



*South Carolina Initiative to Improve Dementia Care  
and Eliminate Off-Label Antipsychotics*

*Coordinated by LeadingAge South Carolina*

[www.leadingagesc.org](http://www.leadingagesc.org)

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## QUICK TIPS

### STAFF STABILITY: A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH

Staff stability is challenging in the best of times. With the unemployment rate at its lowest in years, the tight labor market makes staff stability even more challenging. In February 2017, when six South Carolina nursing homes began their experience as pilot homes in the Initiative to Improve Dementia Care and Eliminate Off-Label Antipsychotics, they faced severe staffing challenges. They had having trouble filling vacancies. They weren't finding people they wanted to hire. New staff were leaving quickly. Too many staff had unscheduled absences or tardies. The instability was affecting their teamwork, communication, and overall performance. A year later they are all in much better positions, though still facing some challenges. They have fewer vacancies and better staff. The homes describe a multi-prong approach to make this turn around:

1. **Examine Your Turnover By Length Of Service.** List out staff who have left over the past 3-6 months. Note how long they worked for you, by looking at start and end dates of employment. How many who left were newly hired? How many were longer tenured employees? Were they fired or did they quit? Were you sorry to see them go? Were they good hires? If yes, how soon did you know they were having concerns? If no, did you have questions at the time of hire? Discuss the factors that contributed to each person's leaving. For good hires who left, evaluate how to improve your welcome and the support provided by co-workers and supervisors. For hires you had questions about, consider how to improve your recruitment and screening. These are the areas that will need action.
2. **Improve Your Recruitment.** Aim to recruit high performers. Do not cast a wide net of applicants. Target to attract people you want to hire. Better to have a small number of excellent candidates you hire who stay, than to have to go through dozens of applications and interviews of people who are not good candidates. To improve your recruitment:
  - a. **Discuss the qualities** you are looking for in an employee, and what makes you a good place for high performers to work.
  - b. **Revise your ads** so they reflect these qualities and benefits. Review your ads on Indeed.com and other on-line job sites. If you don't pay for your ads, the on-line sites scrape the ads you've listed elsewhere and the scraping doesn't always reflect what you want. One pilot home found that it started with "must wash wheelchairs." Review the comments attached to your ads. You need to know what job seekers are seeing.
  - c. **Reach out to nursing schools** to let them know that working in a nursing home is a great first job for a nursing school graduate. If you have any recent graduates working at your home who are doing well, ask them to go with you to speak to the instructors and the class. Let the students know how you will support them as they transition into work.



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- d. Activate refer-a-friend program** by reaching out to your high performers on staff. Identify staff who (1) are warm and friendly, (2) dependable, and (3) competent – these are your triple crown winner employees. Let them know how much you value them, and that you would like to hire people just like them. You are looking for people with their same character and competence. When you do hire someone they have referred, pay them right away for the referral, and do it with fanfare. One pilot home paraded to the staff person’s work station with a big sized check.
- 3. Interview for character** using questions such as “name three elders you had a close relationship/friendship with in your last job” and “tell us about the nicest person you know.” Present situations and see how they react. Use David Farrell’s “five smiles” rule to note if you get five smiles from a person during the interview. One pilot home said with these questions, she “finds out if it’s in their heart; if it’s their passion. When one candidate didn’t have 3 names, it told us something important. She was qualified clinically but we didn’t hire her. Before we did this, we had so many customer service issues. How you answer these character questions, tells us how will you take care of people. Now that we are hiring better, we have reduced our customer service issues.”
- 4. Provide a warm welcome and a good orientation.** One pilot home said, “we build relationships right away and we help people feel comfortable being here.” When you hire warm and friendly people, give them a warm and friendly welcome. Help them immediately establish bonds with co-workers, residents, and leaders. Pilot homes revamped their orientations to make them more interactive. One pilot home added a scavenger hunt as a way for people to get to know the building. Remember, too, that you are hiring *on the go* people, not sitters. Break up the day so that they don’t do too much sitting, watching videos, signing papers, and listening to instructions. Use adult learning to engage their critical thinking so that new employees learn what you want them to know.
- 5. Provide on-going support.** Talk with new staff on a regular schedule to find out how it’s going and offer help where needed. Pilot homes said having these conversations allowed them to know about and fix situations that saved good employees.
- 6. Track, talk about, and act on attendance.** Two pilot home DoNs used white boards in their office to list the people who were late or had unscheduled absences. One DoN said she realized she’d always had the information when she signed off on payroll, but she hadn’t looked at it. Now she did closely. She talked to people who kept going on her board. One person had a child care issue that they are working together to resolve. Others needed to be held to account. No one liked seeing their name on the board. One DoN kept the office light on at night, so that the names were visible 24/7. Homes also gave visibility to the people with good attendance, recognizing them at staff meetings, and giving them gift cards.

**A Multi-pronged Approach:** Pilot homes took many steps to stabilize staffing. All steps were necessary and reinforced each other. Having any part of the process go wrong can undermine the other efforts. It requires on-going attention.