



# A High Road for Home Care

Program Assessment of the Healthcare Workers Rising Transportation Pilot



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## Authors

Sanjay Pinto, PhD  
K.C. Wagner, MLER, MSW  
Russell Weaver, PhD  
Zoë West, PhD

## Partners

 ILR Worker Institute



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# Executive Summary

During the Covid-19 pandemic, frontline long-term care workers have provided essential support to groups at high risk of isolation and adverse health outcomes. Mostly women and disproportionately Black and brown, these direct care workers have done so even as low and inconsistent pay make it difficult to provide for their own families. Transportation barriers are one factor affecting the take-home pay of this workforce. Particularly in home care, the dispersed locations of potential clients coupled with a lack of affordable transport options often limits caseloads and working hours.

In 2020, just before the onset of the pandemic, Healthcare Worker Rising, an organization of frontline healthcare workers in Western New York, launched a transportation pilot program providing free of cost transportation to and from client homes. The program was supported by the Ladders to Value Workforce Investment Organization of 1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds. This brief reports on key findings

from a survey, focus group, and in-depth interviews conducted with program participants as part of an assessment by the Worker Institute at Cornell ILR. The study indicated important benefits related to job quality, work-family balance, and client care, suggesting that further efforts to build and evaluate such programs at scale could benefit a variety of stakeholders.

## TOPLINE RESULTS

### ENHANCED SENSE OF SAFETY

**81%** of survey participants said the transportation program made them feel safer getting to and from work during the pandemic than they would have felt without the program.

### REDUCED STRESS

**88%** of survey participants said the program reduced their level of work-related stress.

### EXPANDED WORK OPPORTUNITIES

**69%** of participants sought to add new clients during the study period, of which **95%** said the program helped them do so. **Eighty-three percent** of participants sought to work more hours, of which **94%** said the program made it easier to exercise greater control over their hours.

### MORE TIME FOR FAMILY AND EDUCATIONAL PURSUITS

**72%** of survey participants said the program made it possible to spend more time with family, **63%** said the program made it possible to provide needed care for family, and **44%** said the program made it possible to take a work-related class or training.

### IMPROVED CLIENT CARE

In in-depth interviews and the focus group, program participants indicated that the program supported their ability to be more **dependable and attentive with clients**.

### SAVINGS AND JOB STABILITY

Homecare workers saved \$436/month on average—roughly one-fifth of monthly income for someone working full-time hours—by using the ride service program. Several focus group participants noted the potential benefits of the program in **recruiting workers and helping them to carve out more stable careers, enhancing retention**.

## Background

In Western New York as in other parts of the country, home care workers are a critical part of the “care grid.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite rising demand, low pay and other challenging conditions have generated a shortage of home care workers.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, the median annual earnings for home care workers (including home health aides and personal care assistants) in the Buffalo area—a key metropolitan hub within Western New York—was \$15,800.<sup>3</sup> In addition to low pay rates, home care workers confront a range of other issues that bear on their take-home pay and the stability of their incomes, including difficulties keeping a stable client base and maintaining consistent working hours from week to week.<sup>4</sup>

Transportation is an understudied issue affecting the ability of many home care workers to reach clients and earn a consistent paycheck.<sup>5</sup> In rural areas, a lack of viable transportation options is often a major barrier

to taking on potential clients. In cities such as Buffalo, more seniors needing long-term care have moved to the suburbs, even as the labor pool of those providing services continues to be located within urban centers. Public transportation options are often limited, making it difficult for many home care workers to reach an increasingly dispersed client base.<sup>6</sup>

In response to this issue, Healthcare Workers Rising (HWR), a membership organization of long-term care workers in Western New York, developed a transportation pilot program that provides fully subsidized rides for workers to reach their clients using the Lyft ridesharing platform in Erie, Niagara, and Monroe Counties. HWR is also actively exploring alternatives that would align with its broader mission of improving labor rights and standards, including possible development of a worker-owned ride-sharing business in the future.

## Method

To assess the experience of participants in the HWR transportation program, including impacts on job quality, work/family balance, and client care, researchers at the Worker Institute at Cornell ILR surveyed 92 program participants (out of 110 enrolled in the program); held a focus group with six workers; conducted semi-structured interviews with five workers; and spoke with a variety of other industry stakeholders,

including employer representatives and advocates. The study was approved as a program evaluation by the Cornell University IRB. The discussion on pages 3-7 is based on the survey, focus group, and worker interview data, and the “costs vs. benefits” box on page 8 draws on this data together with conversations with stakeholders, including representatives from a home care employer based in Western New York.

### WHO WE SURVEYED\*

**77%**

provided only in-home care.

**4%**

provided care only in skilled nursing facilities.

**18%**

provided care in both settings.

**96%**

were women.

**89%**

identified as Black,

**96%**

as People of Color.

**41**

was the average age.

**87%**

were sole earners in their household.

**79%**

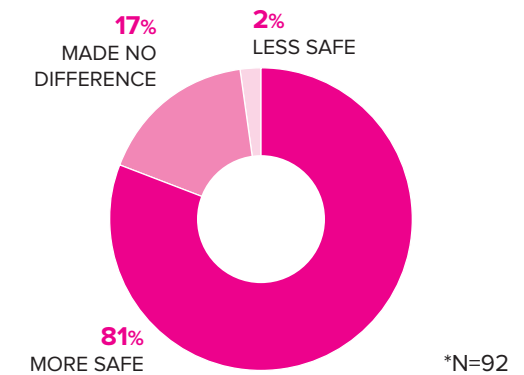
were providers of unpaid care to family.

\*N=92

# Enhanced Sense of Safety

During the pandemic, home care workers have performed their duties in the face of heightened health risks associated with providing direct personal care and reaching clients in a pandemic environment.<sup>7</sup> Survey data and worker interview testimony show that a significant majority of workers derived a greater sense of safety from being able to use the HWR program during the pandemic. Focus group and interview participants also spoke about a greater sense of safety in general, particularly when traveling at odd hours or to remote areas.

HAS THE TRANSPORTATION MADE YOU MORE OR LESS SAFE GETTING TO WORK DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC?\*



## Ruby Lovelist

Ruby Lovelist has been working as a caregiver for over 25 years, but she knew she had a knack for taking care of people since she was a child. She first entered the field when she was 18, after the experience of observing her mother provide paid care for people with mental disabilities. Ruby spoke about how the transportation program has affected her sense of safety during the pandemic.



*“The impact that the transportation program has had, especially with the pandemic—I don’t have to get on the bus, worry about going to work... And that’s been a big blessing, because as a health care worker, that’s a safety issue right there.”*

Ruby also noted how the program was helpful in navigating other risks she faced getting to work.

*“...When I was catching the bus to and from different places, sometimes you had to go into areas where it wasn’t... well-lit and you would have to walk at least a mile to get to that client’s house... One night I was working a late shift and I had to get there about an hour before my shift started, because of the time the buses ran. ...I had to walk from [the bus stop]*

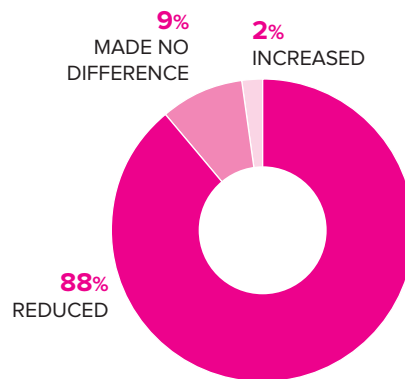
*and it took me about a good 35-40 minutes to walk to this particular client’s house. And ... once you get off the main road... it’s real dark back up in there and there’s some wooded areas. There was a guy that actually followed me for about a quarter of a mile.*

*...But with the transportation [program], it took away a lot of those factors. I was able to get home within about 15-20 minutes from most of my clients. ...[The program] has been a godsend because I haven’t been waiting on corners, standing, catching a bus, trying to get home at a specific time. When the relief doesn’t come, I have to stay to work late—but knowing that I had transportation at the end of the day, I was OK because I didn’t have to worry about that hour and a half bus ride to get me home.”*

# Reduced Stress

The range of duties performed by home care workers are often physically demanding, leading to repetitive strain and other injuries,<sup>8</sup> and psychologically challenging, involving significant stress and “emotional labor.”<sup>9</sup> These factors contribute to burnout and high turnover.<sup>10</sup> Survey data indicated a role for the transportation program in helping to ease job-related stress, and interview and focus group participants spoke about the ability to get work reliably and on time as factors that helped to reduce their stress.

HOW HAS THE TRANSPORTATION AFFECTED YOUR LEVEL OF WORK-RELATED STRESS?\*



\*N=92

## Salina Person

Salina Person always knew she wanted to be a caretaker, and she has been working in the paid care field for 25 years. Salina described the struggle to get enough hours of work to cover her rent and living costs, while also securing childcare for her own children, including a son with chronic asthma. Despite working close to 70 hours per week, Salina finds that she is still usually late in paying rent. With most of her waking hours spent working and caring for her family, the transportation program provides Salina with much-needed time for centering herself and attending to her mental wellbeing. She also connected this to being able to more present and attentive with clients.



*“[Using the program] leaves you enough time to focus on yourself, getting your mind frame right to go and deal with whatever personality you’re gonna deal with for that day—it’s just you and the driver... I put my earphones in, I tune everybody out, and I get my meditation on and do what I’ve got to do. ... It gives me an opportunity to concentrate on nothing but myself until when I get to the client’s house—I’m able to provide a better service to them.*”

*And not to mention you get to work on time. And in my case, I don’t have to get up at 4 o’clock in the morning to get to a case by 8 o’clock. Because that’s what I have to do most times, I have to get up like 4 o’clock or 4:45 to jump on a bus to get to Niagara Falls or to get to wherever I’ve got to go. So it definitely is beneficial to me... And I appreciate ... the opportunity to take full advantage of the ride system so that we can put our focus on ourselves so that when we get to our clients, we can give them 200% of good care versus just a regular 100 percent.”*

# Expanded Work Opportunities

Home care positions are generally not salaried, and the client base and weekly hours of home care workers often fluctuate significantly.<sup>11</sup> As a result, being able to add clients and exercise control over working hours substantially affects the week-to-week income stability and overall financial security of the home care workforce.<sup>12</sup> Survey data and worker comments from the interviews and focus group indicated that the transportation program supported expanded work opportunities and more sustainable workflows for participants, enabling them to take on additional clients and making it easier to work their desired number of hours.

## ADDING CLIENTS

**69%** of survey participants (N=92) were looking to add new clients while enrolled in the program.

Of these, **95%** (N=63) said the program had helped them to add more clients.

## CONTROL OVER HOURS

**83%** of survey participants (N=92) said they were looking to work more hours since joining the transportation program.

**94%** (N=90) said the program made it easier to work the number of hours they wanted to work.

### Oretha Beh

Oretha Beh arrived in Buffalo, NY in December 2003 as a refugee from Liberia. Working as a home health aide felt like a good fit to her, she says, since she grew up in a society where adults were expected to take care of their elders. Oretha is widowed with 8 grown children, and she supports family back in Liberia—her parents and aunts and uncles, along with her grandchildren’s school fees. Oretha has long been used to working multiple jobs and sleeping only 3 or 4 hours—given her rate of pay as a home health aide, she feels strongly that this is the only way she can live up to her duty as a breadwinner for her family.

*“That’s how it is in Africa. Your parents take care of you when you are young, when you are small, and then when you are grown, and they are not able to take care of themselves, then you have got to provide for them ... If you are the breadwinner, everybody looks up to you. So you’ve got to work hard and support your family.”*



Using the transportation program has saved Oretha long stretches of time commuting to and from clients, including waiting for the bus. This has enabled her to take on more clients and bring in more income, which, she says, has been important for her and her family. In periods where she has less work than she would like, her remittances to family back home are seriously affected. She says that the transportation program helped her to provide a level of financial support that she felt good about and that was meaningful to her family.

# More Time for Family and Education

Even as they provide essential care support to others, home care workers often struggle to care for and spend time with their own loved ones. In addition to the financial benefits of the program, the interview and survey data indicated that spending less time in transit enabled a significant majority of participants to provide needed care for family and spend more time with family and friends. A substantial number of participants also said the program helped make it possible for them to take a work-related class or training, pointing to potential implications for career advancement if a program like this were made available on a long-term basis.

## DID THE TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM MAKE IT POSSIBLE FOR YOU TO DO ANY OF THE FOLLOWING?\*

SPEND MORE TIME WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS



PROVIDE CARE FOR FAMILY



TAKE A WORK-RELATED CLASS OR TRAINING



\*N=92

**Ruby** noted how the transportation program helped her spend more time with her husband and to be available to provide care for a sibling. She also spoke about how it enabled her to finish certification programs she had been working towards completing.

*“I’m spending more time with my husband. I’m cooking more. You know, I’m able to deal with other family members even more. Or I’ll pick up another client in between [others]. It gave me a whole lot more flexibility. I have a sister who’s a Type 1 diabetic, and I have to keep my eye on her sometimes ...I have to sometimes walk to her house because she doesn’t live that far from me, I walk to her house and go check on her to make sure she’s OK. Stuff like that.*”

*“...Also, I [have been] in school — I was able to finish school because of the transportation [program], that was the big issue. I was able to get in here and finish my classes because I was going to class for a couple of things. I was renewing my CNA [certified nursing assistant license]... and also, I was taking an 8-week course for learning about co-op businesses. So that freed up some time for me to be able to participate in stuff like this because of transportation issues.”*



# Improved Client Care

The structure of home care work and lack of support for the workforce affects those needing in-home care services, who often confront gaps in care and frequent changes in care providers.<sup>13</sup> According to government data, rates of absenteeism are higher in long-term care than in other industries,<sup>14</sup> and a prominent caregiver training platform noted stress, injury, and transportation issues as factors that contribute to high “call-out” rates.<sup>15</sup> In the interviews and focus groups, several workers noted that the transportation program enabled them to be more dependable in reaching clients consistently and on time, and taking on clients who otherwise would have been out of reach.

*“This program makes you more dependable to your clients. You know you can get to work. They can count on you. There have been times when I couldn’t afford to get to work. I really appreciated [this program], it helped me out a lot.”*

*“Without the program, I couldn’t get to one of my clients anymore.”*

*“I definitely think the [program] helps with fewer call-outs.”*

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

In addition to speaking about how the transportation program helped to her take on additional clients and hours, **Oretha** noted how it helped her consistently get to work on time by avoiding transportation delay such as buses not arriving on schedule or buses that were too full to board.

*“[Sometimes the] bus is late, the bus breaks down, the bus is filled with people... sometimes you can’t get in because it’s packed, so a lot of times it means you’re ten minutes late.”*

*“So [the program] helps us a lot. And the people we are taking care of too, they are happy because they don’t have to wait, wait, wait, wait — if I’m supposed to fix breakfast and I can’t get there on time, the client will be hungry, and will be there looking through the window waiting for the aide to come in. But now that we have the rides, 5 minutes or 10 minutes and we are there. And then it’s just another 10 minutes... to get to the other job. So that helps the clients, and it helps [us] the workers.”*

# Savings and Job Stability

Low pay and insufficient hours combine with other challenging conditions to produce high workforce turnover rates in the home care industry,<sup>16</sup> and these same factors contribute to difficulties recruiting enough workers to fulfill the growing demand for in-home long-term care services.<sup>17</sup> In addition to opportunities for taking on additional hours and clients, the survey results indicated that participants were able to save a significant amount each month by using the ride service. Several focus group participants cited potential benefits for future recruitment and retention, suggesting that the availability of such a program could make home care jobs more attractive and help workers to carve out more stable careers in the industry.

## SAVINGS

Homecare workers saved

**\$436**/month

—roughly **20%** of their income for those working full-time hours—with our ride service program.

*“[The program] helps you a lot. It’s one less bill you have a worry about... [The program] would help more people to join the industry. There are two things that aren’t closing, police and healthcare. Having access to this kind of program would encourage younger people to join. Even if you have your own car, things come up with car trouble, etc. - and this really helps.”*

*“I don’t understand why the agencies can’t have a program like this ... for people like us who are dedicated, faithful.”*

*“I’m very grateful and I want to give back ... It’s helped me a lot, please let me know what I can do to help.”*

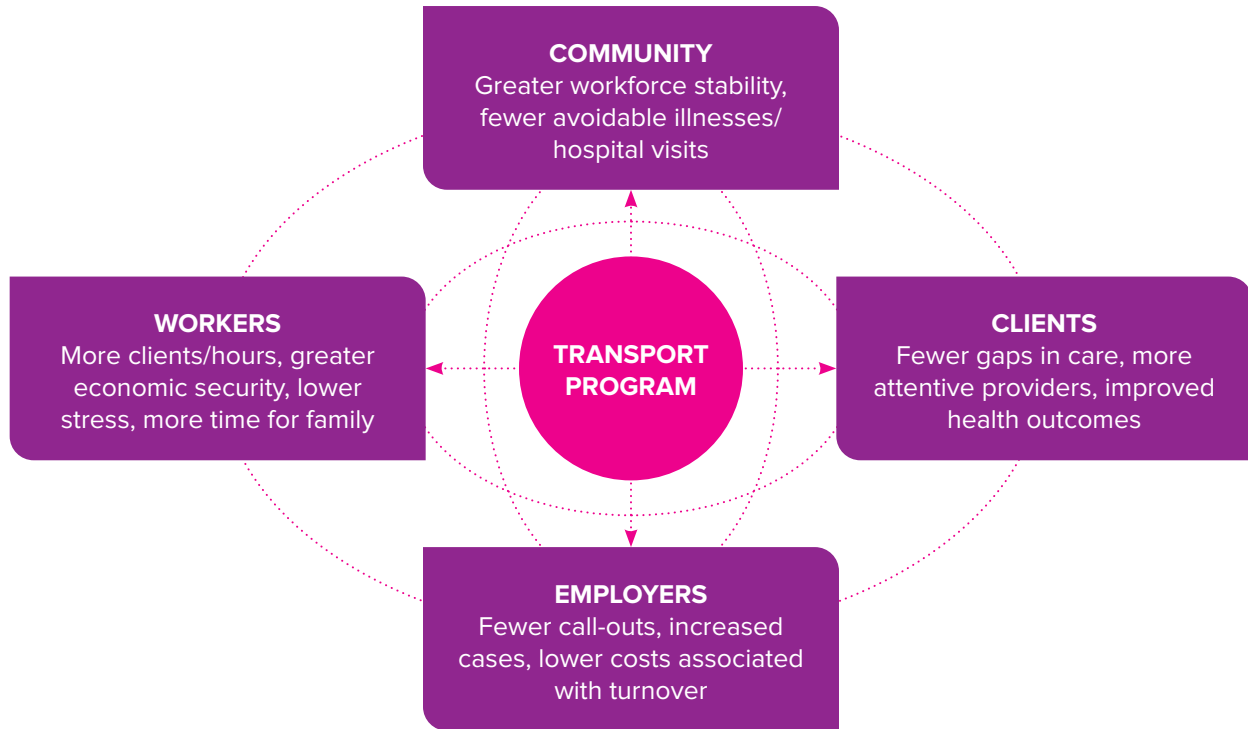
*“You can spend half of your paycheck getting to cases ... Since I started using the program, I’ve had extra money to cover bills. It’s a big help, a big relief that you don’t have to worry about how you’re getting to work.”*

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

## Costs v. Benefits

Sustaining a program such as the HWR transportation pilot entails substantial costs, including the cost of rides. In weighing these costs, it is important to capture the potential benefits for different

stakeholders, including workers, clients, employers, and surrounding communities. The diagram below captures some of these interrelated and mutually reinforcing potential benefits.



## Implications

The data compiled in this assessment indicates that participants in the HWR transportation pilot program derived substantial benefits, including an enhanced sense of safety, reduced stress, expanded work opportunities, and more time for family and educational pursuits. Participants also noted positive impacts on client care and spoke about potential benefits of the program being made available to more workers on a long-term basis. Based on this evidence, we recommend an expanded pilot with one or more employer partners to further test program impacts on different stakeholders and investigate strategies for sustainably building at scale. On the evaluation side, this would include:

- Use of worker surveys and deidentified administrative data from employers to further test program impacts, including working hours, call-out rates, and cases served;
- Potential use of administrative data from the State and/or Managed Long-Term Care plans to test program usage on patient outcomes (e.g., rates of avoidable hospitalizations);

- Use of information compiled on costs and benefits for key stakeholders to formalize and implement, data permitting, a cost-benefit analysis;
- Interviews with relevant stakeholders to explore:
  - 1) Funding strategies involving public, private, and not-for-profit sources; and
  - 2) Different models for scaling up in a manner consistent with principles of worker rights, environmental sustainability, and community access and empowerment.

Additional pilot testing of this kind could inform future program development, potentially building on the promising results of the HWR pilot to enhance wellbeing and economic security for home care workers while reducing gaps in in-home care support for many who need it.

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## Healthcare Workers Rising

Healthcare Workers Rising is a growing movement of caregivers, clients, and community members who believe in the power of care. Since 2017, our programs have mobilized thousands to improve the lives of home care providers and the communities they serve by fighting for a better care system across Western New York. Our goal is to ensure home care services are of the highest quality by providing training certifications, resume and interview prep, job placement, and a voice to fight for better wages and benefits.



## Worker Institute at Cornell ILR

The Worker Institute at Cornell ILR works to advance workers rights and collective representation through research, education, and training in conjunction with labor and social justice movements. We seek innovative solutions to problems faced by working people in our workplaces and economy today.



## 1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds

1199SEIU Training and Employment Funds is the largest workforce development organization for adult workers in the United States. It operates in five states and Washington, D.C., serving 250,000 workers across 600 employers through nine different funds that are committed to changing the structure of opportunity for historically underserved and underrepresented healthcare workers.