Health

# Shortage of Human Service Workers Spawns Recruitment Effort

By **Scott Shurtleff** January 19, 2022

*A nondescript house at 35 Plain Road in Westford serves as a group home for residents in need of special care.*

At a group home in Westford, where trained professionals tend to residents with various special needs, staff has been decimated by the “fast-spreading Omicron variant” of COVID, according to Edinburg Center Developmental Disabilities Residential/Outreach Director Amy Wells.

*Princess Akotey and Papa John are two of the many staff members who give care to residents at Plain Road.*

These staffing shortages are having a devastating impact on the service industry, and not just in Westford. Edinburg manages 28 group homes throughout central Massachusetts and the two-headed challenge of both losing experienced workers and the battle to recruit replacements is an enduring struggle.

“Edinburg workers — many of whom have worked here for years — are deeply committed to helping the most vulnerable among us, even/especially during COVID.” Wells. But there simply is not enough help to perform these critical roles. The homes all need 24-hour staffing and with 52 job vacancies, that is an uphill push.

*Princess Akotey is a caregiver at a group home in Westford. The human services branch of the healthcare industry has been decimated by staffing shortages recently.*

Edinburg currently employs about 385 people across several industries: health care, program coordinators, administrative and other supportive positions. But that is far short of the actual number needed to provide a complete regime of care. The nationwide protocols on healthcare workers plus the state mandates on quarantining strains an already overworked staff, in Westford and across the region.

One of those employees is Princess Akotey, a Lowell resident and third-year nursing student at Rivier College has been employed by Edinburg for less than a month but has already embraced the calling. She sees the role as a chance to help others but also to gain valuable hands-on experience in the field. “This is a great job for young nurses,” she said.

Akotey’s co-worker, Papa John is a more seasoned staff member at Plain Road with more than two years at the location. He said, “People are passionate about their jobs here, and take their responsibilities very seriously. We are often short-staffed not because people leave, but because of the virus protocols.”

If one person in the house, staff or resident, gets the virus then the crisis deepens. Help must come from somewhere and that usually means pilfering workers from another Edinburg house–temporarily transferring people from house-to-house. But the dedicated army of human service workers soldiers on to the degree that OSHA regulations and healthcare worker guidelines allow.

For the residents, there is no shortage of care. Although the normal staff of 12 full-timers at Plain Road is sometimes half that due to shuffling between facilities and prolonged absences due to COVID precautions, the team is up to the task, working double-shifts and pitching in to fill in for others.

*Papa John is one of the dedicated and compassionate caregivers at the group home at Plain Road in Westford, one of more than two dozen managed by Edinburg Center.*

Despite the sacrifices and struggles, there is still a number of leaks in the dam that need plugging…and only so many fingers. Amy Colbert is the house Director of Operations and she discussed the creative ways that her team is filling the void.

“We’re working longer hours but at the end of the day, we say to ourselves ‘Wow, we did it.’ We’re gonna come back tomorrow and do it again.” And that teamwork extends beyond the walls of each home within the Edinburg purview. “We share with other group homes…”Can you come over and do the five o’clock insulin?”

Colbert encourages anyone interested in the human services industry, experienced or not, go to the Edinburg Center’s website and apply. There is a robust and active recruitment campaign so many positions offer sign-on bonuses and locality preferences.