Improving the Health and Safety Behaviors of Home Care Workers

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Home care workers supporting elderly and disabled clients with in-home services represent an expanding worker population at risk of injury and illness. Their physical job demands result in lost-work injury rates triple the national average and frequent migraines, arthritis, and high blood pressure (Denton et al., 1999). Their remuneration averages $10 per hour (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), often too low to obtain adequate health care coverage (Butler et al., 2014).

In Oregon, home care workers are licensed by the Oregon Home Care Commission and represented by the Service Employees International Union, both of which offer training and other support. However, gaps in the system were revealed in a two-part study of COMPASS (COMmunity of Practice And Safety Support), a peer-led group intervention designed at Oregon Health and Science University to support caregivers. A randomized control trial analyzed participating caregivers' health indicators (Olson et al., 2015), followed by qualitative research focused on the demands and stresses they experienced. Data revealed inadequate safety equipment in caregivers' isolated and unregulated work environments, and absence of policy provisions for advocacy or appeals. Intense

stresses originated in interactions with home-bound clients and, conversely, in the lack of interaction with peers or case managers. Caregivers typically experienced "job creep" when, for financial reasons, they dared not refuse demands that exceeded job requirements. Home care workers regarded the networking and brainstorming featured in COMPASS sessions as unique opportunities for social support, so valuable that some caregivers organized regular contact with teammates afterward.

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