

# Laundry lifeline

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Many long-term care operators know firsthand the direct impact laundry operations have on resident satisfaction and the community's bottom line. As a historically non-revenue-generating department, it's not uncommon for laundry operation discussions to focus on bottom line-based strategies for boosting operational efficiencies and increasing throughput.

While seeking ways to increase productivity is prudent, laundry experts caution that facilities that overlook the importance of hiring, keeping — and pleasing — quality employees will be to the facility's detriment. Simply put, without good employees, any chance of long-term success in the laundry department will slip, well, right down the drain.

“Labor accounts for half the expense in laundry [operations], so it's critical to keep employees and employee satisfaction at the top of the priority list,” notes Kim Shady, executive vice president of on-premise laundry sales for Laundrylux, the North American importer of Wascomat and Electrolux equipment.

As laundry managers can attest, it's not always easy. Lower wages, coupled with demanding physical labor and a consistently hectic pace, contribute to employee dissatisfaction, deflated morale and, often, high turnover. Other units and departments also

have to be able to depend on laundry staff.

“It's a difficult job, and it's also a very important job,” says Baylen Botts, director of environmental services and laundry at Levindale Hebrew Geriatric Center and Hospital in Baltimore. “Every employee is crucial. When you get a quality employee, you don't want [to lose them.]”

### **Find the right fit**

While laundry department work probably never will be considered an easy or particularly glamorous job, laundry managers still can find the right employees for the role, thereby preventing a mass exodus that can send the department into a tailspin. Even better news: Success doesn't have to come with a high price tag.

It's a positive lesson that housekeeping and laundry manager Toni Carmean has learned firsthand in her 40-plus years of experience. She has spent more than 16 with her current employer, Sanctuary at St. Paul's, a Trinity Senior Living community in South Bend, IN. With a lean, yet highly efficient team of six laundry staff working nearly round-the-clock, Carmean has seen how hiring the right people from the start and then promoting a positive, team-oriented work environment can keep them in place for the long haul. Turnover is indeed a non-issue for Carmean. One laundry staffer has been on the job for 25 years; another has logged more than a decade in the department.

“About the only time we lose someone is if they retire or become ill and can't continue working,” she says. “We're a really good team.”

Thoughtful recruitment and focused training has helped build that strong team. Facility job openings are first posted for seven days internally before soliciting prospects from the outside, and Carmean has successfully recruited a couple employees from the dietary department as a result. Regardless of where a prospective new hire originates, she always takes her time to ensure it's a right fit.

“[Previous] experience can be helpful, but it isn't necessary. Actually, we prefer to train our own way,” she explains, adding that when working with prospective employees and new hires, she does a detailed walk-through of the department to explain

the ins and outs of the job and gauge the candidate's interest, and also any trepidation. She typically asks prospective employees if they have small children. Although parenting is certainly not a requirement, Carmean points out that such experience may ease the concern of working with soiled linens.

### **Matching roles**

Determining the best role for employees also is critical. As Botts explains, different tasks are better suited to different people, so moving new employees around to give them a true taste of the full department and then evaluating their strengths (and possible weaknesses) can pay big dividends. A 90-day probation period is standard, which lets Botts evaluate core competencies, assess the new employee's on-the-job satisfaction and let his veteran staff provide feedback on their new coworker's progress. Such approaches have likely contributed to his staff's lengthy tenure. One employee who has worked at Levindale for 30 years, for example, has spent the lion's share of her days folding laundry — a job she loves and tackles efficiently.

Botts is quick to point out, though, that sharing responsibilities and, in some cases, pushing employees out of their comfort zone, also has its benefits. When it was determined that a night shift was needed, a slight shakeup occurred in the former two-shift operation and roles started being reversed. Those who had primarily only washed or folded, for example, were suddenly mixing up their duties — and it's given them a stronger appreciation of their coworkers' contributions.

“They're seeing that washing or folding isn't so easy,” says Botts. He's also nudging his team to move outside the department walls and engage more closely with the residents they serve. It's a move that Botts believes will further drive staff satisfaction by allowing them to see firsthand how they positively impact residents.

Creative cross-training also can drive efficiencies and promote a more productive, positive environment. Both Botts and Carmean cross-train housekeeping staff so they can lend an extra hand and ease the burden of a short-staffed, time-crunched laundry.

### **Layout, machines matter**

Happy laundry employees don't happen by teamwork alone. To function at their best, they also need an efficient layout, a pleasant workspace and well-maintained — if not new — equipment, so they can seamlessly transition from one task to another.

“If your laundry is a mess, you won't attract the right people. And if you do manage to get the right people, it'll definitely be harder to keep them,” reasons Shady. Standard operating procedures should be in place to promote a clean, organized and well-functioning space that keeps clean and soiled laundry separate, puts everything in its place and keeps equipment looking good and operating well, he stresses.

“Just wiping down machines each day so there aren't messy chemicals drips and [debris], and getting organized and eliminating clutter can really make a positive impact,” he notes.

Senior housing facilities also should do their part to clear the air, Shady adds.

“Air quality in the laundry is very important and must move from clean to soiled areas, and then be moved out. This helps ensure that the pathogens on soiled laundry aren't being transported to clean areas,” he explains.

Another advantage: Good airflow and ventilation helps eliminate odor.

Cleanliness comes in other forms, too, including the elimination of pests that are all-too-common in moist, warm laundry environments.

“Making pest management a priority in the facility's laundry reflects a dedication to maintaining a safe, sanitary work environment for employees,” observes Frank Meet, international technical and training director for Orkin LLC. It also helps safeguard a facility's reputation by reducing the chance of returning clean linens or other laundered items with pests in them, he adds. Further, employee education also can play a key role in keeping pests at bay, and identifying risk areas and factors that might indicate that pests are entering laundry areas.

Rethinking longstanding laundry policies also can make for happier employers — and, in turn, more satisfied residents. When Sanctuary at St. Paul's became an Eden Alternative community, Carmean and her crew started delivering and storing linens

directly to resident rooms, as opposed to storing them on carts on floors.

“Now, if a resident wants a washcloth or towel, they don't have to wait for one to be delivered. All they have to do is open a cupboard,” she noted. “It's easier for staff, too, because they don't have to run up and down the stairs every time a resident needs an item.”

Staggering dirty laundry pick-up times also keeps operations running smoothly, while minimizing odors in the laundry.

“We don't have a set time to get linens. Breaking that up over the day and as needed prevents soiled laundry from coming in all at once,” she adds.

Making high quality, well-functioning laundry equipment a priority also is prudent.

“If equipment isn't working properly, that's very frustrating because it can slow us down and make our job that much harder,”

Botts stresses.

### **New considerations**

If new washer-extractors or dryers are in the budget, managers should take time to carefully assess all the options and solicit input from staff on which features matter most to them. Today, laundry equipment boasts a number of user-friendly, efficiency-boosting features — from built-in microprocessors that offer one-touch, load-specific operation and automatically dispense the right amount and type of detergent or chemical to sensors that determine the proper water level and chemical dilution needed for smaller loads.

Dryers that sense residual moisture and shut off when dry also are making it easier for staff to multitask, instead of wasting valuable time opening the machine to check if the load is dry. Many machines can be programmed in different languages.

“Time is money in the laundry, so anything you can do to take the guesswork out of the process and make employees' jobs easier and more effective will be a good investment,” says Steve Hietpas, national sales manager for Maytag Commercial

Laundry.

Advanced controls can even cut several hours of labor each week. UniMac's Head Start function, for example, lets machines be loaded at the end of the day and programmed to start an hour before employees arrive for the next day's shift.

“With this feature, an extra load can be processed each day,” notes Bill Brooks, UniMac national sales manager.

And if laundry employees perform duties outside the laundry room, the control can be configured to send a signal to a remote location. “This allows the attendant to focus on the job at hand without wasting time checking for a laundry cycle to end.”

Although Levindale's laundry still relies on some older equipment, a new, 140-pound capacity washer was added this year, which has significantly increased efficiency, according to Botts.

### **People first**

Because many senior housing laundry operations — including Botts' and Carmean's — still house older equipment, too, they stress the importance of proper, ongoing maintenance, and the importance of promptly addressing any employee complaints about malfunctioning or efficiency-robbing machines.

Above all, though, they stress the need for creating a supportive environment where employees' needs come first. The bottom line: The latest and greatest equipment, and the most beautiful-looking department won't mean a thing if the laundry staff isn't respected and appreciated.

Carmean and her staff lunch together regularly and off-the-clock outings are not out of the norm. Her warm, open door management approach also has helped camaraderie.

At Levindale, a peer-nominated Super Star Award recognizes deserving employees.

“As a manager, you have to be very involved if you want to earn staff respect. I know their job isn't easy, so I have no problem with jumping in and folding linen if I have to,” Botts says.

“Sometimes, they just want to see the effort and know that they're appreciated.”