

Caring for the Caregivers

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With more jobs being lost all the time across the board — more than 71,000 layoffs in the United States were announced on Monday and Tuesday alone — there should be comfort in the fact that one sector, health care, continues to add jobs. In December, employers added 32,000 health-related positions.

Outdated labor rules from 1975 allow home care aides to be defined as companions, which exempts their employers, usually private agencies, from federal standards governing overtime and minimum wages. As the population has aged, however, demand for home care has grown and the work has evolved far beyond companionship. It is not uncommon for home care workers to perform significant housekeeping chores and to help their elderly clients move, dress and eat, make sure they take their medicines and go to doctors' appointments.

In its last days in office in 2001, the Clinton administration proposed a revision to the labor rules to allow federal protections to apply to personal home care aides, but the Bush administration promptly threw that out and reasserted the status quo. A 2007 Supreme Court ruling upheld the rules, and a push that year by House and Senate Democrats to pass a bill to update the law went nowhere.

According to the Labor Department, personal and home care aides are expected to be the second fastest-growing occupation in the United States from 2006-2016, increasing by 51 percent, slightly behind the expected growth in systems and data communications analysts.

Most home care aides are women, low income and minority, and many of them are immigrants. Some states have taken steps to provide them with basic labor protections. Efforts to unionize home care workers in some states also has led to wage gains and better conditions. But the progress is incomplete without a federal law to recognize and protect the home care work force. It is unconscionable that workers who are entrusted with the care of some of the nation's most vulnerable citizens are themselves unprotected by basic labor standards.

It is also unwise, because poor pay for long hours leads to high turnover, which undermines the quality of care. Turnover also drives up the cost of providing home care — a needless drain on Medicaid, which pays for many home care services. And that is not the only way that poor quality home care jobs end up costing taxpayers. Nearly half of home care workers rely on food stamps or other public assistance, so taxpayers ultimately compensate for their low pay and inadequate benefits.

Of necessity, job creation and job quality will be the focus of the Obama administration in 2009, and, most likely, for many years. The Department of Labor could rewrite the rules to extend federal protections to home care workers. Or Congress and the White House could work together to pass a law granting those protections. Either way, the point is to ensure that home care, a 21st-century growth industry, creates good jobs.

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