

PSW Perspectives on the Staffing Challenge in Long-Term Care

Report on Challenges, Possible Solutions, and Visions
for the Future from PSWs across Ontario

ONTARIO CLRI AT THE RIA
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Contents

- 03 Executive Summary
- 04 Opportunity
- 05 Project Approach
- 09 Challenges and Root Causes
- 18 Future Vision and Potential Solutions
- 28 Engagement Learning
- 31 Conclusion



**“I love and enjoy taking
care of these precious lives
placed in my care.”**

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT

Executive Summary

The long-term care (LTC) sector in Ontario is experiencing severe staffing challenges. As a result, Personal Support Workers (PSWs) face a number of challenges every day in their role caring for and supporting older adults. During this project, PSWs shared that they often feel unacknowledged, undervalued, and overlooked as care providers in the LTC sector. They noted that they experience negative interactions, racism, discrimination, violence, and stigma within their places of work and in the community at large.

Though PSWs face different barriers and challenges, the majority of PSWs take great pride in their work and want to provide the best possible care for residents.

While the staffing challenges in LTC are well-known in the sector, PSWs have had limited opportunity to share their perspectives and present possible solutions for the problems they experience in their work. To effectively address these challenges and seek solutions, the Ontario Centres for Learning, Research and Innovation in Long-Term Care (CLRI) at the Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging, in partnership with Overlap Associates, engaged in a project with PSWs across Ontario to better understand their experiences amidst the staffing shortage.

Placing individuals with professional and lived experience at the centre, hundreds of PSWs were engaged to explore three key theme areas—barriers to resident care, safety and well-being at work, and respect and feeling valued. Sharing their experience and challenges, PSWs described four main areas that have the biggest impact on their roles: staff shortages, systemic issues, resident and family pressures, and management.

Through an in-person event pre-COVID-19, an online survey, and six online workshops, PSWs reflected on these opportunities and challenges. A vision for a better future of their roles and work environments began to take shape. This vision includes respectful workplaces, more available time, positive team dynamics, adequate staffing and resourcing, and a re-imagined role.

The intention of this report is to share the voices of those who often go unacknowledged and unheard—the PSWs—and to understand their lived and professional experiences. To move beyond the many challenges PSWs face and to provide the meaningful care that LTC residents deserve, the LTC sector can come together to support and engage those who care for and protect us and our families.

Opportunity

Before meaningful change comes meaningful engagement. From the beginning of this project, the Ontario CLRI at the RIA was clear in its motivation to engage PSWs and frontline team members in an inclusive and accessible way. Armed with the knowledge that PSWs are not usually engaged in solutions, we rooted our engagement approach in the following objectives:

- **To understand the experiences of PSWs and frontline team members in the LTC sector in Ontario,**
- **Identify problems that contribute to the challenges of recruiting and retaining PSWs and frontline team members in LTC,**
- **Co-design ideas and solutions with PSWs and frontline team members, and**
- **Amplify PSW voices to leadership in homes, systems partners, advocates, and policy-makers.**

Moving through the engagement process, we heard difficult and passionate stories from frontline team members about the challenges they face and how deeply they care for residents. As a result, we acknowledge that there are more opportunities to share and to act on the findings and feedback collected. These may include, but are not limited to: the creation of new training and supports for PSWs, building awareness and recognition of the role, and working to change workplace culture within LTC homes.

We greatly appreciate and value the experiences shared by PSWs and frontline team members. It is because of their generosity and vulnerability that we are able to share their lived and professional experiences with a wider audience through this report.

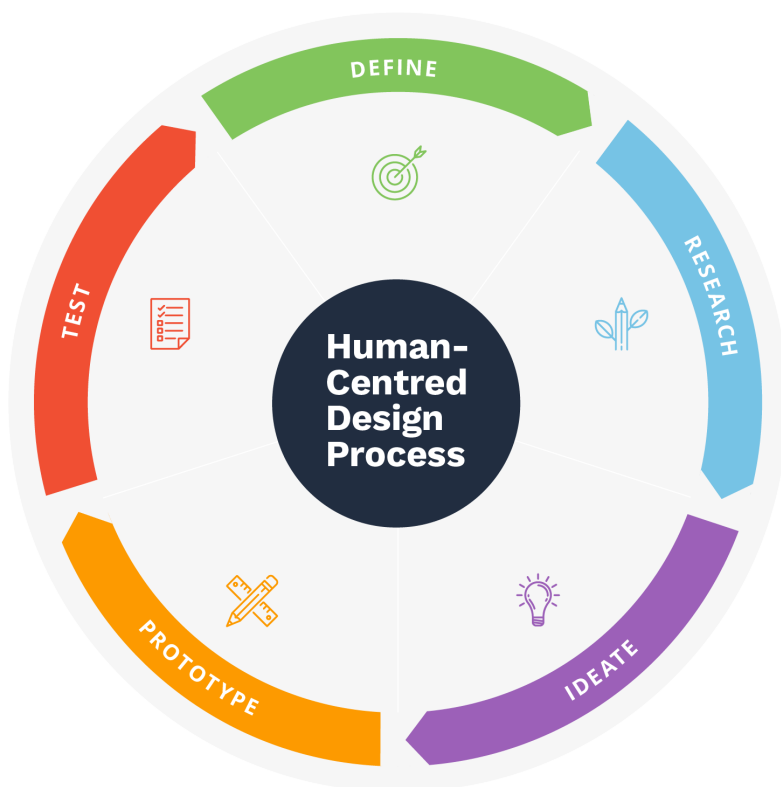
Project Approach

Human-Centred Design

For the purposes of this work, it was important for the Ontario CLRI to engage PSWs and other team members in a manner that created a safe and open environment where conversations and ideas could be shared. With that in mind, we were supported by Overlap Associates to employ a Human-Centred Design (HCD) approach.

With its intentional focus on people’s experiences, HCD enables us to shift our focus away from creating artifacts or “things” towards solving complex problems. HCD provides a toolkit for deeply understanding people’s needs and experiences, generating ideas to meet those needs, and then testing solutions with—and learning from—the people that will use the program or service. The versatility of HCD allows us to solve complex problems by putting creativity and empathy to work.

At its core, HCD is an approach to problem-solving that puts the knowledge and needs of people experiencing a problem at the center. The Human-Centered Design Cycle outlines the major modes of working in any project: defining the scope of work, research (PSW Engagement), ideate, prototype, and test.



Design Research

Design research starts by engaging people to understand their experiences in order to design—or improve via redesign—services, programs or products. It uses the methods of design itself—such as behavioral observation and iterative prototyping—to gather and synthesize information. Then we reason inductively, using insights that have been observed from real people to arrive at conclusions about things that we have not observed ourselves (e.g., resident care, staffing shortages, pandemic response, etc.). Insights are generated from these methods using a method called Grounded Theory.

Grounded Theory

The types of information we gather determine the types of questions we can answer. Quantitative information—data we can measure or count—can help us work out who is affected by a situation, as well as where, when, and how often. But to uncover what is happening and investigate why it happens, we need to ask open-ended questions and collect qualitative information—descriptive data that are harder to ‘sum up’. We need to gather responses without judgment, then review and compare them to patterns, trends, and possibilities.

One of our most fruitful methods for this type of interpretation is grounded theory, so-called because it collects data from people experiencing a certain challenge on the ground and then produces a theory from this ‘grounded’ data. Instead of designing our questions and topics before engagement, we start with engagement and watch as key topics emerge from the observations.

We used grounded theory for interpreting data during all phases of engagement for this project because it is an exploratory, descriptive method for developing hypotheses about what’s going on. It is a common interpretation method used with qualitative data in numerous fields, including ethnography and design research.

Engagement Methods

This project was initially designed with five in-person design workshops hosted in locations across Ontario. Each workshop was intended to be two days long and to include 10-15 PSWs and other frontline team members from LTC. Workshops were scheduled in Waterloo, Niagara, Barrie, Sault Ste. Marie, and Ottawa. However, the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic meant redesigning the approach after the first design workshop.

To inform the redesign of the workshops, we developed an online survey and held a meeting with a small group of frontline team members to identify topics of priority. The result was six, two-hour online workshops that focused on the topics of barriers to resident care, safety and well-being at work, and respect and feeling valued.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

The general audience for this project was PSWs working in LTC. In addition to this, the project team wanted to ensure that a diverse group of PSWs were engaged to offer their perspectives based on their experiences. This was important because we know there are many different people and experiences in this sector. We also know that people's identities, like gender and racial identities, can change experience and how they are treated at work. Lastly, engaging a diverse group of participants improves the quality of the final output, including more creative solutions. As a result, recruitment activities focused on reaching PSWs with different identities and experiences related to:

- Gender identity
- Race and ethnicity
- Geographic locations across Ontario
- Years of experience as a PSW
- Types of LTC residences worked at (for-profit, non-profit)
- Part-time and full-time work

STAKEHOLDER LAB WITH SYSTEMS PARTNERS

The in-person Stakeholder Lab brought together representatives from different system partners in the LTC sector to kick off the project. These stakeholders worked together during the workshop to identify the primary challenges facing PSWs and discuss the impacts these challenges have on frontline team members, residents and families, LTC management, and organizations that support the LTC sector. The challenges identified in this workshop were shared back with the group for their determination of next steps and were also used to inform the design of the upcoming workshops for this project.

DESIGN SPRINT WORKSHOP

The in-person design workshop enabled us to explore the topics and ideas that emerged from open-ended activities with PSWs from the Kitchener-Waterloo Region in February 2020. Thirteen PSWs participated in the full design cycle: definition, research, ideation, prototyping, and testing activities.

The information gathered during this workshop helped to inform a new direction for this work amidst the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and was later used to develop the online survey in English and French, which was widely shared in September 2020.

ONLINE SURVEY AND INSIGHT MEETING

The online survey was developed to seek further information on the challenges PSWs experience day-to-day, what they enjoy about their job, and their vision for “better” for their role. The survey was promoted via social media and shared through a number of different networks and email lists with PSWs across Ontario.

Any PSW working in Ontario LTC could complete the survey; however, in an effort to diversify responses the survey was promoted more heavily in locations where in-person workshops were meant to be held, to racialized PSWs (PSWs who self-identify as Black, Indigenous, and/or a person of colour), and PSWs with varying levels of experience. Survey responses were collected in September 2020 from 326 respondents.

Survey responses and a meeting with a small group of PSWs helped the team to identify the three key topics to explore during the online workshops.

ONLINE WORKSHOPS

Six online workshops were hosted with PSWs from across Ontario between October and December 2020. These two-hour workshops explored the prioritized topics of barriers to resident care, safety and well-being at work, and respect and feeling valued. Activities included individual reflection and group discussion in response to questions about the topics, as well as idea generation for solutions.

In total, 44 PSWs participated in the workshops: each session had 8-22 participants. Combined with the input gathered from the previous engagement activities, the online workshops helped to identify challenges and possible solutions to helping PSWs feel more valued in their role.



Challenges and Root Causes

A reflection of challenges PSWs may face
throughout their career.

Challenges and Root Causes

Through contextual research, we learned that much effort has been given to engaging LTC sector stakeholders. This has resulted in many recommendations attempting to improve recruitment and retention of PSWs. However, PSWs have often been left out of these conversations.

PSWs spend the most time with residents, by and large providing exemplary care, support, and companionship. As such, PSWs intimately understand the problem space related to staffing shortages because they must work through challenges related to shortages on a daily basis.

As we began our engagement process, a strong narrative took shape almost immediately: *PSWs do not feel valued in their role in LTC.* Participating PSWs felt unacknowledged, undervalued, and overlooked in the LTC sector and shared accounts of bullying, racism, discrimination, and negative stigma associated with the role.

Though PSWs face overwhelming barriers and challenges, we found that the majority of PSWs take great pride in their work. All PSWs we spoke with care deeply for the residents in their home and expect the highest quality of care and integrity from themselves and their colleagues. For the most part, PSWs hope that the challenges they face are addressed so they can provide the compassionate care that their residents deserve and support families through difficult life transitions.

When asked if their work environment is usually safe—physically and emotionally—PSWs responded:

“My workplace is not safe at all, we have 3-4 people crammed in a room with wheelchairs, commodes, table dressers, and oxygen machines and we trip. When brought up to health and safety, they want us to remove objects from rooms before we do care. We do not have air conditioning, no hot water half the time. Our building is full of asbestos.”

“No, co-workers are not polite at one another. They snap and yell.”

“As a manager I am seeing more and more staff with anxiety issues. And our home is staffed higher than the average LTC home for PSWs.”

“I am exhausted.”

When asked what do you like about your job, PSWs responded:

“I simply love helping the residents to look good and live as normally as they can.”

“Of course take care of them [residents] but whenever I get time I'd like to dance with them, talk to them, what they like to eat and [ask them] what they like to do.”

“Nothing now. Years ago I loved my job but the demands are just too much. I would never tell

anyone to do this job...burnt out after 12 years on the job.”

“In the past I would have said that I love being able to make my residents smile. Caring for them and helping during their time of need as well as supporting the families has always been my favourite part of my job. Unfortunately as of late, I feel more like I’m working at a car wash with no time to interact or connect.”

Insights

To better understand the recruitment and retention challenges, we asked PSWs to share their experience, expertise, and learnings. Throughout the engagement process, four major pillars (insights) emerged across the three key topic areas: barriers to resident care, safety and well-being at work, and respect and feeling valued. What follows is a description of each insight or problem area and specific causal factors as described by PSWs.

The insights listed below are a reflection of challenges PSWs may face throughout their career. It is important to note that these challenges were shared by participants based on their lived experience. This section is a compilation of perspectives and is not necessarily representative of the experiences and work environments of all PSWs and LTC homes.

STAFF SHORTAGES

Throughout the engagement process, PSWs consistently stated that the number one challenge in their role is staffing shortages. PSWs communicated that staffing shortages not only put more emotional and physical stress on them, but more importantly, the shortages do not allow PSWs to provide the care and heartfelt support they believe residents should receive.

Across the three focus areas, PSWs felt that the staffing shortage has compromised their safety and well-being, is the major barrier to proper resident care, and has led to an increase of disrespectful interactions devaluing their role and negatively affecting their emotional health. It is important not to understate the expansive effects of staffing shortages on the health, well-being and retention of PSWs, health and quality of life of residents, and sustainability of the LTC sector.

During the Barriers to Resident Care workshop, we asked if:

In my home, there is a good ratio of PSWs to residents?



PSWs responded:

79% disagree or strongly disagree

Specifically, PSWs highlighted the following challenges:

- *Not enough team members to meet resident needs or provide holistic care* — PSWs want to go above and beyond role requirements to support the holistic care needs of residents. Currently, they find it difficult to provide basic care with the limited time they have. Anything beyond basic care is near to impossible with current shortages.
- *Overworked team members and capacity issues* — Due to staffing challenges, PSW are often overworked. PSWs describe situations where they are short-staffed, with some PSWs staying after their shift to provide needed care to residents, which results in feelings of being “run down” or overworked. Other PSWs describe situations where they have too many residents to care for, resulting in the inability for them to take nutrition, hydration or bathroom breaks during their shifts. Overworked teams suffer burnout and have less capacity to engage in proactive emotional care for themselves, which can contribute to tense team and workplace dynamics.
- *Undertrained or inconsistent team members* — Participants shared that often training does not prepare new PSWs for the challenging reality faced in most LTC homes. This leads to frustration across all levels because new team members must learn and adapt to the realities of the PSW role and cannot keep up with their full workload. In addition, teams are often short-staffed without notice and other supporting roles may not help PSWs because of a that’s-not-my-job mentality. PSWs communicated that other supporting roles may take the form of agency team members, those swapped from other areas or floors, or full-time team members that aren’t consistent in their behaviour or ways of providing care.

PSWs shared:

“You have 2 staff for 23 people and are unable to get to everyone.”

“Some residents need more than one PSW and there may not be another PSW around.”

“New staff don’t know what they are doing. They are not getting the proper training at the school and when they come into work they are overwhelmed then they quit.”

“Never working with enough staff on the floor.”

SYSTEMIC ISSUES

PSWs shared that there are typically a number underlying systemic issues present in the LTC homes where they work. These systemic issues are less tangible than others, as they tend to be a result of stressors within the system. We heard that system issues described and shouldered by PSWs include various forms of stigma, disrespectful environments and not being acknowledged for their work, a lack of available time, as well as poor communication within teams, between management, and with residents and families. Similar to staffing challenges, systemic issues felt by PSWs are pervasive and typically felt in every facet of their roles. Ultimately, PSWs have minimal time and energy to develop resilience in response to these complex relational, communication, and emotional stressors.

During the Safety and Well-Being at Work workshop, we asked if:

My work is emotionally difficult?



PSWs responded:

64% strongly agreed

Specifically, PSWs highlighted the following challenges:

- *Inherent emotional stress of the role* — At its core, the PSW role is emotionally complex and stressful. Even if all systemic issues were addressed tomorrow, the nature of the work means dealing with death, dying, life transitions, loss, grief, and many other challenging themes on a daily basis. In addition to the inherent stress associated with their role, PSWs communicated that they also face emotional stress from those within LTC and the general public in not valuing their work and role. This is likely compounded by pervasive ageism that runs through society and the impacts of this relating to working with older adults directly.
- *Disrespectful work environments* — Throughout the engagement process, PSWs shared that they are not always respected at work. Participants shared that disrespectful behaviour comes from many different places, with no one group as the main instigator. Often unacknowledged, not consulted, and overlooked as contributors, PSWs do not feel like a valued part of the team. PSWs shared that they do not often receive words of support from colleagues. In addition, many PSWs have either witnessed or have been targets of bullying, discrimination, and racism by colleagues, families, residents or management, and violence from some residents. They are also talked down to or made to feel “easily replaceable” by management and other healthcare workers, whose roles are perceived to be more important (Nurse Practitioners, Registered Nurses, etc.). PSWs also commented that they experience misdirected frustration and guilt from families and are sometimes not even greeted or acknowledged when families visit. However, PSWs shared that when they are supported by management, it makes a big positive impact on their experience.
- *Additional stress and continuous policy and staffing changes due to COVID* — Since March 2020, PSWs have shouldered additional stress resulting from COVID-19. As policies and restrictions change and adjust to infection rates in any given location, PSWs have had to manage and implement government-mandated protocol, sometimes without the proper PPE, in addition to their daily responsibilities. This has increased stress and workloads for PSWs who are already overloaded.



“With the pandemic and hourly changes, that communication piece is tough. Things change so often it’s hard to factor in the time it takes to get the job done.”

WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT

- *Poor communication* — Compounding all these issues is a lack of strong communication between and within teams, homes, and the larger LTC sector. This is experienced as not communicating changes effectively from the LTC home or even between team members. Often, expectations or resident needs are not communicated from management or families, leading to confusion. Also, PSWs shared that they are often not part of onboarding conversations with families and residents. PSWs communicated that not being part of these conversations is a missed opportunity to learn and begin to build relationships with family members and residents. Without effective communication of procedures, expectations, and key information, PSWs are left having to react to situations they could otherwise have prepared for or anticipated.

PSWs shared:

“There are some places where you work, staff that don’t want to work with you because of the race they are from.”

“Discrimination and racism from residents.”

“Some nurses are very difficult to deal with too because they want you to take the blame when things go wrong.”

“I have a wonderful management team and they really support us a lot. I find when talking to people outside they have little respect especially if they watch the news.”

“Seems like there is a baseline of respect that’s missing - being talked down to by co-workers.”

“With the pandemic and hourly changes, that communication piece is tough. Things change so often it’s hard to factor in the time it takes to get the job done.”

“Poor communication between staff, residents and family.”

RESIDENT AND FAMILY PRESSURES

Moving into an LTC home is challenging; families and residents are experiencing a major life transition in an unfamiliar environment and rely on unknown team members to help them through. PSWs are the face of this transition by helping residents and families as they settle into new surroundings and new routines. PSWs are happy to help in this process. However, with a rise in the complexity of resident needs and a lack of time to build trust with families, PSWs face very real challenges in providing the care they feel residents deserve.

During the Safety and Well-Being at Work workshop, we asked if:

I feel that the families I work with respect me and my role.



PSWs responded:

48% agreed, 22% neutral

Specifically, PSWs highlighted the following challenges:

- *Resident needs are becoming more complex* — Not only are PSWs supporting more residents with complex health conditions and more residents living with dementia, residents have become more diverse in terms of language, culture, addictions, aggressive responsive behaviours, and mental health needs. As PSWs often lack the formal training to support residents along a complex health continuum, they feel that they are required to stretch their skills and experience to try to fill roles and gaps they were never properly trained to handle.
- *Lack of trust and frustration from families* — As mentioned, PSWs are not typically part of the resident intake process, which puts them at a disadvantage in learning about the residents and families they will work with. PSWs shared that because families don't know the care processes and the people who will be caring for their loved one, this can create unnecessary tension, frustration, and stress that PSWs must manage. In addition, PSWs observe that families often feel guilty when a loved one moves into LTC, which can lead to emotionally-charged interactions that PSWs must navigate.

PSWs shared:

"We are unable to communicate because of language barriers."

"We have many residents that are coming in with higher care needs but we are not getting the time or staff to meet their needs."

"The fact that some residents' families talk to you like you are beneath them and feel that it is your work and you are being paid for it so no need to treat you with some dignity and respect."

"With COVID, a lot of family members are distressed and are concerned about their loved one, the hardest part is that when they leave they don't know what their loved ones will be like when they get back."

MANAGEMENT

PSWs noted that the relationship between management and PSWs can be a strained one. Many PSWs communicated that management feels at arm's length from the realities of the PSW role and that some do not fully appreciate or understand how challenging the PSW role can be. Also, management sometimes views PSWs as "easily replaceable" or dispensable if they make mistakes. This contributes to the stress PSWs face on a daily basis. In addition, PSWs stated that when they communicate issues to management they are often not listened to, which again contributes to a disrespectful culture.

During the Safety and Well-Being at Work workshop, we asked if:

I feel that management at my LTC home respects me and my role.



PSWs responded:

50% disagree or strongly disagree

Specifically, PSWs highlighted the following challenges:

- *Lack of management recognition or support* — Overall, PSWs commented that management often fails to recognize the important work that PSWs do. Many PSWs stated that a simple “thank you” or “job well done” would go a long way to boost their morale. When problems do arise and management is made aware, follow-through in addressing issues can be haphazard and inconsistent, which can cause PSWs to feel mistrusting, hopeless, and alone.

PSWs shared:

“I think the management is being disrespectful to all of us in general because even though we give our 101% best we still receive bad criticism from management.”

“Management don’t listen to our concerns.”

“Management doesn’t manage/discipline because they are worried staff will leave.”



Future Vision and Potential Solutions

Ideas for improving the PSW workplace experience
and solutions for the challenges they face.

Vision

Reflecting on their experiences, we asked PSWs what an ideal vision of their role might look and feel like. Based on the topics covered over the length of the engagement process—feeling respected and valued, safety and well-being and barriers to resident care—we wanted to understand how PSWs envision a brighter future. We also wanted to get a sense of what changes PSWs would appreciate to help them feel valued, heard, and respected.

“PSW work is 100% more emotionally laborious than my hospital job was and the low pay signifies to me that this labour is not valued. Essentially I hope for PSWs in LTC to be given a seat at the table.”

In each workshop hosted, we asked PSWs to describe their ideal vision of feeling safe and respected in their work. The following theme areas and ideas emerged:

RESPECT: PSWs shared what their role might look like if respect was integrated into their work and workplace.

- Enjoying and taking pride in their work
- Recognition and feeling acknowledged and supported by management, families and residents
- Not feeling rundown or bullied (reduced stress)
- Family transition support is available to all incoming residents and their families to help set expectations, learn about the LTC home, processes, etc.

PSWs shared:

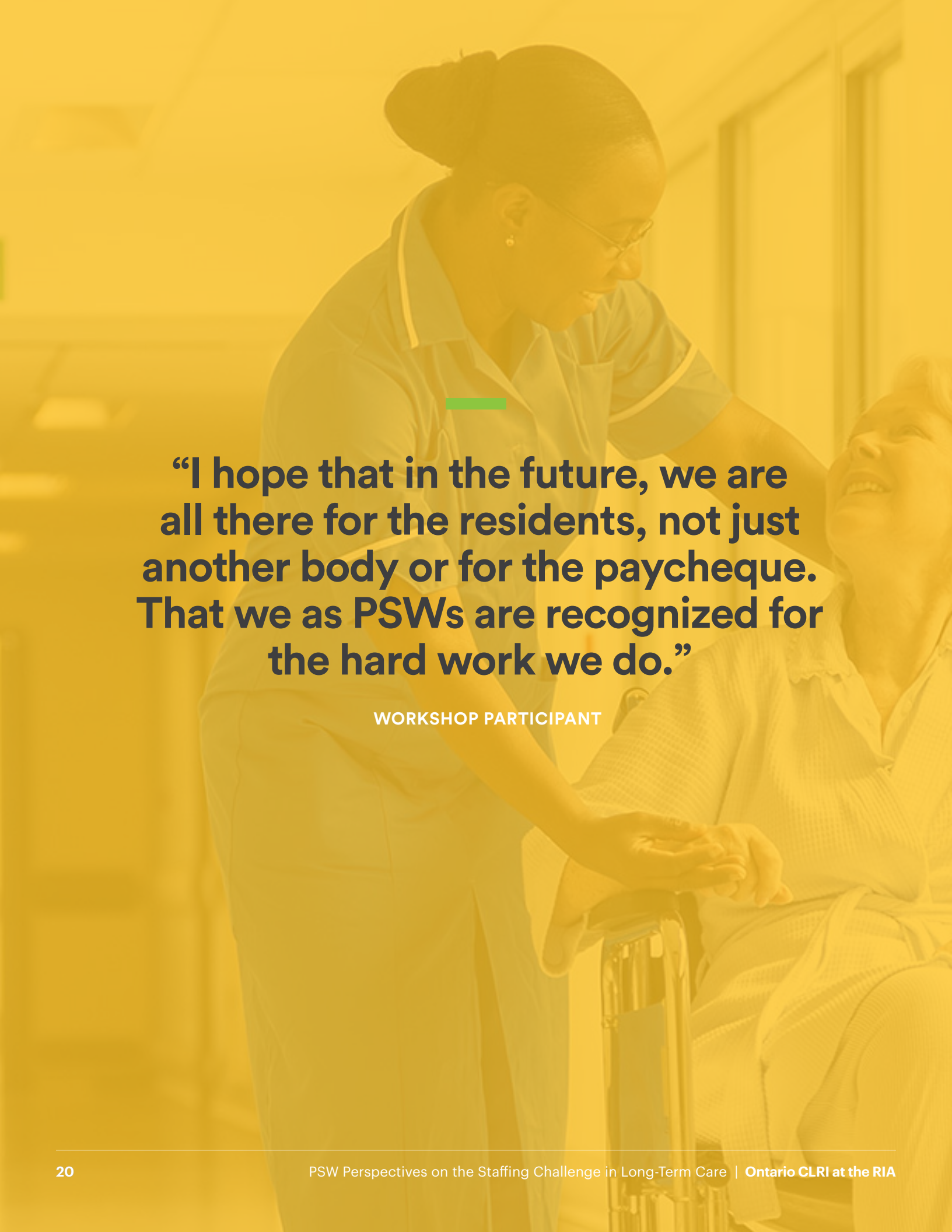
“I hope that in the future, we are all there for the residents, not just another body or for the paycheck. That we as PSWs are recognized for the hard work we do.”

“Just respect in general from the managers, owners, families and the general public.”

“I hope the world will see how important a PSW is and give them the respect, pay, and staff that they deserve.”

AVAILABLE TIME: PSWs shared what more time would allow them to do or achieve, centring around providing amazing care to residents.

- More time for building relationships with residents and families
- Time to provide the best possible care in a holistic way
- Time for residents (so “we don’t have to rush them”)



“I hope that in the future, we are all there for the residents, not just another body or for the paycheque. That we as PSWs are recognized for the hard work we do.”


WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT

PSWs shared:

“Honestly I would like to see PSWs move more towards an overall care approach and be given the appropriate time and resident ratio to make this work.”

“To be able to give the quality of care the residents deserve instead of having to rush them because of time availability and working short.”

“That we can provide adequate care for these seniors on a reasonable time frame so they feel valued and loved.”



POSITIVE TEAM DYNAMICS: PSWs shared how positive team dynamics might be expressed or show up in their work.


- Teamwork and trust of co-workers
- Better communication
- Access to mental and physical health supports on the job

PSWs shared:

“PSWs should have access to physical and mental support as it does strain the body and mind.”

“Everyone should work as a team and communicate better.”

“A team that worked like a team. Nurses and all parts of the care team working like a smooth running engine.”



ADEQUATE STAFFING AND RESOURCES: PSWs shared what sufficient staffing and resourcing would look and feel like to them and residents.

- More team members
- Better ratios between team members and residents (e.g., 1/2, 1/4 or 1/5 ratio)
- Minimize turnover of team members, since cycling through staff has a negative impact on trust development between families and residents and the PSWs
- Full-time roles so PSWs do not have to work multiple part-time jobs
- Good compensation and benefits
- Proper equipment and resources to manage the health and well-being of residents
- Government stepping in to support PSWs (wage, healthy environments, etc.)

PSWs shared:

"I hope that the system is capable of keeping the PSWs at one location and offer full-time hours. I believe it will be beneficial for most residents, giving them more of a stable team and more familiarity. You will get to know the residents needs and wants at a deeper level."

"I hope PSWs get the respect they deserve, I hope they receive livable wages. I hope that when we say we need help people listen and changes are made. But most importantly I hope we are provided with appropriate staffing levels so that we can provide quality level care without putting ourselves at risk."

"I really hope that someday there will be a 1:2 or maybe 1:4 staff to resident ratio, as I feel that would be manageable and allow PSW's to do the little extras that make the residents' days so much better."



RE-IMAGINED PSW ROLE: PSWs shared how their roles could be advanced to better support residents and allow for professional development and advancement.

- Training, up-skilling and career advancement
- Regulation, certification and licensing
- Expanding limits of the role (e.g., providing mental health support to residents)
- Program development for residents

PSWs shared:

"I hope PSWs will be treated with more respect, get more opportunities to advance in their career and be given more rights."

"I hope PSWs get full-time employment with benefits, treated with respect on the health care team, become a registered profession—also have a body that represents you."

"To be recognized with licences, like nurses."

"Better education on how to deal with (resident) behaviors and legal ramifications."

Many of the ideas listed above are not extreme. These suggestions and ideas are typically what many professionals expect from a role or workplace. PSWs communicated that their main desire is to be acknowledged and have their efforts fairly compensated and respected. Again, as PSWs provided feedback, many stated that if slight changes were made they would be able to provide better care to residents. PSWs want a role and an environment that allows them to deliver excellent care to older adults.

Solutions

Placing PSWs at the centre of the design process allows for their ideas and solutions to be heard. Reflecting on the topics of Barriers to Care, Safety and Well-Being at Work and Respect and Feeling Valued, PSWs generated the following solutions to address the challenges they face on a daily basis:

APPROPRIATE STAFFING AND RESOURCING

- More team members (full-time positions with benefits)
- Raise pay, provide benefits and offer more full-time positions so PSWs are not forced to work multiple part-time jobs
- Balance workload to take into consideration different levels of resident needs

OPERATIONAL CULTURE SHIFT

- Policy and operational adjustments to support the PSW role, including: consistent policy and disciplinary actions, helping to manage expressive or violent resident behaviour, enabling all teams to help with PSW tasks, and the inclusion of PSWs in decision-making processes
- Better communication and conflict resolution skills on the team and in managers
- PSW suggestion system to support PSWs in raising concerns and ideas to management
- Anti-racism, anti-discrimination, and anti-bullying policies
- Consistent disciplinary actions against bullying, racism, and discrimination
- Management taking more active role with managing responsive behaviours from residents to reduce violence against PSWs

TEAM-BUILDING AND GRATITUDE

- Improve dynamics between experienced PSWs and new PSWs (this is currently where a lot of friction on teams can develop)
- Set up a buddy system so PSWs can work in pairs, which supports PSW safety and could reduce potential for injuries
- Team-building activities to improve trust and communication, including management
- Comment or “thank you” cards from team members, residents, and families
- Recognition from management and families for job well done
- Establishing team norms around team behaviour, such as the expectation to say “thank you” to another team member during a shift

TRAINING

- Cultural and anti-racism training for teams and management
- Creating plans for on-the-job training for new team members that support their learning and

enable trainers (experienced PSWs) to take the time to train the new team members with reduced resident workload

- Mandatory training in crisis intervention and de-escalation, dementia, mental health, and addictions
- Recognizing gap between ideal scenarios and processes taught in school and the realities of homes that are constantly short-staffed
- Leadership training to support managers in addressing challenges in workplace culture on their teams

EMPOWERING FAMILIES

- Enabling PSWs to have enough time and skills to build relationships and trust with families
- Educating families about the roles in the home and setting appropriate expectations with families about the care they can expect and how they are expected to treat team members respectfully
- Supporting and encouraging families to assist with care of their loved ones, especially with activities that present scheduling challenges, like mealtimes

MORE VISIBLE AND SUPPORTIVE MANAGEMENT

- Management role reversal
- Increased accessibility to management, such as open-door policy and managers spending time on the floor during their day
- Management jumping in to help PSWs when short-staffed or during scheduling challenges, such as helping out with lifts or mealtimes.

Additional Solutions

In addition to these creative ideas, PSWs also generated a smaller subset of more detailed solutions. These are intended to provoke conversations about solutions that might be feasible in different contexts, as well as to inspire pilot programs that could enable testing and learning before implementing on a larger scale.

Transfer of information: Move-In Meeting

The PSWs who created this solution were addressing the challenge of team members being excluded from information about resident needs, or not being informed in a timely manner. For example, some PSWs shared that at resident move-in meetings, directors of care, coordinators, and nurses are included, but PSWs are not. As a result, some PSWs often find out crucial resident information second-hand or not at all.

The proposed solution is for a meeting at move-in that includes all care team members. In order to achieve this:

- All members of the care team responsible for a resident are included in a meeting at move-in to meet the resident and hear first-hand context about family, social worker, caregivers, etc.
- PSWs must be taken off the floor to attend the meeting and should be replaced during the meeting with another member of team member (for example, leadership, PSW, recreational team member) to ensure that there is not a shortage of bodies on the floor.

Hope for Better Care Campaign

The PSWs who created this solution were addressing the challenge of high resident-to-staff ratios, which reduces the quality of care PSWs can provide to each resident during a shift. They also wanted to change the poor perception of PSWs and LTC in the general public.

The proposed solution for this challenge is for a social media campaign to promote a reduced staff-to-resident ratio of 1:6. This campaign would aim to raise awareness of working conditions for PSWs in Ontario aimed at individuals, communities, organizations and government, with the goal of improving care and attracting more PSWs to the LTC field. The PSWs proposing this solution felt that, with improved ratios, organizations will improve team member retention and training costs, PSWs will have higher job satisfaction and residents will have better care and increased independence.

“Hand-in-Hand” Peer Mentorship App

The PSWs who created this solution were addressing the challenge of new PSWs feeling a disconnect between their studies and the realities of working as a PSW, which comes from a lack of understanding of the PSW role and responsibilities. The proposed solution for this challenge is a mobile application for new PSWs to connect with a mentor to have support around adapting to the work environment and gaining the necessary hands-on experience and confidence. The application is accessible digitally and from the home, but excludes resident information, so there is no risk to confidentiality. This solution supports new PSWs in their transition into work, which can also improve their ability to care for residents.

Staffing Squad

The PSWs who created this solution were addressing staffing challenges and PSWs not having opportunities to voice their concerns and ideas to management or other team members.

The proposed solution for this challenge is a group of identifiable individuals who meet on a monthly basis to discuss staffing challenges and build resolutions together. The group is made up of PSWs, management and representatives from other staffing groups, such as Registered Nurses, etc. The members of this group are approachable and actively engage other team members to gather their feedback by participating in team huddles and using tools like a suggestion box.

PSW Training Plan

The PSWs who created this solution were addressing the challenges of PSWs not being prepared for the increased complexity of resident needs, as well as the challenge of recruiting and retaining PSWs in the LTC field.

The proposed solution for this challenge is to create a training plan for current PSWs, which will ensure they are trained on essential topics. Topics should include dementia, medication training, mental health, addictions, non-violent crisis intervention and other topics that are essential for resident care and PSW safety. Training could be mandated as regular professional development for PSWs to ensure they are continually improving their skills. Additional training in specialization could also be offered. Mandated, continuous training could improve the trust that families and residents have in the PSW role.

PSW Recognition System

The PSWs who created this solution were addressing the challenge of PSWs feeling unrecognized and under-valued for their work. They also wanted to ensure that all PSWs were recognized, whereas they find that currently PSWs are not equally recognized, as some may be more outgoing or recognition may be influenced by cliques in the workplace.

The proposed solution for this challenge is a board where families, residents, team members and management can submit team members' names for recognition. Nominated team members can be entered into a draw for a prize.

To ensure all PSWs have a fair chance for recognition, this solution would also include an anonymous co-worker survey that prompts team members to nominate individuals for different categories that relate to the quality of their work.

Better Workload Balance System

The PSWs who created this solution were addressing the challenges of staffing shortages and burn-out. They noted that team members can become more burned out at work if they are working regularly with residents with the most complex needs. They also wanted experienced PSWs to have more time and capacity to support new PSWs. Often training new team members is an additional task added to an already heavy workload. This creates a poor environment for mentorship and can lead to frustration and tension.

The proposed solution for this challenge is a system for more effectively balancing PSW workloads, which take into account their safety needs and the different factors that can lead to being overworked and burnt out. To address safety needs, PSWs in this system will always work in pairs. All team members, regardless of role, will also be trained in key activities, such as lifts, so that PSWs can always find someone to help them with these tasks. Another aspect of this idea is potentially bringing in PSWs for specific tasks or busy times during the daily schedule, such as incorporating a bathing shift or having more PSWs available during mealtimes.

PSW workload should also take into consideration the level of complexity and needs across residents so that each PSW has a mix of residents with higher and lower needs. If this is not possible, PSWs should be scheduled on a rotation so that no one individual is overly-burdened by working with residents with high needs all the time. Workload should also take into account training needs for new PSWs, so if an experienced PSW is training a new team member both individuals have a lighter workload. This will enable proper training and less stress.



Engagement Learning

Key lessons learned during
the engagement process.

Engagement Learning

Engaging with any audience reveals lessons learned and new approaches, some that work better than others. PSWs who took part in the engagement process were extremely motivated to share their experiences and ideas for change. However, challenges and opportunities for learning did present themselves throughout the process. We discovered that PSWs can be difficult to reach due to the nature of their shift work.

Here are some of the key lessons learned during this engagement process:

RECRUITMENT

- Social media can be used successfully to reach different PSW audiences. Posting about events and asking partner organizations to do the same, enables easier and widespread sharing of the project information.
- Email communication with PSWs was challenging and ultimately not as effective for recruitment as we had initially thought, which made it difficult to share information in a timely manner.
- Connecting to PSWs through partner organizations is a great starting point for recruitment, as long as additional avenues are used as well. This ensured that we were reaching a wide variety of PSWs in different locations and social networks. This is especially important with PSWs because there is no central group, hub, or organization that regulates all PSWs in Ontario.
- Offering the opportunity to participate through managers at specific LTC homes was also an effective strategy for recruitment. Managers could communicate directly with PSWs and make it easy for PSWs to attend the remote workshops by setting up a meeting room at the home and coordinating with the project team.

HOSTING AND FACILITATING EVENTS

- Try to schedule events around shift change times, when those are known, to maximize the number of PSWs who might be able to attend. We also scheduled events at a variety of times, so that we could reach people with different schedules.
- Send reminder emails one day and one hour before the event. This is especially helpful for PSWs who have busy schedules and intensive workloads. Including the event information and all necessary instructions in those emails can also make it easier for participants to attend.
- Schedule lots of breaks during the sessions and ensure there are different types of activities that enable participants to stay focused, stretch and move around. We heard this advice from PSWs early on in this project because PSWs are used to being active and on their feet all day. Even during the online workshops, we scheduled a break and

facilitated a stretching activity to break up the session.

- Fairly compensating PSWs for their time is extremely important. It shows respect for their contributions and input and makes it easier for PSWs to attend events, while trying to work enough shifts during their week.
- It is important to reiterate at meetings that PSWs have a lot to offer because they might not see themselves as having a voice or having expertise. Most PSWs do not feel like they have opportunities to share their ideas and opinions about work so they may need more encouragement to get started.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

- Many PSWs told us that they enjoyed the workshops because they felt supported and heard. Workshops were also an opportunity for them to hear from other PSWs about similar and different experiences they have had working in the sector.



Conclusion

A summary of what we did and a recommendation of taking action.

Conclusion

This project provided a unique opportunity to engage with PSWs and hear directly from them about their challenges at work. We also worked with PSWs to identify the solutions that they feel would improve their experiences. These solutions have the potential to improve the retention of PSWs in the LTC field and attract more PSWs. This would help address the sector-wide challenge of staffing shortages and high turnover.

The PSWs engaged for this project worked hard to identify the core issues they face on a daily basis and develop ideas that can address them. By presenting their contributions and voices, we hope to inspire partners across the sector to explore and implement these solutions, wherever possible. Taking action on the recommendations of PSWs will show that we are listening and value their contributions to the LTC system.

This final report has been developed collaboratively
with the Ontario CLRI at the RIA and Overlap Associates.



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