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Area Agency on Aging to strengthen local direct care workforce with grant

ST. JOSEPH — Area Agency on Aging's (AAA) ongoing work to strengthen the local direct care workforce gained additional support last week thanks to a grant from the Corewell Health Foundation's Community Wellness Endowment.

AAA was among six local organizations to receive funding for projects aimed at improving health in Southwest Michigan with a focus on health equity, diversity, and inclusiveness.

"This investment gives us an important opportunity to strengthen the direct care workforce that older adults and people with disabilities rely on every day. By making practical, high-quality training more accessible here in Southwest Michigan, we can support caregivers while helping more people remain healthy and independent in the communities they call home," Christine Vanlandingham, CEO of Region IV Area Agency on Aging, said.

Direct care workers provide essential hands-on personal care and daily living assistance to older adults and people with disabilities. They include personal care aides, home health aides, and certified nursing assistants (CNAs) working in homes or residential facilities. They can also include close family and friends, who provide most of the care older adults and people with disabilities receive.

But with high turnover, workforce shortages, and limited access to trained caregivers, care is disrupted, increasing the risk of avoidable hospitalizations and institutional placements while placing additional strain on the healthcare system.

"Direct care workers are doing essential and often demanding work, yet traditional training is not always designed around the realities of their lives. Many are balancing part-time employment, family caregiving responsibilities, limited unpaid time, and inconsistent access to technology. If we want a strong and stable workforce, we need to bring training closer to workers, make it easier to access, and create meaningful opportunities for them to build their skills and advance," Vanlandingham said.

The Direct Care Workforce Training Center, housed at the Campus for Creative Aging, 2920 Lakeview Ave., St. Joseph, will offer an innovative, community-based workforce development model that builds on existing training and competency standards. Designed around the realities of direct care work, the program provides accessible, locally-delivered, hands-on training focused on person-centered care, geriatric care, and relationship-building.

Participants progress through three stackable certificate programs, combining classroom instruction with supervised on-the-job learning, competency verification, ongoing feedback, and achievement-based incentives.

“This is more than a training program. It is a practical career pathway that recognizes the value of direct care work, helps caregivers grow their skills, and strengthens the continuity of care older adults and people with disabilities receive. When we invest in the people providing care, we strengthen the health and well-being of our entire community,” Vanlandingham said.

For more information about Region IV Area Agency on Aging's programs and initiatives, visit www.AreaAgencyonAging.org or call 800-654-2810.

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Region IV Area Agency on Aging has been serving Southwest Michigan with aging and disability services for over 50 years. RIV AAA is a private, not-for-profit corporation. Established in 1974 for the business of developing age supportive commerce and services, it plays a major role in planning, funding, and delivery of a host of services. Empowerment and independence of community members are driving themes behind its efforts. Designated by the State of Michigan to receive federal Older Americans Act funds for planning and development, the agency manages an array of government contracts for service delivery in Southwest Michigan. Its primary service area includes Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren counties. For more information about the RIVAAA, visit www.areaagencyonaging.org.