

Determination of Resident Acuity Level and Process for Fair Assignment

The success of consistent assignment depends upon ensuring that there is fairness of workload, a compatibility of assignments, and supervisory practices that foster teamwork, conflict resolution, and problem solving, particularly in regard to care for residents whom staff find challenging. It needs to be accompanied by regular team meetings where information about residents is shared among staff so that anyone can be a back-up in caring for a resident.

Assignments must be fair for staff and a good match between residents and staff, playing to the staff's strengths. For fairness and compatibility, staff members need to be involved in determining assignments, and supervisors need to facilitate adjustments when assignments do not work. It is a best practice for residents to be involved in choosing their caregivers, and for staff to work in pairs with residents that all staff find challenging to care for.

Determining fair workload among frontline staff is key to successful implementation of consistent assignment. Workload is better determined by the level of resident acuity than by the number of residents within an assignment. Nursing assistants are most knowledgeable about resident care and the time it takes to meet both physical and emotional needs of residents and their families. This example suggests a process for determining resident acuity based on nursing assistant input and utilizing this information to assign residents to staff fairly.

The definition of acuity is the intensity level of services necessary to provide care to a resident on a daily basis including both physical and emotional needs. When indicated, time spent with families can be included.

Example of Determining Resident Acuity for Fair Assignment

1. Call two meetings, one with all of the nursing assistants from the day shift and one with all of the nursing assistants from the evening shift.
2. Begin the meeting by explaining that the nursing home is switching to consistent assignment. Suggest that one hall pilot test consistent assignment to see how it works and make changes as indicated by staff feedback before rolling it out to the entire facility.
3. Place each resident's name on a post-it note and place all of the notes on the wall.
4. Ask the group to rank each of the residents by degree of difficulty/acuity. Use numbers 1, 3, and 5 with number 1 being relatively easy care, number 3 in the middle, and number 5 being very difficult care for residents with a high acuity level. This could also include emotionally draining care situations or family needs. Facilitate discussion among the nursing assistants about each resident and come to an agreement on the rank of each one. Write the number on the resident's post-it note.
5. Allow the nursing assistants to select their assignments. Assignments are fair when each nursing assistant's assignment "total" is equal. Therefore, if one assignment has six residents and another has eight residents but the numbers assigned to rank each resident total 27 then the assignments are fair.
6. Relationships with residents are important and also should be part of the decision making process. The sequence of rooms is less important.

Maintaining Consistency During Staff Absences

1. If one group of assignments is affected by an absence, do not compound it by taking another nursing assistant away from her assignment to fill the gap. This will create two groups of residents without their dedicated caregiver. Instead, have an "All Hands on Deck" approach where department heads and other members of the

nursing team help out at the busiest times. Ask food service and housekeeping staff to pitch in at meal times and other busy times. Indicate your dedication to consistent assignments by your actions.

2. Develop a pool of consistent back-ups who know the residents they will be asked to care for.
3. Have a longer huddle at the beginning of the shift to help any frontline staff member who is serving as a substitute so that they become familiar with the residents under their care.
4. Make staff assignments by resident group so that the same nursing assistants always back each other up. Encourage them to work together to work out schedule substitutions for each other so that residents still have consistency.

Calculating Your Current Rate of Consistent Assignment

Mary Tess Crotty at Genesis Corporation developed a simple way to calculate how consistently you're staffing. For a sample of residents, count the number of nursing assistants who initial the flow sheet for a month. If you are 100 percent consistently assigned, you should have six to nine nursing assistants (this includes a full time nursing assistant and her back-up on each shift, and a weekend nursing assistant per shift). If you have more than six to nine nursing assistants then look to see why.

Keys to Success

1. After consistent assignment has been implemented and a nursing assistant has a particularly difficult schedule or needs a break for a particular day, the director of nursing or scheduling person can change the schedule for a particular day or week. Gather input from front line staff about how to accomplish this. Nursing assistants who enjoy working with particularly challenging residents will then have the opportunity and know that the administrative staff fully supports their occasional need for a break.
2. Meet every three months to reexamine the assignments to ensure they are fair workloads based upon degree of difficulty and acuity. Use a team process to monitor workload and make adjustments as needed, and as residents move out, come in, or have changes in condition.
3. Have staff and leadership mutually commit to consistent assignment. This means that staff commit to a certain set schedule and that leadership commits as well so that the staff can count on that schedule.
4. Find out from staff what their preferred schedule and assignments would be and incorporate them to the degree possible.
5. Figure out when the busiest times are for frontline staff to meet residents' needs. Adjust schedules to have the help that's needed during those times.
6. Find out who among staff enjoys floating or prefers a changing assignment. Determine how to fit them into a schedule that provides consistent assignment to meet their preference and offer some flexibility in scheduling.
7. Create teams that work together regularly.
8. Create a pool of staff that is willing to provide back-ups and substitutes for when staff need to change their schedule or call out on a scheduled shift.
9. Develop consistent assignment in housekeeping and food service by having each assigned to a care area.
10. When new staff is hired, assign them to one work area so that they are familiar with a group of residents and co-workers.
11. Make consistent assignments of back-ups for when a staff person has time off. Give a solid orientation to any staff serving as back-up, and make a good introduction if a back-up person isn't known to the resident.

Evaluation Measures

1. Staff, resident, and family feedback
2. Decreased number of shifts per week with unscheduled absences
3. Decreased staff turnover

Adapted from B&F Consulting, www.BandFConsultingInc.com