

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Which Senior Living Departments Have The Least Engaged Workers?**

Wrightsville, PA. Holleran, a national firm specializing in employee engagement research and consulting, recently analyzed its database, which benchmarks over 1,000 not-for-profit senior living provider organizations throughout the United States. A notable finding is that Dining/Food and Beverage is the least engaged group of employees on campus. Fewer than 40% are engaged in their work, according to the Holleran National Benchmark. Nursing and Health Services engagement is at 41%, which is also lower than other campus departments.

Engagement among Administrative Staff is highest at 55%, followed by Housekeeping and Laundry at 47% and Environmental Services at 45%.

Reasons for lower engagement among Food Services and Nursing/Health Services employees may be similar, speculates Michele Holleran, PhD, founder of Holleran. "What I have learned anecdotally from these two groups of employees is that they are often distracted by work/family conflicts. In addition, their energy levels are greatly affected by the physical demands of their work." A study by the Sloan Center on Aging and Work found that a significant number of dining services workers come home from work too tired to take care of their household chores at least several times per month.

Pay is also a factor in their level of engagement, believes Holleran. "Especially CNAs and entry-level workers in food service...they typically struggle with financial stress more than LPNs, RNs and dining supervisors." However, there are strategies besides increasing wages that can increase engagement levels; namely, inclusion in decision-making, flexible work schedules, better recognition practices, and sharing department-level employee engagement survey results.

The Sloan study on dining workers states that including employees in decision making is a practice underutilized in the food sector compared to other sectors. "Because the dining services environment is a stressful, time-sensitive one, there may be a tendency for supervisors to be very directive in their approach, and less inclined to empower workers to participate in decision-making." And while this top-down approach is easier for supervisors to control, in the long run, self-directed work teams may be a better strategy. Especially in light of the fact that younger workers represent a high proportion of dining staffs in senior living, and they like working on teams. Another strategy is to identify the younger dining workers who are engaged and want to advance either within the Dining Department or in some other area of the organization. And in those cases where new workers bring experience to the workplace, reverse mentoring, where just-hired employees teach existing staff a new process or method of work, can be effective.

Holleran's personal observation in working with nursing staffs across the country is that they are often also hierarchical in their approach to managing teams. While this is less evident than a decade ago, thanks to new philosophies around nursing, such as the Green House, Pioneer Network and Eden Alternative models, it still exists in many senior living communities. "More mature nurses tend to be old-school in their leadership approach," observes Holleran. "They



were never taught the softer, relationship-building side of leadership in nursing school. Most are excellent managers and skilled clinicians, but they require more leadership development training."

Another place for examination is how tolerant Dining and Health Services departments are with flexible scheduling. "Studies show that rethinking scheduling practices can have a remarkable impact on enhancing retention and reducing absenteeism" among dining services workers, according to Sloan researchers. Allowing workers to have some say in their schedules demonstrates sensitivity to work-life balance.

Another simple strategy that Dining Services managers and Nurse leaders should embrace is frequent recognition of staff when they perform well. "Reinforcing all the good behaviors and excellent performance is key. That brings pride to both the individuals and departments for a job well done," states Holleran, adding that, "hand written notes, verbal thank yous, and gift cards, are simple ways to show appreciation and encourage the heart."

Finally, it is important to share departmental results with Dining Services and Nursing leaders, so that they can see where specific engagement factors are ranked by their employees. The Holleran Benchmark reveals that two engagement factors are ranked low by both Dining Services and Nursing/Health Services employees: (1) At work, my opinion counts and (2) I trust the leadership of the community. Teaching leaders about how to effectively solicit and act upon feedback from front-line workers, as well as build trust individually and at the team level, will go a long way in boosting overall engagement scores in these two departments.

Dining and Health Services departments represent an upside opportunity for senior living organizations to raise their overall engagement scores, due to the large number of employees populating these departments. "Just stabilizing the turnover in these two departments alone will make a huge difference in morale, engagement and supervisor ability to develop more meaningful relationships with direct reports," believes Holleran.

*Holleran is the premier provider of employee and resident engagement and satisfaction research and benchmarks, serving more than 1,000 not-for-profit senior living provider organizations nationally.*

## **ENDS**

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