



# Addressing America's Senior Care Provider Shortage

Challenges, Impacts, and Strategic Solutions

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## INTRODUCTION

Within the next decade, the senior care provider shortage in the United States will become acute. We're already feeling the impacts today. What can leaders in the healthcare and public services sectors do – today and tomorrow – to address this shortage and ensure quality care for aging individuals?

In this white paper, you'll learn about the senior care provider crisis, including causes and impacts, as well as strategies for addressing this challenge.

We'll focus in particular on ways to support care providers.

## ABOUT EMBODIED LABS

Embodied Labs provides first-person immersive training solutions to organizations across the aging care continuum, including nursing programs, government organizations, and senior living facilities. Through VR and web immersive workforce training, we empower care providers with the insight and experience they need to provide exceptional and empathetic care.

Our clinical and product leadership team includes: CEO and Founder, Carrie Shaw, MS; Co-Founder Erin Washington, MLS; VP of Clinical Innovation Carrie Cusker, MS, RN; Head of Product Derek Koch, MM; Product Manager Dr. Tonia Nguyen, OTD, OTR/L; and Technical Product Manager Haiden McGill, MS.

This white paper is anchored in scientific research. As applicable and where stated, it also draws on our own clinical expertise and experience working with thousands of care providers nationwide.

# UNDERSTANDING THE SENIOR CARE PROVIDER SHORTAGE

There's no question that we're facing a shortage of care providers in the United States. But why?

## WHY IS THE US FACING A CARE PROVIDER SHORTAGE?

The US care provider shortage is multifactorial:

- **Aging Population:** The U.S. population is aging rapidly, driving a higher demand for healthcare services, particularly in areas like chronic disease management, long-term care, and geriatric care.
- **Workforce Challenges:** There's a shortage of providers, including doctors, nurses, and caregivers. This shortage is exacerbated by the increasing retirements of healthcare professionals and a limited number of new graduates entering the field. Additionally, healthcare workers often face high levels of burnout, which contributes to the workforce shortage.
- **Training and Education:** There are not enough training programs or educational opportunities to produce the required number of new healthcare professionals to meet future demands. The slow pace of expansion in medical and nursing schools, combined with restrictive residency slots, limits the growth of the healthcare workforce.
- **Geographic Disparities:** The shortage is more severe in rural and underserved areas, where attracting and retaining healthcare providers is challenging. This disparity means that many older adults in these areas may have limited access to necessary care.
- **Technological and Administrative Burdens:** The adoption of new technologies and the increasing administrative demands of healthcare can detract from patient care and contribute to provider dissatisfaction, potentially leading to higher turnover rates.

## HOW SEVERE WILL THE SENIOR CARE PROVIDER SHORTAGE BE?

Within the next 10 years, experts predict that the senior care provider shortage will become severe. A variety of factors are at play when attempting to determine the timeline of this shortage – including demographic trends, workforce supply, and healthcare demand – but no one seriously contests that it's coming.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates that the demand for registered nurses (RNs) will rise to more than 170,000 additional RNs annually through 2032.<sup>1</sup> After accounting for projected industry growth, the Health Resources and Services Administration anticipates a shortage of 78,610 full-time RNs as soon as 2025.<sup>2</sup>

This growing demand is coupled with an aging workforce; almost a quarter of RNs working in outpatient, ambulatory, and clinical settings already have or plan to retire within 5 years.<sup>3</sup> Burnout and job dissatisfaction is also driving nurses to leave the field; more than 60% of RNs around the world report experiencing burnout.<sup>4</sup> The impact can be felt in hospitals, clinics, senior care facilities, and beyond. In 2024, two third of nursing homes reported that staffing shortages may drive them to close.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> AACN, "Fact Sheet: Nursing Shortage."

<sup>2</sup> Health Resources & Services Administration, "Health Workforce Projections."

<sup>3</sup> Health Resources & Services Administration, "NCHWA Nursing Workforce Dashboard."

<sup>4</sup> American Nurses Association, "Nurse Burnout: What Is It & How to Prevent It."

<sup>5</sup> MedPro Group, "The Impact of Staffing Shortages in Senior Care, and Strategies to Improve Recruitment and Retention."



Nurses are on the frontlines of senior care and are a leading group of professional caregivers. Still, nurses are only one part of the overall care provider population, and a shortage among nurses will inevitably lead to additional pressure on other care groups, namely, informal, or friends and family caregivers.

Informal caregivers are already struggling with the demands of caregiving. According to the AARP, approximately 53 million Americans provide unpaid care, or one in five US adults.<sup>6</sup> This number is expected to rise. Family caregivers often face significant challenges, including financial strain and health issues, which can impact their ability to provide effective care. As the population continues to age, the pressure on informal caregivers is likely to rise.

This confluence of factors puts additional pressure on social services, which is itself facing an employee shortage.<sup>7</sup> These public health workers are often overlooked as significant contributors to the senior care world. A shortage in this workforce makes it more difficult for federal, state, and local agencies to meet the needs of their community members.

## WHICH REGIONS WILL BE HARDEST HIT BY A CARE PROVIDER SHORTAGE?

In some regions, the senior care provider shortage will be more severe, driven by considerations including lower availability of caregivers and higher proportions of older populations.

### RURAL & UNDERSERVED AREAS

Rural areas often face a more pronounced shortage of healthcare professionals due to lower salaries, fewer resources, and less professional support. These areas may also have fewer training facilities and limited access to continuing education for providers.

Residents in rural areas may experience longer wait times for care, reduced access to specialized services, and a higher burden on local providers.

### STATES WITH HIGHER PROPORTIONS OF OLDER ADULTS

States with large older populations may experience higher demand for healthcare services, which can strain the available workforce. These states may need more providers to manage chronic conditions and long-term care for seniors. In Maine, West Virginia, Vermont and Florida, 20% of the population is 65 or older.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> AARP, "1 in 5 Americans Now Provide Unpaid Family Care."

<sup>7</sup> Harvard School of Public Health, "U.S. governmental public health workforce shrank by half in five years, study finds."

<sup>8</sup> USA Today, "In an aging nation, these states are home to the oldest residents on average."

Demand for senior care is likely to be particularly high in these states; when compounded with other factors that can decrease access to care, a stark picture emerges.

### **LOW INCOME AREAS**

Regions with high poverty rates may have limited access to healthcare resources and fewer healthcare professionals. Low-income areas often face additional barriers to care, such as inadequate transportation and fewer healthcare facilities.

This can lead to disparities in health outcomes and access to care, exacerbating the challenges of the care provider shortage. For example, the number of primary care providers in Appalachia is 12% below the national average.<sup>9</sup>

### **URBAN AREAS WITH HIGH DEMAND**

While urban areas may have more healthcare facilities, high demand and population density can lead to increased strain on healthcare systems. These areas are more likely to experience provider burnout and high turnover rates.

### **AREAS WITH LIMITED MEDICAL TRAINING FACILITIES**

Regions with fewer medical schools, nursing programs, and residency slots may struggle to produce enough new healthcare professionals to meet future demand.

This can exacerbate shortages in both rural and urban settings. Regions with limited medical training facilities might not have the capacity to train enough professionals to address local needs.

## **WHY DOES A CARE PROVIDER SHORTAGE MATTER FOR AMERICA'S SENIORS?**

In the broadest strokes, a shortage in professionals across the aging care continuum means that fewer people can access the support and care they need. But the impact goes much deeper than that.

An increased demand for healthcare providers and public servants who specialize in geriatrics and chronic disease management from a too-small pool of professionals is likely to result in:

- Reduced access to care.<sup>10</sup>
- Decreased quality of care.
- Increased pressure on informal caregivers.
- Financial pressure and increased cost of care.
- Compromised aging-in-place.
- Stress on the healthcare system.

### **REDUCED ACCESS TO CARE**

Nearly 70% of older adults will need access to long-term care solutions, either via in-home care or in a senior living facility.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission, "Health Disparities in Appalachia."

<sup>10</sup> Bipartisan Policy Center, "Addressing the Direct Care Workforce Shortage."

<sup>11</sup> Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, "Housing America's Older Adults."



# Nearly 70%

of older adults will need access to long-term care, either in-home or in a senior living facility.

JOINT CENTER FOR HOUSING STUDIES OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY



For those who can travel to the hospital or doctor's appointments, the shortage may also result in longer wait times for medical appointments, treatments, and routine check-ups. This delay can exacerbate health issues and lead to more severe conditions that could have been managed with timely intervention.

There may also be fewer specialists available to address specific needs of seniors, such as geriatricians or endocrinologists, leading to gaps in specialized care.

## DECREASED QUALITY OF CARE

Care providers experiencing high workloads due to the shortage – including healthcare professionals, public servants, and informal caregivers – can lead to increased burnout. This can directly impact the quality of care.<sup>12</sup>

Overworked and stressed professional care providers are more likely to make errors, which can compromise patient safety and care quality. This includes medication errors, missed diagnoses, and lapses in monitoring.

It can also impact a person's experience in the care environment. Providers might have less time to spend with each person, potentially leading to less thorough assessments and follow-ups.

## PRESSURE ON INFORMAL CAREGIVERS

Informal caregivers, like friends or family members, often step in to fill the gap when professional care is not available. This can place an overwhelming burden on these caregivers, leading to stress, financial strain, and health issues for the caregivers themselves.

Without adequate support and training, informal caregivers may not be able to provide high-quality care and may struggle with managing complex medical needs without adequate assistance.

## RISING COST OF CARE

The shortage of care providers can lead to higher costs for senior care, exacerbating an already notable affordability crisis. Only 13% of adults 75+ in U.S. metro areas who live alone can afford assisted living without liquidating assets.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> AACN, "Fact Sheet: Nursing Shortage."

<sup>13</sup> Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, "Housing America's Older Adults."



Families may need to pay more for private care services, or there may be increased costs associated with emergency care due to delays in routine care.

Senior care facilities, such as nursing homes and assisted living centers, may face financial pressure due to higher staff turnover rates and the need to pay higher wages to attract and retain staff. There are approximately 600 fewer nursing homes than there were about 6 years ago.<sup>14</sup>

### **COMPROMISED AGING-IN-PLACE**

A high percentage of seniors who wish to age in place may face difficulties accessing home health services due to the shortage and the cost of care; only 14% can afford in-home care in addition to their housing costs.<sup>15</sup>

Community-based programs and resources for seniors may be underfunded or unable to meet demand, reducing the availability of services that support aging in place.

### **SYSTEMIC IMPACTS**

The shortage places additional strain on healthcare systems, leading to issues including (but not limited to) overcrowding in hospitals and emergency rooms. This can result in a lack of timely care for seniors and others in need. It can also exacerbate existing disparities in care access and quality.

And last, but certainly not least, it contributes to rates of burnout, fatigue, stress, and turnover<sup>16</sup> at every level of the aging care continuum.

In this white paper, you'll learn more about how to address the senior care provider shortage. But first, we need to understand one of the key factors driving this shortage: burnout.

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<sup>14</sup> Kemp, "The Upheaval at America's Disappearing Nursing Homes, in Charts."

<sup>15</sup> Rubin, "Aging America Faces a Senior Care Crisis."

<sup>16</sup> Willard-Grace, "Burnout and Health Care Workforce Turnover."

## ADDRESSING STRESS & BURNOUT AMONG CARE PROVIDERS

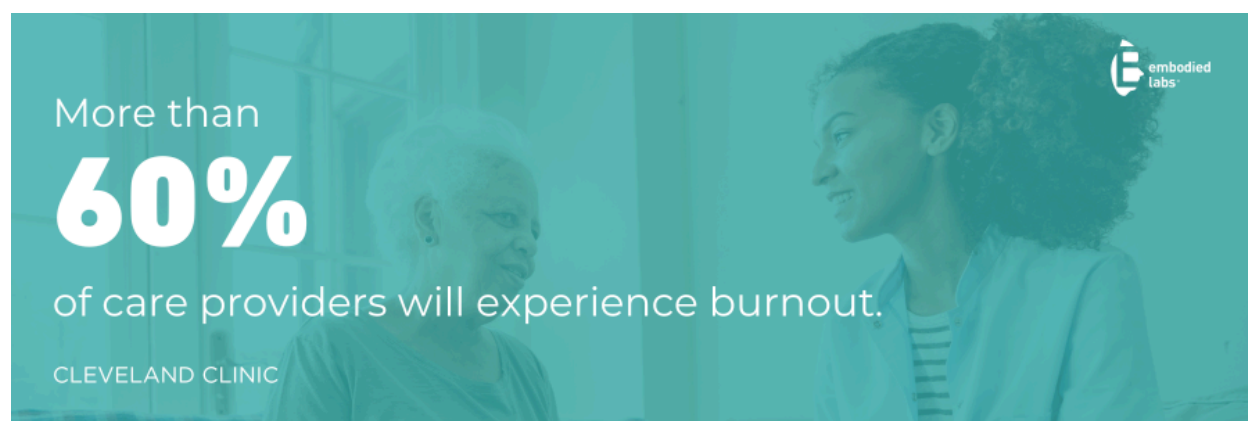
Many factors influence the care provider shortage, and burnout is one of the most critical. After all, what is the good of training a new league of senior care providers only to have them leave the profession within a few years?

### WHY IS BURNOUT SUCH A CRITICAL CHALLENGE?

It is impossible to address the care provider shortage without addressing burnout, stress, and general job dissatisfaction. Until the underlying problems are addressed, this persistent challenge will make it difficult to attract and retain talent across the aging care continuum.

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion, which can result in fatigue, anxiety, and depression. Caregiver burnout is burnout that's attributed to taking care of someone else.<sup>17</sup>

Studies show that more than 60% of care providers will experience burnout.<sup>18</sup>



An associated challenge that some care providers may face is compassion fatigue. According to the Cleveland Clinic, “Compassion fatigue occurs when a caregiver takes on the emotional stress and trauma of a person within their care. It causes a lack of empathy (understanding the feelings and situations of someone else) or a lack of care for the person within your care.”<sup>19</sup>

Among professional care providers, including nurses and physicians, high patient volumes, extensive paperwork and administrative tasks, emotional stress, and long hours contribute to burnout.<sup>20</sup> Burnout is also reported to be on the rise among medical students and trainees.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, burnout has a long-term negative impact on the workforce.

For one, it can create a negative-reinforcement cycle where burned out providers generate more burned out providers.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cleveland Clinic, “Caregiver Burnout.”

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> National Academies of Sciences Engineering, National Academy of Medicine, “Factors Contributing to Clinician Burnout and Professional Well-Being.”

<sup>21</sup> The Lancet, “Physician burnout: the need to rehumanise health systems.”

<sup>22</sup> The Lancet, “Addressing burnout in the healthcare workforce: current realities and mitigation strategies.”

It can also lead to reduced engagement, and ultimately turnover. One study of the health system staff in San Francisco found that only about a third of clinicians and slightly more than a third of staff reported high engagement rates.<sup>23</sup> This study was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely increased rates of burnout and compassion fatigue nationwide.

High burnout rates also make it harder to recruit new senior care providers and public sector employees.

## HOW DOES BURNOUT IMPACT THOSE RECEIVING CARE?

Burnout impacts more than just the care provider; it also impacts those receiving care.

When care providers experience burnout, they may disengage from their profession; their overall sense of job satisfaction is likely to decline, as well as their confidence and feelings of self-worth.<sup>24</sup> This can result in reduced professionalism, empathy, and engagement, which persons receiving care can recognize and report as lower patient satisfaction. Higher levels of burnout are associated with patient dissatisfaction, and increased patient and family complaints.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, burnout is associated with a decreased safety of care.<sup>26</sup>

## INCREASED MEDICAL ERRORS

Burnout is associated with an increased likelihood of medical errors; physicians experiencing high levels of burnout were more likely to report errors in patient care.<sup>27</sup> Medical errors are the third-leading cause of death in the United States.<sup>28</sup>

## REDUCED PATIENT SAFETY

Among the most concerning byproducts of burnout is reduced patient safety. Patient safety is impacted by the overall functioning of the health system, including systems and processes, as well as care providers. That being said, the professional wellbeing of care providers does impact patient safety.

One study found that physicians experiencing burnout “are twice as likely to be involved in patient safety incidents compared with no patient safety incident.”<sup>29</sup>

Burnout among care providers has a tangible impact on the quality of care delivered to patients. It affects various aspects of care, including the likelihood of errors, patient satisfaction, adherence to safety protocols, and overall clinical performance.

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<sup>23</sup> Willard-Grace, “Burnout and Health Care Workforce Turnover.”

<sup>24</sup> BMJ, “Associations of physician burnout with career engagement and quality of patient care: systematic review and meta-analysis.”

<sup>25</sup> Profit, “Burnout in the NICU Setting and Its Relation to Safety Culture.”

<sup>26</sup> BMJ, “Associations of physician burnout with career engagement and quality of patient care: systematic review and meta-analysis.”

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> de Lima Garcia, “Influence of Burnout on Patient Safety: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.”

<sup>29</sup> BMJ, “Associations of physician burnout with career engagement and quality of patient care: systematic review and meta-analysis.”

## HOW CAN WE REDUCE CARE PROVIDER BURNOUT, ESPECIALLY IN SENIOR CARE?

Addressing burnout among care providers depends on improving working conditions and support systems. This includes, but is not limited to:

- Programs for mental health support and stress management.
- Resilience training for care providers.
- More efficient systems and processes.
- More balanced workloads.
- Expanded training programs for new entrants to the workforce.
- Ongoing training and education for existing care providers.
- Additional health literacy training and resources for family caregivers.
- Improved financial incentives, including salaries and benefits.
- Stronger culture of collaboration among care providers and administration.

One word surfaces repeatedly: training.

While effective workforce training can't solve all of the problems related to burnout, it can have a measurable impact on reducing burnout and improving engagement.



We'll explore that next.

### THE CRITICALITY OF TRAINING IN SUPPORTING THE SENIOR CARE WORKFORCE

Training and education play a crucial role in both supporting existing senior care providers and public sector employees, and encouraging more individuals to enter the aging care field.

#### HOW WORKFORCE TRAINING ATTRACTS NEW CARE PROVIDERS

There are a wide variety of ways that effective training can encourage individuals to enter the senior care field.

First, training and education can boost awareness about different pathways in senior care.

In addition, training providers like Embodied Labs can partner with medical schools, nursing programs, and community colleges to deliver tailored training that supports senior care. This helps build a pipeline of

new healthcare professionals with experience in geriatric care. Immersive and VR training also allows future care providers to build experience in a safe, risk-free environment.

Last but not least, proactive training around issues like resilience have the potential to reduce the likelihood of burnout when providers enter the field.

## **HOW WORKFORCE TRAINING SUPPORTS CURRENT SENIOR CARE PROVIDERS AND PUBLIC SERVANTS**

It's difficult to overstate the importance of ongoing workforce training for senior care providers and public servants.

Workforce training, at a minimum, provides opportunities to enhance skills and knowledge. This can support engagement and efficacy. But that's just the beginning.

Specialized senior care training can open doors for providers looking to advance their careers, take on more complex roles, and even address specific gaps in care.

Training can also support burnout prevention as some training programs focus on resilience and stress management, enabling those across the senior care spectrum to cope with the demands of their jobs.

While traditional training sessions and handbooks are effective, an enhanced approach to training is delivering even more positive outcomes. Immersive training technologies, including simulation and VR, can improve the quality of training and help providers practice complex procedures in a risk-free environment.

This is more than just new technology; it's an entirely new perspective on what effective workforce training can be.

## A NEW FRONTIER: IMMERSIVE SENIOR CARE TRAINING ACROSS VR, AR, AND XR

There's been a groundswell of support for a more empathetic and human-centered approach to healthcare, social services, and caregiving, specifically because of its ability to reduce burnout.<sup>30</sup>

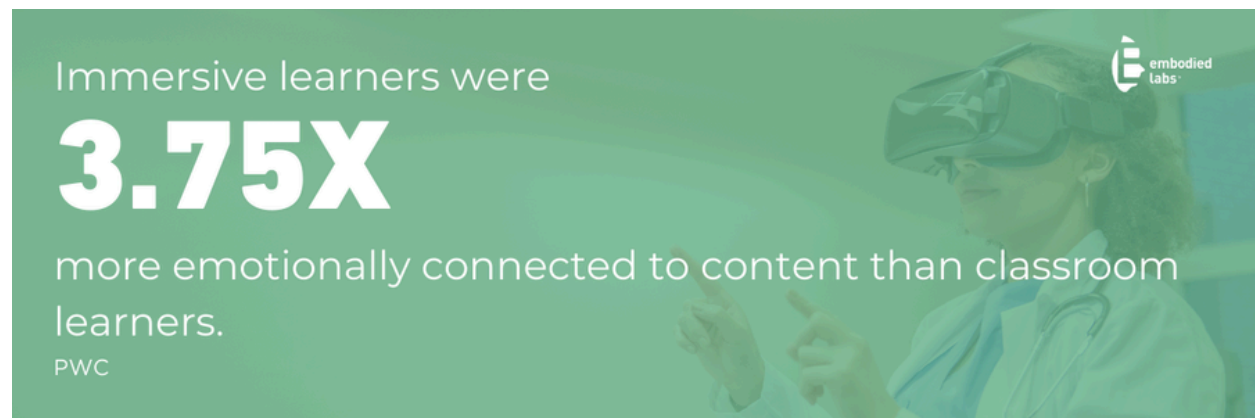
Immersive training – delivered via extended reality (XR), which includes virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) – builds an interactive and holistic learning environment for care providers to experience. This creates a new approach that has gained support due to the potential to reduce provider burnout.

### PRIMARY BENEFITS OF IMMERSIVE TRAINING

When compared to traditional training, immersive training appears to significantly improve learning outcomes.

In one study<sup>31</sup>, immersive learners were:

- 4 times faster to train than in the classroom.
- 275% more confident in applying skills learned after training.
- 3.75 times more emotionally connected to content than classroom learners.
- 4 times more focused than e-learning peers.



Overall, the benefits of immersive and VR training include:

- **Improved Engagement:** VR training can increase engagement by providing an interactive and immersive learning environment. This engagement can lead to better retention of information and skills.
- **Skills Development:** With VR training, care providers and public servants can learn how to better navigate complex or high-stress situations, without requiring physical resources or the risk of harming those receiving care. This repetition can improve proficiency and confidence.
- **Realistic Training:** Immersive training can deliver a more realistic and multidimensional learning modality, allowing those working across the aging care continuum to experience less common situations.

<sup>30</sup> The Lancet, "Physician burnout: the need to rehumanise health systems."

<sup>31</sup> PWC, "How Virtual Reality Is Redefining Soft Skills Training."

- **Increased Access:** In many cases, immersive training can be accessed remotely, allowing for more individuals (including informal caregivers) to receive training than via in-person programs.
- **Ability to Scale:** The digital nature of many immersive training platforms means that many people can access training, even simultaneously. That makes it a cost-effective solution for large training programs.
- **Reduced Burnout:** Immersive simulations allow learners to gain experience in complex situations, in a controlled environment. This has been shown to improve resiliency and reduce the stress associated with challenging situations.

In the senior care setting, immersive training can not only improve educational outcomes, but it can also support emotional intelligence. A recent study conducted by Embodied Labs found that immersive training provided clear and measurable benefits to senior care providers in a senior living community.

### STUDY: HOW IMMERSIVE TRAINING HELPED IMPROVE RESILIENCE, BUILD EMPATHY, AND REDUCE BURNOUT

In one recent study, Embodied Labs worked closely with a senior living facility to evaluate the impact of their immersive training tools.

The Embodied Labs immersive training leveraged the Beatriz Lab and the Dima Lab, focusing on Lewy body dementia and Alzheimer's disease. This immersive, first-person embodied experience aims to help care providers understand the perspective of those living with these conditions.

Embodied Labs' first-person immersive training experience works by simulating the sensory and cognitive challenges these individuals face. Care providers, public servants, and informal caregivers can gain a firsthand experience of what it's like to live with these conditions. This immersive approach is much more impactful than traditional lecture-based training, as it allows staff to feel the confusion, frustration, and fear that residents often experience<sup>32</sup>. This, in turn, deepens their empathy, as they can better relate to the emotional and psychological states of those in their care.

"While VR is part of a spectrum of extended reality, brain studies show that VR is unique among other types of XR in offering the possibility of 'forming a memory,' a stand-in for a real experience"

BRITT ANDREATA



This study, which took place in a senior living environment, found that Embodied Labs' immersive training can significantly impact emotional intelligence (EQ) among caregivers, improving empathy, communication, and the overall care provided.

<sup>32</sup> Britt Andreatta, "The Brain Science Behind VR."



- **Emotional Intelligence Improvement:** The study showed a 20% increase in staff who felt they were better able to handle upsetting problems and think about different approaches to situations after undergoing the immersive training.
- **Communication Improvements:** The data indicated that 79% of staff reported that their communication with residents had either “somewhat positively changed” or “very positively changed” as a result of the training.
- **General Effectiveness:** Overall, 90% of participants said that the training was more helpful than other forms of training, and 80% reported that it positively affected their day-to-day work.

This immersive training program also supported qualitative improvements in the experience for care providers and those receiving care.

## 1. EMPATHY BUILDING THROUGH EMBODIED EXPERIENCE.

By simulating the sensory and cognitive challenges these individuals face, caregivers gain a firsthand experience of what it's like to live with these conditions. This embodied experience supports empathy by allowing trainees to better relate to the emotional and psychological states of those in their care.

After going through the VR experience, one social worker became more aware of how dementia patients can feel excluded when others talk about them without involving them in the conversation. This led her to change her behavior, ensuring that the elders she works with are always included in family meetings.

Carrie Cusker, a former nurse educator at St. John's Home, described the transformation she saw in caregivers: "I've noticed the people who have the full experience—it leaves a mark on them in a way that no other training I've ever seen can do. It gives them a sense of this secret information that's been shared with them. 'Oh, I know what that's like. I've experienced dementia.'" She emphasized that this emotional connection leads to a more natural sense of empathy that can't be achieved through textbook learning or lectures.

Such changes in behavior are rooted in the emotional connection fostered by the immersive, first-person Embodied Labs experience.

## 2. REDUCING BURNOUT THROUGH INCREASED UNDERSTANDING AND PROACTIVE CARE.

The immersive training experience helped staff recognize and anticipate the needs of residents, which reduces the likelihood of stressful situations escalating.

Cusker also mentioned how the training helped staff become more proactive: "I've noticed a more proactive approach upstairs which is very refreshing. We've always tried to support our elders in living their best life and meeting their needs, anticipating their needs so that we're not then having to handle those manifestations of unmet needs. By doing this, we're able to give the elder a good day and we avoid those triggers altogether."

For instance, the training made caregivers more aware of environmental factors, like noise and lighting, that can trigger agitation in dementia patients. By addressing these factors proactively, caregivers can prevent behavioral issues that might otherwise lead to burnout.

Similarly, by experiencing sensory overload and other symptoms associated with dementia in a controlled environment, caregivers learn to manage their stress responses better. The training emphasizes that understanding the root cause of a resident's distress can prevent misinterpretation and frustration, which can lead to caregiver burnout. The example of using music to soothe residents or adjusting lighting to reduce glare highlights how caregivers can use these insights to create a calmer, more manageable environment.



Caregivers who completed the training felt more confident in their ability to handle challenging situations with residents, which reduces the stress that often comes from feeling unprepared or overwhelmed. Embodied Labs immersive training equip staff with unique insights about what it feels like to have dementia, allowing them to approach their roles with a greater sense of purpose and effectiveness.

### **3. SHIFTING FROM SURFACE ACTING TO GENUINE ENGAGEMENT.**

This study also showcased the critical distinction between authentic interactions and surface acting.

Traditional customer service training often leads to "surface acting," which is where staff pretend to be fine and positive, even when they're not.

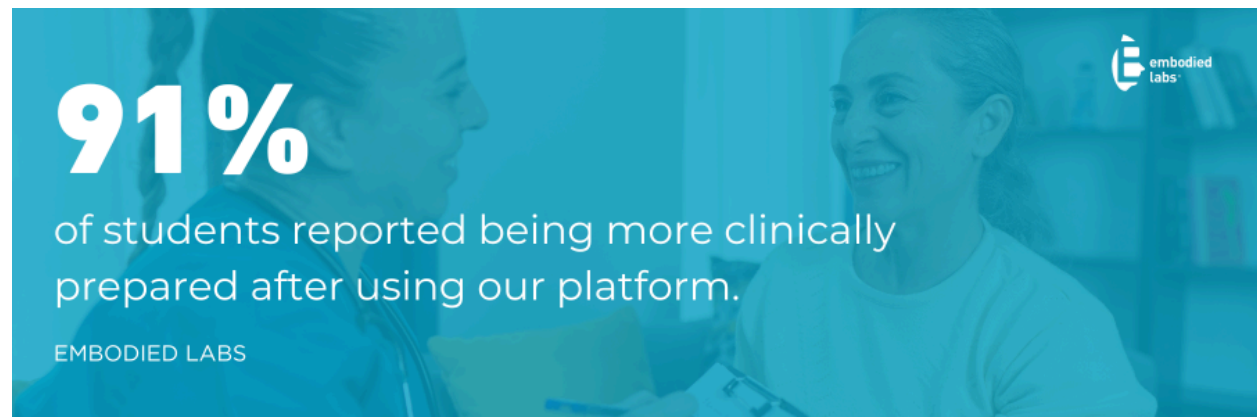
The immersive training encourages caregivers to engage more authentically with residents, moving away from superficial, task-based interactions to deeper, emotionally connected care.

This reduces the emotional dissonance that comes with surface acting, a known contributor to burnout and job dissatisfaction.

## **5 TIPS FOR IMPROVING SENIOR CARE PROVIDER EDUCATION AND EMPATHY, AND REDUCING BURNOUT, IN HIGH-STRESS ENVIRONMENTS**

Senior care has long been a high-stress environment, with care providers, informal caregivers, and public servants facing daily challenges that can easily lead to burnout. Add the complexities of conditions like dementia, and the emotional and physical demands increase significantly.

There are ways to improve caregiver education, foster empathy, and reduce burnout—all of which can lead to better care for residents and greater job satisfaction for staff.



Drawing on insights from a recent study conducted by Embodied Labs in collaboration with a senior living facility, here are five tips that can help organizations make meaningful improvements in these areas.

### **1. USE IMMERSIVE TRAINING TOOLS TO FOSTER EMPATHY**

One of the most effective ways to build empathy in care providers is through immersive training tools, like the virtual reality (VR) experiences developed by Embodied Labs. These tools allow staff to step into the shoes of seniors living with an age related condition or impairment, experiencing firsthand the sensory overload and confusion that come with conditions like Alzheimer's or Lewy body dementia.

As Cusker explained, "It leaves a mark on them in a way that no other training I've ever seen can do."

“The people who have the full experience—it leaves a mark on them in a way that no other training I've ever seen can do. It gives them a sense of this secret information that's been shared with them. 'Oh, I know what that's like. I've experienced dementia.'”

**CARRIE CUSKER, MS, RN**



Immersive training helps caregivers internalize the emotional and sensory challenges faced by residents, which leads to more compassionate and effective care. According to data from St. John's Home, 79% of staff reported that their communication with residents positively changed after undergoing this type of training.

## **2. MAKE TRAINING HANDS-ON AND ENGAGING**

Care providers are often busy and hands-on learners, which means traditional lecture-based training may not be the most effective approach. Instead, engaging and interactive training sessions that relate directly to their daily experiences are more likely to resonate and stick.

Mimi DeVinney, Dementia Care Specialist at St. John's Home, emphasized that training needs to be relevant and engaging: “They need to be able to relate it to their everyday experiences. Flexibility is really nice... you can use [VR training] in so many different ways, with family members, for orientation, and even for marketing.”

By making training relatable and hands-on, organizations can ensure that caregivers are more likely to absorb and apply what they learn. This approach also keeps staff engaged, reducing the chances of burnout due to boredom or disconnection from the material.

## **3. FOCUS ON ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION, NOT JUST PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Training programs alone are not enough to drive lasting change. Truly sustainable change has three components: personal, organizational, and physical transformation.

For improvements in care to be sustainable, organizations need to align their job descriptions, performance metrics, and operational processes with the goals of emotional intelligence and person-centered care. This means that any personal transformation achieved through training must be supported by broader organizational transformation.

Jill Vitale-Aussem, President and CEO of the Eden Alternative, explained this holistic approach: “There are three components to sustainable change: personal transformation, organizational transformation, and physical transformation... If you do that [personal transformation] and you don't do the second part, which is organizational transformation, nothing happens.”

Leaders play a crucial role in this process, not by mandating changes, but by engaging staff in the journey and helping them understand the need for it. Empowering staff to be part of the solution fosters a sense of ownership and reduces burnout by making the workplace feel more supportive and inclusive.

#### 4. PRIORITIZE EMOTIONAL CONNECTION OVER CUSTOMER SERVICE

Too often, senior care providers are trained in customer service techniques that focus on surface-level interactions, leading to “surface acting” where staff feel pressured to pretend that everything is fine, even when it’s not. This kind of dissonance can lead to stress and burnout. Instead, training should focus on building authentic emotional connections between caregivers and residents.

Jill Vitale-Aussem pointed out the limitations of traditional customer service training: “Customer service can play a role, but it can’t be our go-to... It also often leads to what is called surface acting... Surface acting leads to stress, it leads to burnout, it leads to people quitting their jobs.”

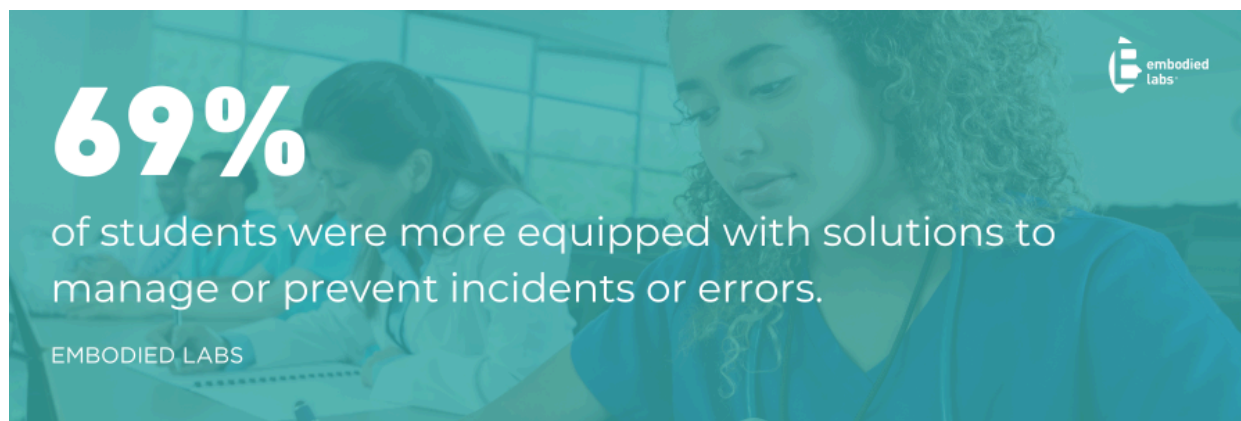
By shifting the focus from transactional customer service to genuine, empathetic care, organizations can create a more emotionally fulfilling environment for both residents and staff. This approach reduces burnout by allowing caregivers to be their authentic selves and build meaningful relationships with those in their care.

#### 5. LEVERAGE DATA AND REFLECTION FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Continuous improvement in senior care requires regular reflection and data-driven insights. Organizations that gather feedback from caregivers and assess the impact of training programs can make informed adjustments to ensure that their initiatives remain effective. St. John’s Home, for example, conducted pre- and post-assessments of staff who participated in the VR training and found significant improvements in emotional intelligence and day-to-day care.

Data from the study showed a 20% increase in staff who felt better equipped to handle upsetting problems and think about different approaches to care. Encouraging staff to reflect on their experiences, as well as using data to guide decisions, ensures that training efforts remain relevant and impactful.

This study shows how important it is to view seniors as individuals with complex needs, rather than just “patients” or “customers.” It also highlights how immersive experiences help staff internalize the emotional and sensory challenges faced by residents with dementia, resulting in more compassionate and effective care.



## 4 STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING THE SENIOR CARE PROVIDER SHORTAGE

The imminent care provider shortage presents a critical moment for those working across the aging care continuum; it also presents risks for those receiving care.

Addressing it will require collaboration, innovation, and even policy change.

Focusing on a range of strategies designed to attract and retain talent, enhance education and training, support family caregivers, and leverage technology can make an impact.

### ATTRACT AND RETAIN CARE PROVIDERS

To make a meaningful impact, we first need to make the field of senior care more attuned to the needs of care providers, public servants, and family caregivers. That includes:

- Improving access to education and specialized training to scale the workforce. (More next.)
- Reducing burnout and improving resiliency to improve retention.
- Investing in ongoing training and professional development opportunities to keep providers updated with the latest practices and prepare them for the challenges of the job.
- Enhancing financial incentives for current and future senior care workers.

### ENHANCING EDUCATION AND TRAINING

First, increasing the number of educational opportunities, and creating accelerated training pathways, can quickly ramp up the number of qualified care providers.

Providing training, particularly immersive training, can support professional skills, improve empathy, and enhance communication skills.

Education doesn't stop at graduation. Continuous professional development and specialization opportunities keep senior care workers sharp and knowledgeable.

### SUPPORTING INFORMAL CAREGIVERS

Informal caregivers play a vital role in the senior care system, but they often face significant challenges. Providing resources such as training programs can help family members manage caregiving tasks more effectively.

Strengthening community-based programs is essential for supporting seniors, including those who wish to age in place.

### LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

Technology plays a transformative role in addressing the care provider shortage. Telemedicine, for instance, extends the reach of healthcare services by enabling remote consultations. This is especially valuable for seniors in rural or underserved areas, where access to care may be limited.

It goes beyond telehealth. Technology is also transforming how we train care providers.

Immersive training, including virtual reality (VR) and simulation-based learning, is revolutionizing the way we prepare professionals for the challenges of senior care.

Incorporating immersive training into the education and professional development of care providers is a powerful way to enhance their readiness and effectiveness. By embracing these advanced technologies, we can better equip our workforce to meet the demands of senior care and ultimately improve outcomes for the seniors they serve.

## CONCLUSION

The growing gap between the supply of care providers and the needs of America's aging population represents one of healthcare's most pressing challenges. As we look toward the next decade, the shortage affects multiple segments of the care spectrum, from nurses to informal caregivers, with certain regions—particularly rural and low-income areas—facing disproportionate impacts.

A significant factor in this dynamic is burnout among care providers, which continues to drive workforce attrition. Traditional training methods alone have proven insufficient to address these challenges. However, promising solutions are emerging. Immersive training technologies, particularly virtual and augmented reality, demonstrate remarkable potential to transform how we prepare and support care providers. These advanced training approaches consistently show increased engagement and knowledge retention while building genuine empathy through first-person experiences. They help reduce burnout by better preparing providers for challenging situations, all while scaling more effectively than conventional training methods.

Organizations across the aging care spectrum can take meaningful steps today by implementing comprehensive training programs that incorporate immersive technologies, focusing on authentic emotional connections rather than surface-level interactions, and supporting both professional and family caregivers with targeted resources. The path forward requires combining enhanced training, improved support systems, and strategic use of technology.

The future of senior care depends on our ability to attract, train, and retain qualified providers.

Through strategic implementation of solutions like immersive training, we can work toward ensuring that every older adult has access to the quality care they deserve, delivered by well-prepared and supported care providers.

To learn more about Embodied Labs' approach to immersive training for care providers, visit [embodiedlabs.com](https://embodiedlabs.com).

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