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Good morning. My name is Tonya Blackshear and I work as a CNA in a nursing home in Utica.

I've been a CNA for over 26 years.

Twenty-six years may sound like a long time to do a very difficult job, and it is. But I like taking care of residents and I'm committed to making sure they get the best care they can. Over the years I've gone to school for other health care positions. But from the bottom of my heart, my place is in my nursing home with those residents.

The challenge is, how do we make sure there are lots of young women – and it is women for the most part – starting out today who will be there 26 years from now.

My facility has always struggled keeping new staff, and the pandemic has made this worse. It was scary during the pandemic. I remember when I had to go into a room where I knew the resident was Covid positive. I cried at first, but I put on my PPE and did what I had to do because that resident needed care.

I was fortunate to not get sick, but some did. And some quit and they've never returned.

Before the pandemic we had a lot of vacancies, and now it's worse. The current staff work double shifts, come back to work after catching some sleep and can be faced with having to do another double. It's brutal on the body and people are getting hurt.

From my experience, for every 10 new workers that come into the building, 5 don't make it past their probation period and only 2 make it past the first year.

We do orientation every week for new staff and we average about 9 or 10 new staff per month. That means we are seeing over 100 new staff a year, but we can only keep maybe 20.

The work is simply too hard for what we are paid.

Our employer thinks that because we work in a poorer area, they can pay us poverty wages. But people can go to fast food and make more than our starting rates.

What's happening now is our facility is mostly hiring agency staff who get paid a lot more than we do. Also, a lot of long-term staff are switching to per diem because they can make more. They lose their health benefits, but for them the extra pay is worth it.

The last time we negotiated a contract, our employer refused to raise the start rates. Now they are paying for this by having to hire agency staff instead.

I know it takes a special person to work in a nursing home. But it shouldn't just be that way. Employers need to value the work we do.

Employers have to start paying wages that are well above fast food if they want to keep people who are coming in the door.

It's not that there are no workers applying for nursing home jobs. Remember, we are getting about 100 new hires a year. Employers need to pay them enough so we don't lose 80 of these 100.

Thank you.