

# **An Initiative of the Live Oak Project and the National Association of Health Care Assistants (NAHCA) to Address the Workforce Crisis Among Certified Nursing Assistants In Nursing Homes**

## **Live Oak Project Mission**

The mission of the Live Oak Project is to organize a process that transforms all dimensions of the long-term care system while simultaneously helping to ensure that each person currently in a long-term care community is not harmed and has a voice and choice in the decisions that impact one's life.

## **National Association of Health Care Assistants Mission**

The NAHCA Mission is to elevate the professional standing and performance of caregivers through recognition, advocacy, education, and empowerment while building a strong alliance with health care providers to maximize success and quality patient care.

**The Live Oak Project is a joint initiative of Pioneer Network and Live Oak Institute**

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**The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated the impact of the chronic shortage of certified nursing assistants (CNAs) in nursing homes. It is estimated that in 2019 before the COVID-19 crisis there were 170,000 CNA openings in the United States<sup>1</sup>, which is approximately 23% of the minimum required national CNA workforce. Since CNAs provide more than 90 percent of direct resident care to Medicaid and Medicare residents and patients, the impact on the ability to manage infections and on quality of care caused by this shortage has resulted in the pandemic related carnage of people who live and work in nursing homes.**

**The current average CNA salary is \$22,000 per year nationally, which in virtually every state puts CNAs below the federal poverty line. Although the issues involved in the CNA shortage are complex and involve such factors as respect, training and in some cases, the need for a career ladder, are multifaceted, one thing is clear: *A good first step towards mitigating the chronic shortage is to provide CNAs with a living wage and decent benefits.***

**In the longer term, these economic improvements combined with a culture of respect for what CNAs do and what they know will have a synergistic effect on the quality of life and safety for every person living and working in a nursing home.**

### **Our Purpose**

Our purpose is simple: raise CNA wages to a living wage by 30 percent over 3 years. The mechanism will be a direct wage pass-through to CNAs funded by Medicaid/Medicare. A 30 percent increase represents approximately one-one thousandth of the total federal annual budget for Medicaid and Medicare.

Below poverty wages for CNAs, all of whom are required to be trained and meet federal and state certification standards, have caused many to work two jobs to make ends meet. These circumstances have greatly exacerbated the catastrophic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and have posed severe and immediate consequences to nursing home residents as well as to staff. The immediate short term solution is to substantially increase wages to a living level.

We acknowledge that government support for virtually all staff in nursing homes results in them being underpaid and undervalued relative to their peers in other segments of the healthcare system. We are focusing on CNAs because they have the greatest contact with and impact on the life of each person receiving care in a nursing home and are most at risk of catching communicable disease. Of all direct caregivers, they generally have the highest rate of turnover. We see this as an important first step towards wage equity for all nursing home employees. An

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/nursing-assistants.htm#tab-6>

indirect impact is that it is likely that the resolution of the shortage of CNAs will result in substantially lower costs of overtime and agency personnel that could enable nursing homes to raise the wages of such non-certified employees as housekeepers and food service workers.

#### Federal Legislative Action is Necessary

The only way to address the need for an equitable living wage for CNAs is by federal legislative action that provides a direct Medicaid/ Medicare passthrough to providers and ensures that the money is exclusively used for the wages of CNAs.

Potential return on this investment will include improvement in quality of care and life through reduction in staff turnover, better recruitment of staff, consistent assignment of staff, reduced unnecessary hospitalizations, more efficiently operated nursing homes, and numerous other possible enhancements. We anticipate that stabilization of the CNA workforce will contribute significantly to compliance with the bi-partisan generated Nursing Home Reform Act of 1987 legislation, which after 33 years is still woefully lacking.

#### How the Legislation Might Work

This section describes in practical terms the kind of federal legislation that would be required to meet this challenging need.

We propose a 30 percent increase in wages over a period of three years according to the following schedule.

Year	% Increase	Federal Portion	State Portion
1	10%	100%	0%
2	10%	95%	5%
3	10%	90%	10%
Average Total Wage Increase	30%	95%	5%

Because state budgets have been severely affected by the pandemic, we are proposing a 100 percent federal contribution during the first year and a 95 percent contribution the second year and 90 percent contribution in year three.

This passthrough is intended to be in addition to cost of living increases. It shall be exclusively dedicated for CNA wages, with none of it to be siphoned off for administration or management expenses.

Nursing homes shall provide a clear audit path in their cost reports and any money not used for this purpose shall be returned to federal and state agencies.

### **Our Call To Action**

This issue is beyond politics. We want to create a bi-partisan initiative for the 2021 legislative session for the immediate implementation of a living wage for certified nursing assistants. In order to have the clout to achieve our goals we seek to light the fire under a broad coalition of consumers, advocates, provider and professional associations, labor unions, elder organizations and other policy influencers, to put aside their sometimes conflicting agendas to support this initiative. This is an important first step in securing the safety and wellbeing of nursing home residents and short term patients and those who care for them.