

Diane – Story of a Home Care Assistant, Oakland



My name is Diane, and all my life I have felt a passion for taking care of the elderly. As a 16 year old kid, I took my first job at a nursing home, a place called the "City Infirmary." It was as bad as the name sounded – I used to come home crying every night for the patients and how they were treated. My mother kept telling me to quit, but I stuck with it.

Then I graduated and got married, and life took me in a different direction. I made a career as an executive with a major lawn and garden equipment company in California. But I never lost my passion for the elderly. I see how they can become a forgotten entity. At a certain age, they begin to lose their independence and sometimes they aren't seen as useful anymore. If they're left alone all the time, they can just fade away...

A few months ago I took a job as a Home Care Assistant, finally returning to the work I have always felt called to do in my heart. And I love what I'm doing. I had a patient tell me the other day, "I'm a new woman." She was so happy to have company for a few hours a day, someone to help with bathing. That makes me feel good. To know that someone can have her final years and be *happy*, rather than just sort of fading away – that's my reward.

In order to do this job, you have to have a passion for it. You can't work in this industry, and get paid what we get paid, and not have a passion for the people you're taking care of. I have been lucky to get pretty regular hours with one client because I'm willing to work weekends, but a lot of the girls have to drive around to several different clients – a few hours here, a few hours there – and no money for gas or the time they spend between appointments. You might spend 11 hours and \$6.00 in gas just to get 8 hours of work at \$7.75 an hour.

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I also don't have any access to medical benefits through my job. I went and bought individual insurance – a catastrophic policy with a \$5,000 deductible. Even after the deductible, there are still co-pays and limits and things they don't cover, so I'm still paying "mega" money out of pocket, and that's beside the \$350 a month in premiums! There are two medications that I take – with no generic options available – that cost me over \$600 a month. Once I tried cutting down from taking a pill twice a day to once a day, but that made me really sick. I've been taking money out of my 401(k) plan just to keep my head above water, but that is counted as income and prevents me from being eligible for help from MaineCare or other programs.

Sure, I've thought about finding another job. But I've been wanting to do this all my life, and I said to myself that if I could ever get back into it I would. And if I had insurance I'd feel really good. But I worry – for somebody just getting out of school now, 18, 19 years old, is long-term care going to be attractive? When you think that Maine has 200,000 people over age 65, there's a lot of need out there to have health care workers. Why is it that the people we need the most, get treated the worst?

To learn more about the Kennebec Valley Organization (KVO), and its campaign to improve long-term care for workers, consumers, and families in the Valley, contact us at 873-5844 or kvo@gwi.net, or visit www.kvorg.org.