

**Testimony to the Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing  
“There’s No Place Like Home: Home healthcare in Rural America”  
February 12, 2020**

**Francis Adams, Home Care Worker**

Good morning Chairman Collins, Ranking Member Casey, and Senators. My name is Francis Adams, I’m 70 years old and I am a home care worker from Washington, Pennsylvania. I’m also a very proud member of the United Home Care Workers of Pennsylvania, a joint program of SEIU Healthcare PA and AFSCME. I’ve been a home care worker for more than 20 years, helping seniors and people with disabilities who need support to remain at home instead of being placed in a facility. From my first-hand experience, I can see our current long-term care system does not support home care workers or the clients who need our services.

The thing about home care is that there’s always work. Every day, more than 10,000 people turn 65 in America.<sup>1</sup> In Pennsylvania alone, 70 percent of people turning 65 need some type of long-term care.<sup>2</sup> But, in my state, there is only one home care worker for every eight people in need of services.<sup>3</sup> As a whole, our country needs to attract one million more workers to the home care industry by 2028 to meet the skyrocketing demand.<sup>4</sup> However, for a job that’s in such high demand, home care is one of the lowest-paid and most under-supported workforces in the country.

When I was younger, you could quit your job at the steel mill, walk across the street to another mill and get another job in ten minutes. Today, that’s home care. There are so many open jobs, but it’s hard work and people aren’t going to fill open positions if they can get paid more at a CVS. Home care work was a lifeline for me after the mills I worked at went under. By the time my pension kicked in, it was only a small fraction of what had been promised, so being able to do home care kept me afloat. However, despite the importance of this work, it does not pay as well, which continues to be a problem.

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<sup>1</sup> Heimlich, R. (2010, December 29). Baby Boomers Retire. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2010/12/29/baby-boomers-retire/>

<sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania Health Care Association. Long-Term Care Trends and Statistics, The Need for Long-Term Care Continues to Grow. Retrieved from <https://www.phca.org/for-consumers/research-data/long-term-and-post-acute-care-trends-and-statistics>

<sup>3</sup> Home Care Fight for \$15. Care Gap Report. Retrieved at <https://fightfor15homecare.org/care-gap-report/>

<sup>4</sup> Scales, K. (2019). *Envisioning the Future of Home Care*. Retrieved from <https://phinational.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/The-Future-of-Home-Care-2019-PHI.pdf>

With our current system, low wages (a median wage of \$11.57 per hour<sup>5</sup>), lack of benefits and basic protections, and isolation contribute to a critical shortage<sup>6</sup> of home care workers. National workforce turnover rates were as high as 60 percent in 2014.<sup>7</sup> Many home care workers don't have affordable healthcare, and go years without seeing a doctor. More than half of all home care workers rely on public assistance. We're unable to meet our basic needs.

I started my career in home care when my grandfather fell ill from black lung. I left my job as a steelworker to return to my family. I wasn't paid for the work, but it didn't matter to me — I wanted to be there for my family. I later started taking care of my aunt, and that's when someone told me that home care can be a profession. I really like the work, and I know how much people need it, so I started taking on other clients.

In addition to acting as a family caregiver to my brother who is blind from diabetes, I serve my community as an on-call home care worker, meaning I step in when a client's regular caregiver is unavailable. I never know what time of day the call will come, but when it does, I answer. If I don't, who will? They don't have anyone else and need someone to be there for them. As long as I'm physically able to do so, I promise to be that person.

A lot of the tasks I do in home care are physical — bathing, cooking meals, cleaning, helping clients go to the bathroom, driving them to and from appointments, helping them get in and out of bed — but it's the emotional connection that really makes an impact. You might be the only person they talk to all day, or maybe even all week. I never want to leave a client alone — depression and mental illness can kill you just as fast as lung cancer. And because I work as an on-call home care worker, often times I don't know what equipment someone has in their home. It is why training is so important — if I don't know how to properly use equipment, then I can hurt myself or my client.

Western Pennsylvania isn't like Washington, D.C. As a rural area, we can't walk across the street to the grocery store or hop on a subway to get across town. Isolation and distance are huge issues for people in communities like mine. Neighbors are separated by several miles. I don't own a car, so to get to my clients, I sometimes have to borrow my stepchildren's or friends' cars. When I don't have a car to use, I take the bus. But the buses only run at certain times, so if I miss it, I walk.

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019, September 4). *Occupational outlook handbook*. Retrieved at <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/home-health-aides-and-personal-care-aides.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Farrell, Chris. (2018, April 18). The Shortage Of Home Care Workers: Worse Than You Think. Retrieved at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nextavenue/2018/04/18/the-shortage-of-home-care-workers-worse-than-you-think/#34f2fc093ddd>; Institute of Medicine. (2008) *Retooling for an Aging America*. The National Academies Press: Washington DC.

<sup>7</sup> Ozga, M. (2015, April 28). SURVEY: Home Care Worker Turnover Topped 60 Percent in 2014. Retrieved from <https://phinational.org/survey-home-care-worker-turnover-topped-60-percent-in-2014/>

For those in need, it takes much longer for emergency services like fire trucks and ambulances to arrive at the scene. Because my clients can't get to the store, whether it's because of distance or mobility issues, sometimes they run out of vital supplies like dish soap, paper towels, toilet paper, or over the counter medications. I am the one who makes sure that my clients have the basics. For these reasons, home care workers are all the more important for those who live in rural areas — we are truly their lifeline.

Many of my clients are living in deep poverty themselves. I remember one client shut all his lights off at 7 p.m. because he couldn't afford electricity. So here's this guy, sitting in the dark all night long. It's really disheartening to see people sitting there like that — they can't watch TV, listen to the radio or read a book. Even if they can afford cable, lines might not run out to rural areas. So you can see in these cases, having a caregiver there to care for and talk with them is especially important.

And because there is not enough funding for home care and our clients are struggling themselves, home care workers like me may have to pay out of our own pockets for things like transportation or supplies. I have had to do that, and it only adds to the financial burden of the job. I make \$10.70 an hour, and I work anywhere from 10–40 hours any given week, depending on how many calls I get. I do my best and work hard to support myself and my brother with what we have. In addition to working as a home care worker, I have to work a second job in retail to make ends meet. But if home care was a better paying job, I wouldn't have to take on other work.

We can't truly improve the long-term care that seniors and people with disabilities rely on unless we tackle the major obstacles that are holding working people back, including low wages, lack of benefits and basic worker protections, and inadequate training. It isn't that we don't have enough people to do this work that creates a workforce shortage, it is that our country, as a whole, undervalues this work and so nobody wants to fill the positions. We have to fix this. We have to invest in long-term care for all and we have to finally respect the work home care workers do.

That is why I am joining Pennsylvania home care workers and workers across the country to raise wages to at least \$15 per hour. To win a living wage, home care workers like me are uniting in unions to improve the lives of themselves and their clients.

Through my union, my fellow home care workers and I have the strength in numbers to negotiate for higher wages, basic benefits and for training programs. My union gives me opportunities I never thought possible. We have worked together to get the Pennsylvania government to strengthen the commonwealth's Medicaid program. My union provides me with critical training I might not otherwise get. And importantly, my

union has given me a sense of community. I even found out that there are three other home care workers that live in my building.

The union is everything to me. My grandfather was a miner and a union member, my father was a steel worker and a union member, and my mother was a teacher and a union member. I saw what the unions did to improve life for our family, and I see now what our union is doing for home care workers like me.

I have advocated for racial and social justice my entire life. As a child, I saw first-hand how the shameful legacy of Jim Crow held hardworking people in my community back. I joined my parents as we marched arm and arm with Dr. King and I held that power and passion in my heart as I grew older. Coming of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I upheld my commitment to justice, standing with my sisters and brothers of all backgrounds as we protested the Vietnam War and fought against oppression during the Stonewall uprisings. Our strength then paved the way for justice today, but we know there is more work to do. Even now, in 2020, prejudice and hatred permeate our society, with those in economic power shamelessly and willingly enacting sexist, racist policies that revive the demons of our past. Home care, a job that has historically (and falsely) been labelled “unskilled” and “women’s work,” is a clear example of this. This cannot stand. The things we were advocating for in the 60s are now mainstream parts of our culture, and, similarly, I hope what we’re calling for today will make home care mainstream, top-notch and dignified work, so that in 20 years, supporting our elderly at home isn’t even a debated question.

At 70 years old, I’ll soon need someone to care for me like I do for my clients and my brother. I want to make sure that the future of home care is made up of good, qualified, compassionate workers who are able to do the job to the best of their ability. As a consumer, I want to make sure that I’m not left in the dark because my caregiver can’t get to me or that they’re too sick to work.

The aunt I cared for once told me, “If I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die in my own bed.” People want to live in their homes — I’ve never once heard someone say they wanted to go to a nursing facility. Home is where they’re the most comfortable. It’s where their family is. It’s what they spent their whole lives building. It’s what they know. I want that for myself, too.

It is why I ask that Senators do everything they can to make it easier for people to receive care in their homes. We have starved our long-term care system, and all the Medicaid cuts proposed by the President will only make it worse. I want to thank Senator Casey for introducing the Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) Infrastructure Improvement Act. This bill will give more money to states to make sure that as many people as possible have access to care in their community. It will help

states support things like transportation and encourage states to increase wages and provide training for home care workers. The funding Pennsylvania could receive if this legislation passed would mean I could have real hope for a raise. And that is true for home care workers across the country if their states pursued workforce improvements under the bill.

Home care work is this country's future. It's never going away, and funding for home care must increase if we're going to make sure every person in this country — home care workers and those who need the services — has hope for a good life.

Thank you.