

# Caregiver shortage hits home for some

BY CATHY DYSON  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

For the first time in 24 years, Mimi and Jim Cole can't hire anyone to help care for their autistic son. Funding isn't the problem, finding help is.

Medicaid waivers cover the cost of personal attendants for Russell Cole, who's 27 and lives in Stafford County with his parents. But because no one will take the job while his parents are at work—and make sure he doesn't hurt himself or wander into danger—the Coles have assumed the duties themselves.

She calls it “living on a wing

and a prayer” as they juggle the hours needed to get their jobs done with the time spent supervising Russell. When Jim Cole, who's in finance and has been working from home since last year, has a Zoom meeting he can't miss, she keeps an eye on their son.

When she visits patients as a part-time home health care

worker, he keeps Russell from resorting to negative behaviors which she said happens when he's “cooped up” for too long.

“Usually I have several attendants at a time who work for us, and this is the first time that I have not been able to find anybody,” Mimi Cole said. “I have

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# Firefighters put heat on MWHC, Cigna

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As a steady rain came down, professional firefighters from the Fredericksburg area to Fairfax—and as far north as Annapolis, Md.—joined members of the community in the shadow of the area's biggest health care system.

Even with umbrellas

above them, the group of about 30 people still risked a soaking as they stood on the sidewalk of the campus of Mary Washington Hospital. The less-than-ideal conditions were nothing new for firefighters, said Rocco Alvaro of Spotsylvania County.

“We aren't afraid to get dirty, especially when it's time to make a point,” he

said.

And the point the group stressed repeatedly is that officials from Mary Washington Healthcare and Cigna health insurance need to settle a contract dispute that's affecting 15,000 people in the Fredericksburg area. The two parted ways in May when they couldn't agree on payment rates and each

cast blame on the other.

Mary Washington says Cigna wants to cut its reimbursements for hospital services by 30 percent, which the health care system cannot abide, said Eric Fletcher, MWHC vice president. Cigna says MWHC demands rates that are too expensive for customers and clients,

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# RALLY

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according to Holly Fussell, communications senior advisor for the health insurance company.

"I think it's ridiculous that two multimillion companies can argue and we're the ones who end up suffering," said Wesley Woodruff, a Stafford County resident who works for an aerospace company.

Those impacted either have to find other doctors who accept Cigna, outside the expansive MWHC network, or pay higher out-of-network costs for services from providers that many have relied upon for years.

"It's unfathomable to think of what they're doing to our members who are responding to the citizens and taking care of the community," said Ron Kuley, president of the Fairfax County Professional Firefighters.

Kuley works with Ryan McGill, a director with the union that's affiliated with the Fairfax firefighters and the organizer of Saturday's rally. McGill lives in King George County and has contacted officials with Mary Washington and Cigna, encouraging them to go back to the drawing board.

On Saturday, he passed out yellow shirts that stated "Stand With Us" and thanked those who gathered with firefighters to support more negotiations "so we can have access to our health care."

"That's right," said one man from under an umbrella.

"Help us get what we paid for," added Lynn Pierson, a Spotsylvania County resident whose husband is a professional firefighter in Loudoun County.

"I am gainfully employed, my husband is gainfully employed, we pay for our health insurance like everybody else does, but we're being denied the health care we need," Pierson said.

Of course, she can continue seeing Mary Washington providers for her medical issues, which include rheumatoid arthritis and thyroid problems. But instead of paying about \$35 for each visit, she'd have to pay about \$150 at each visit, and she can't afford that.

Finding another doctor isn't as simple as driving an hour north or south, said Andrew Pantelis, vice president of the Mid-Atlantic region of the International Association of Firefighters. He's based out of Annapolis and came to Fredericksburg on Saturday for the rally.

"We know from the pandemic how backed up the health care system is" and how difficult it is to get an appointment, Pantelis said. "This is having a tangible impact on real people's lives" and on people, as Pierson described, who

haven't hesitated to serve on the front lines during COVID-19.

Justin Langridge is a director with the Virginia Professional Firefighters and lives in Spotsylvania. While the contract dispute doesn't impact Spotsylvania workers, "it's kind of scary to know that our family health care insurance can be canceled at the drop of a hat because of a disagreement."

This week, officials from Mary Washington Healthcare and Cigna will meet again to discuss renewing their contract. Dr. Mike McDermott, CEO, and Sean Barden, senior vice president and CFO, from MWHC will sit down with Monica Schumde, president of Cigna Mid-Atlantic, and Rich Novack, senior vice president of Cigna's U.S. markets.

"We are optimistic now that Cigna is returning to the negotiation table and looking forward to continuing talks between our organizations," said Lisa Henry, marketing direc-

tor for Mary Washington Healthcare.

Fussell was getting ready for vacation when contacted last week and did not provide a comment.

The firefighters' union also has asked Cigna to extend its continuity of care until a new agreement is reached, said McGill, who added that Cigna officials told him they'd consider it. Under the program, Cigna customers who face ongoing medical issues, such as pregnancy or cancer treatment, can apply to continue with the same providers for 90 days.

But that provision is due to expire at the end of August unless a contract is renewed.

Kuley, the president of the Fairfax firefighters, believes the heat from his group and other members of the community who stood out in the rain Saturday will make a difference.

"We're pressuring them to get this figured out," he said.

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A photograph of a living room featuring a wooden armchair with a grey cushion and a white blanket. A small table with a vase of white flowers sits next to it. A white dog is visible in the foreground.

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# Academy helping fill caregiver gap in area

BY CATHY DYSON  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

From the outside, the event looked like an open house and community appreciation, a celebration of the Career Nursing Academy moving to a much larger space in a Locust Grove shopping center.

But inside, the goings-on at the Orange County facility are indicative of what's happening across the region—and nation. There's a desperate need for caregivers and nursing aides, both for older people who want to remain in their homes, as well as for those whose physical needs or memory issues have mandated a move to a facility.

And Zoila Ortega, a nurse, medical instructor and health care professional for more than 50 years, created the academy to fill that void.



**Nursing aide student Helanna Shaw checks Kathy Zeiler's blood pressure at the open house.**

She started the training center in 2015 after she came out of retirement for the third time—joking that old nurses don't stop working, they just die.

But on a serious note, Ortega was taking care of her mother, and as the older woman's dementia increased, her English decreased. Ortega, who's Cuban, searched for a

certified nursing aide who could help her.

"There was not a Spanish-speaking CNA to be found," said Ortega, who's 73.

So Ortega, who had created the nurse aide program at Germanna Community College—and was an adjunct professor in the nursing department there—set up the Career Nursing

Academy. Because she speaks three languages—English, Spanish and French—she gives extra encouragement to those who aren't native English-speakers as well as to students who might not have had an opportunity for training.

On a recent Saturday, Ortega and her instructors held the community open house and job fair at their academy to try to match students with prospective employers.

"The demand is overwhelming," Ortega said. "All of the nursing homes are scrambling for CNAs to work, and then the people who want to stay at home—and there are a significant number who want to be at home but they need some help—they are knocking down our

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# CAREGIVERS

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doors.”

The demand is the main reason the academy moved last month from its former location next to the Locust Grove post office to a space that’s 2.5 times larger, off State Route 20 in the shopping center with the Exxon gas station. The training center is open six days a week and when there are more students than its three CNA classes can accommodate, overflow evening classes are scheduled. That happened twice this summer, Ortega said.

The academy also offers classes for medication and personal care aides and caregiving basics.

Many of the students, who talked with potential employers and gave free blood pressure checks to residents, are interested in being caregivers for the same reason Ortega started the academy.

They’re motivated by personal experiences.

Aleksa Shoemaker helped her grandmother take care of her grandfather, who had a feeding tube, whenever she visited.

“He just kind of inspired me to work with people in need and kind of led to where I’m at today,” she said, adding she won’t have trouble finding a job. “The medical field is a constantly hiring environment, so many people here are in need. It’s a job that’s in very high demand.”

Bailey Clements had planned to become a registered nurse and was in college last year when the pandemic began. But as the classes went on, she “wanted to be hands on” working with patients so she switched to the CNA class. Like her classmate Mikeesha Henderson, she’d like to start as a home health care worker, advance to a nursing home and eventually become a registered nurse and work in a hospital.

Helanna Shaw said her “heart grew” after she had her daughter, Kaia, two years ago.

“I came to realize that everyone is someone’s child and that’s honestly why I think being a CNA is a great job. You have to care for people and take care of them like they’re family,” said Shaw, who also works nights as a bartender and applies some of the same thought processes to both fields. “Everyone’s a person. You don’t know what they’re going through and you don’t know their stories.”

The need for caregivers was keen, long before COVID-19 arrived, said



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**Nursing aide students Helanna Shaw and Nancy Hinton practice some of their skills on a mannequin at the Career Nursing Academy’s training center.**

Sheila Mathis, an academy instructor who worked her way up the health care ranks, starting as an aide who worked in peoples’ homes. She just completed her doctorate as a nurse practitioner.

“The need has just grown that much more since the pandemic,” she said.

Families who saw the way COVID-19 tore through long-term care facilities during the early months of the pandemic, wreaking havoc and death, have tried to keep their loved ones at home and find help with their care.

When they contact Ortega, she passes them along to Mathis’ husband, Derrick, who also has an office in the academy and directs Veritas Training and Consulting Services, which refers potential caregivers to families.

He sees continued growth for his business—and caregiver training—as 10,000 Americans are turning 65 every day, according to the AARP. The number of older adults will more than double in coming decades and represent one of every five people by 2050, the AARP estimates.

Derrick Mathis said a lot of nurses and caregivers left the field when the pandemic began, perhaps because they were close to retirement age and had concerns about COVID-19 and their own exposure.

Others with young children “had to make some hard decisions” about their care last year as schools went to virtual classes, said Jenette Riggan, resident care coordinator at the newly opened Trinity Senior Village in Locust Grove. “It imposes quite the burden on the parent, particularly on women because more often than not, you see women in this field.”

Trinity is an assisted



**Academy Director Zoila Ortega (seated) checks the blood pressure reading that nursing student Jason Morgan got from open house visitor Joe Moy.**



**Program Coordinator Christy West (left) talks with nursing aide students Bailey Clements and Mikeesha Henderson at the Locust Grove facility.**

living facility that also plans to provide care for those with memory issues. Trinity is trying to fill its staff openings and has seen an influx of potential applicants who have left other jobs because of COVID-19 vaccine mandates. Trinity “strongly encourages” employees to get vaccinated, but does not currently have a mandate, Riggan said.

Visiting Angels, which sends health workers into the homes of seniors, is in the same position, said Cathy Lewis, recruiting director. It doesn’t mandate vaccines, either, but because 95 percent

of clients want to be seen by workers who are fully vaccinated, she said, “It’s going to get to the point where we’re not going to be able to hire people who are not vaccinated.”

She offered a glimpse of encouragement, that in the last two to three months—perhaps as in-person classes have resumed—more people have returned to their jobs.

“I think it’s got a lot to do with the fact that in our industry, people want to get back to work, get back to feeling like they’re making a difference,” she said.

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