregiver results in more individualized care, which leads to better clinical outcomes and quality of life. Implementing a consistent assignment system also leads to greater staff satisfaction and lower staff turnover rates. This FastFacts summarizes the evidence supporting consistent assignment and offers a pragmatic method to make the change.

Consistent Assignment vs. Rotating Assignment

Ninety percent of nursing homes require staff to rotate assignments. Consistent assignment (sometimes called primary or permanent assignment) is defined as using the same caregivers (registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, certified nurse's aides) to care for the same residents on every shift. Consistent assignment allows staff to develop closer relationships with residents in their care and with co-workers. Conversely, rotating staff assignment continually interrupts the formation of relationships and inhibits staff's ability to recognize resident decline and optimally address care needs.

There are many reasons why leaders believe that rotating staff assignment is effective. Some of the most common reasons for rotating assignments are centered on fairness, preventing staff burnout, and making all staff familiar with the needs of all residents. Some facilities discourage strong relationships between staff and residents to help shield staff from grief when residents die. Some resist consistent assignments because they do not want staff to be stuck with particularly challenging residents. However, such reasons for rotating staff assignments are not supported by research. In fact, rotating assignment exacerbates low staff morale—leading to staff burnout, call-outs, and turnover.

Benefits of Consistent Assignment

- **Residents receive better care.** Residents feel more comfortable and secure with consistent assignments. One study compared two nursing homes with permanent assignments to two nursing homes with rotating assignments. Residents living in permanent assignment nursing homes rated

significantly higher for personal appearance and hygiene than residents in rotating assignment homes. In another study, one facility saw a 75 percent reduction in the incidence of decubitus ulcers after implementing consistent assignments.

- **Improved job satisfaction.** Studies found that nurse's aides working in consistent assignment homes reported higher job satisfaction than those working in rotating assignment homes. Facilities found that after a year of using consistent assignments, staff turnover rates fell by 29 percent.
- **Staff feel valued.** One study found that rotating staff made certified nurse's aides (CNAs) feel less valued for their skill, experience, and knowledge of the residents. CNAs defined good care based on establishing good relationships with residents. Any disruption to these relationships was detrimental to the quality of care and the quality of residents' lives.
- **Staff feel empowered.** With consistent assignments, staff feel more responsible for the care of residents. They feel more accountable for their residents and take pride in helping them improve. Aides also report feeling more accountable and are better able to make and implement nursing decisions.
- **Strong foundation for person-directed care.** With consistent assignments, residents form close bonds with the people who care for them and consider them "family." These relationships are the cornerstone of person-directed care. Relationship bonds form over time—we do not form relationships with people we see infrequently.

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■ More familiarity with residents' needs and desires.

When staff care for the same people daily they become familiar with residents' needs and desires and can anticipate their needs. As a result, their work becomes easier because they are not spending extra time getting to know what each resident prefers—they know from experience, which only develops from being in a consistent, caring relationship.

- **Fewer call-outs.** When staff care for the same residents every day they are less likely to “call-out.” As one CNA said, “I don't call-out now, because my residents would miss me.” Create an in-house pool of staff who can take over when call-outs do occur.

How to Switch to Consistent Assignment

When switching from rotating assignment to consistent assignment, leaders should expect some resistance from staff. Remember, they have been told that the rotating staff model is better for them. Share new research with them and note that new information means better practices. Addressing their concerns will be the key to success. Consider the following example of a process to make the change:

1. Call separate meetings with all of the day shift and night shift CNAs.
2. Begin each meeting by explaining that nursing homes that have switched to consistent assignment have improved resident quality of care and life as well as improved work life for the staff. Suggest that the facility try consistent assignment and see how it works.
3. Write each resident's name on a Post-it note and place the notes on a wall.
4. Ask the CNAs to rate the residents by their degree of “challenge to care for,” with number 1 being relatively easy to care for and number 5 being very difficult to care for (time-consuming, emotionally draining, etc.). Let the CNAs discuss each resident and come to an agreement. Write the number on each resident's Post-it note.

More *FastFacts* available at www.chcf.org/fastfacts.

References

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Web Resources

Change Ideas for Consistent Assignment
www.nhcqf.org/QI_Services/NursingHomes/Jan2006Files/Change_Ideas_Consistent_Assignment_0805-292.pdf

5. Allow the CNAs to select their assignments. Make assignments fair by allowing CNAs to care for different numbers of residents depending on their “challenge to care for” number. For example, if one CNA has six residents and another has eight residents but both “degree of challenge” numbers total 27, then the assignments are fair. Also consider existing relationships with residents as part of the decision-making process.
6. Meet every three months (or sooner) and re-examine assignments to ensure that staff feel they are still fair and the relationships with the residents are going well.

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