

A Homestyle Aged Care staff member and resident

# Staffing solutions

Perks and technology are among strategies providers are using to fill shifts, writes NATASHA EGAN.

## In this story:

- Capecare offers accommodation, student placements and bonuses to aid recruitment, retention
- Homestyle Aged Care staff pick up 90 per cent of available shifts quickly using worker marketplace platform Emprevo
- Providers without real-time data may have to overcompensate in staff hours to meet compliance requirement, says James Price from Mirus Group.

**T**he pandemic has amplified ongoing challenges with recruiting and retaining aged care staff. The Omicron wave compounded issues further.

The result is an increasing number of nursing and care staff reporting their intentions to leave the sector.

According to an Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation national survey conducted in January and February 2022, more than one in five plan to leave their aged care job within the next 12 months (21 per cent). And more than a third of the nearly 1,000 nurses, midwives and personal care workers surveyed plan to leave in one-to-five years (37 per cent).

A United Workers Union survey of 1,000 aged care workers in South Australia and Queensland in February painted a similarly grim outlook – more than 75 per cent intend to leave the sector including one-fifth as soon as possible (19 per cent), a third within 12 months (33 per cent) and a quarter within five years (24 per cent).

Capecare – a non-profit provider of residential and

home aged care services and independent living accommodation in the south-west of Western Australia – is dealing with workforce shortages across the board from leadership to direct care and support roles, says CEO Joanne Penman.

“The shortages are impacting on our capacity to provide care and services to our residential aged care and community aged care clients,” Penman tells *Australian Ageing Agenda*.

Capecare has around 200 aged care beds and 75 independent living apartments across two villages in Busselton and Dunsborough.

“We opened a new 82-bed facility in nearby Dunsborough in August 2021 but due to an inability to recruit the required high quality suitably skilled workforce, we have not been able to open many of the available beds,” Penman says.

To help attract staff to work at the established Ray Village in Busselton, Capecare has temporarily converted cottage respite accommodation and office spaces into onsite beachside accommodation where staff can stay in their own bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms and shared facilities.

“By opening up some of our respite and administration areas as nursing and care staff accommodation, we’ve been able to attract Perth-based staff who would otherwise not have been able to find rental accommodation.

“This has resulted in an additional 14 staff living rent-free in our accommodation, providing an essential injection



Joanne Penman



Anthony Byrne



Dawn Griffiths



James Price



to our teams. The incentive of free accommodation and the higher agency rates makes it a more attractive proposition to prospective staff,” says Penman.

Capecare has spent money and time refurbishing the accommodation and providing cleaning, maintenance and support to these staff free of charge. However, it is worth the expense, says Penman.

“This initiative has been a game changer for us, allowing us to maintain high-quality services and support our community by offering as many residential aged care beds and community services as we can.”

### Tech-solutions to finding workers

Attraction issues aside, technology is increasingly helping providers meet their staffing needs. Among solutions developed for aged care sector is Emprevo.

The platform allows providers to create and customise their own tailored worker marketplace so managers can fill shifts and part-time and casual employees can find work via an app on their smartphone, says Anthony Byrne, Emprevo’s CEO.

“You’re able to add your own workers to that marketplace,” Byrne tells AAA. “Rather than having to call, text and chase workers, this system does it for you,” he says. “It means you can quickly connect and find your workers to fill those shifts.”

There are approximately 40,000 workers and 3,400 managers from aged care companies using Emprevo, he says. He describes the platform as a round-the-clock dynamic solution to the most dynamic of situations. It is particularly useful at finding staff at all hours that managers didn’t realise could help them because it’s based on live availability of all eligible workers in the marketplace, says Byrne.

“That’s the powerful thing about this – it flips it. Rather than the manager spending two-to-three hours a day trying to fill shifts, they’re able to find and connect workers who are chasing that work,” he says. “It’s like any marketplace that is active, right? You have two people who have the opposite problem. You have managers that are desperate to give work and you have workers that have always wanted more work.”

Homestyle Aged Care has been using Emprevo across its 11 aged care homes in Melbourne and Geelong for the last two years.

“It’s a tremendous success,” Dawn Griffiths tells AAA. “Generally, over 90 per cent of available shifts are picked up quickly by our own staff,” says Griffiths, Homestyle Aged Care’s general manager of human resources.

Homestyle Aged Care has around 1,000 residents and 1,300 staff. Most employees are permanent part-time (66 per cent), almost a third are casual (27 per cent) and the rest are full-time (7 per cent). The provider publishes rosters four weeks in advance and available shifts for two weeks.

That involves first notifying permanent part-time staff of their master roster shifts then sending the available shifts to all staff, particular groups or individuals as desired. “Our casual workforce picks up most of the available shifts,” says Griffiths, who adds the organisation’s employees are the best audience to offer shifts to first.

“They know the residents. We also know our team is committed to the residents so given an opportunity, they would often like to provide that care as opposed to have a shift filled by agency. Emprevo enables us to be transparent with employees around the shifts that are available. And then they – on a first come, first serve basis – pick those shifts up,” Griffiths says.

Filling the final 10 per cent usually involves encouraging staff to do it before sending it off to agency, she says. “If it becomes available at very short notice, we will still often send it to a team member first, but maybe an hour or so later, then send it to agency if it’s still available. Agency is still used as that last-minute opportunity to pick a shift up.”

Key benefits include ease of use, less time spent on finding and calling staff to fill available shifts and a streamlined process for everyone, says Griffiths.

“Team members can manage their commitment to us. They can see shifts quite a fair way out and choose to take them. You

might be rostered to work three shifts a week but are happy doing four. But you don’t want to commit to doing four every week. This way, you can choose to pick up that fourth shift pretty regularly without having to make that big commitment to it.”

Aged care providers can also add agencies to the marketplace through Emprevo’s Agency Connect.

“[W]hen they do have to go beyond their own workers, they can then engage their agencies from the same platform,” says Byrne.

“The agencies would then have to find the worker, and then automatically it comes back filled on the calendar for the manager at the site,” he says. “So even though their workers have been scarcer, it means that they can tap into their agencies, when they only need to.”

About four months ago Homestyle Aged Care piloted the tool with agencies at two homes and following its success rolled it out to all homes.

“We were apprehensive about using the agency plugin because we were concerned available shifts would go too quickly to agencies,” says Griffiths. “But it didn’t. Only about 5 per cent of shifts are going to agency,” she says. “It speeds up the process. Instead of making multiple phone calls you can send it to one or more agencies at the same time.”

She says the system was beneficial during single-site worker arrangements due to COVID. “We were able to ensure we gave the staff who chose Homestyle as their single-site first choice on available shifts before publishing to all staff,” Griffiths says.

“We can also send short messages to staff. Like ‘It’s St Patrick’s day tomorrow so wear something green to work.’ And people wore green so it shows they are reading it.”

The messages come up as a notification on an employee’s smartphone, which is more effective than an email blast, she says.

### Impact on costs, compliance

Real-time tools and ready access to available workers are going to be crucial for providers to optimise their staffing and meet compliance requirements, says James Price, co-founder of Mirus Australia, which offers technology-based workforce management solutions.

“The fundamentals of workforce and rostering all stem from demand,” Price tells AAA. This demand will be influenced by incoming Australian National Aged Care Classification, which will indicate the daily required minutes of care per resident according to their assessed level, he says.

“In order to establish demand from a compliance point of view – and I’m talking about star rating here too – those minutes prescribed by the department are going to be important” with more minutes meaning a better star rating, says Price.

“As I understand the reporting, the average minutes will be rolled up every three months so as you get to the end of the three-month period, you’re going to get more anxious about whether you have met those hours. If you have to put more staff on to get your average up over three months, then that’s going to start to cost you more money.”

If you’re using agency staff, a delay in getting the information you need to make accurate decisions could add further to costs, Price says.

“People without good systems and processes and people without visibility of real-time data are going to have to overcompensate in staff hours to make sure they get their number.”

Innovative systems will also help providers access the workers they need, says Price. Mirus Works! provides real-time data and award interpretation to help providers optimise staff coverage, save time managing rosters and reduce unplanned overtime costs. Mirus has teamed up with workforce management platform PowerHouse Hub, recruitment experts Pulse Staffing Australia and Astute Payroll to pilot a new solution that helps providers act more like an agency to fill shifts.

Price compares the solution to Uber, saying it allows organisations to set up talent pools of workers to draw on when needed. Providers use Mirus Works! to roster staff and

offer the shifts and Powerhouse Hub’s “workforce wallet” to track workers’ skills and ensure they are screened, qualified and ready to work.

“If I need someone this afternoon, I can post a shift to 10 people and see who comes back,” Price says. “The system does all the hard work for you.”

For shift offers, the system ensures suggested workers are available, suitably qualified and won’t breach the award arrangement. Roster managers can send the offer to as many or as few of the suggested internal or external workers as they choose.

“When you get that list of 10 people, it’ll tell you how much they cost, how many hours they’ve been rostered and whether they’re permanent, casual or agency. Then you can choose – depending on how urgent your shift fill is – how many you send it to, and which ones you go to,” he says.

“When workforce is your most expensive cost line, why wouldn’t you have a real-time indicator of what that’s costing you and whether you’re compliant?”

### Valuing employees key

While many in the sector have been struggling to fill shifts – particularly during the Omicron wave – Griffiths says Homestyle’s hasn’t experienced this issue as acutely. Tools like Emprevo help, but the main reason is “a workforce committed to their residents,” she says. The secret to this committed workforce, says Griffiths, is “appreciation” and “communication”.

“Our CEO is at the forefront and our group general manager too. They keep staff updated and they are thanked frequently and often told they are valued and appreciated. That runs throughout Homestyle so in the homes the DONs do the same.”

To improve retention long-term, Homestyle Aged Care’s workforce strategy targets “having fewer employees doing more hours,” says Griffiths. “We are looking to give our part-timers as many hours as they want to work just for Homestyle, and we are aiming to reduce our number of casuals.”

Capecare agency staff taking up free accommodation enjoy the neighbouring beach (from left:) Vida, Alana, Evelyn and Ramadani



### Partnerships and bonuses

At Capecare, Penman says a partnership with South Regional TAFE to support its Ageing and Disability Job Ready Program with practical placement opportunities for students and its own trainee program are other important initiatives targeting recruitment.

“Capecare runs a fully supported traineeship program for students studying a Certificate III Individual Support (Ageing), who will then become part of our care team for both our residential facilities, and our home services community.

“For those studying to be a registered nurse or enrolled nurse, we offer practical, paid experience while they complete their training,” Penman says. “We will offer them a role as an RN or EN once they graduate.”

Capecare also pays a \$500 recruitment bonus for new full-time and part-time recruits.

On what’s needed to resolve staff shortages and workforce issues in the aged care sector, Penman says: “Greater recognition of the skills and commitment required to work in the sector, higher wages, training and further education opportunities, and funding for more clinical and direct care hours to allow providers to employ more staff.” ■

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