
Staffing, Turnover, and Succession in Senior Services

A MUST HAVE CHECKLIST FOR SENIOR LIVING AND AGING SERVICES LEADERSHIP

Demand for senior living and aging services continues to grow, while the workforce needed to support that growth is increasingly constrained. That pressure will only intensify as the population aged 80 and older is projected to grow by more than four million by 2030. Unfortunately, new communities, programs, and beds aren't coming online fast enough to absorb it, leaving a projected shortfall of roughly 370,000 units.¹ Every gap in capacity becomes a gap in staffing: the caregivers already on the job absorb the overflow, caseloads grow heavier, needs get more complex, and burnout pushes turnover above 50% a year.²

Leadership isn't insulated from this. If anything, it's a second runway running out at the same time. More than half of nonprofit leaders expect to leave their role within five years,³ yet fewer than three in ten organizations have a written plan for who comes next.⁴ Front-line staffing and leadership succession are usually managed as separate problems. They aren't. An organization stretched thin on caregivers has less capacity to develop the next generation of leaders, and an organization without a leadership bench is poorly positioned to fix the caregiver shortage.

Below are seven questions worth asking now, while there's still room to plan rather than react.

01 Could someone step in tomorrow... at any level?

Not just the top seat. Name who could run the organization on day one if a key leader were out unexpectedly, and who could step into each program director, development, or operations role. A bench that looks good on an org chart isn't the same as one that's ready; that only comes from identifying high-potential people early and investing in them well before a vacancy opens.

02 Have you talked with your board about your own timeline?

Not to signal that you're leaving, but so the board isn't planning your succession without you in the room. The strongest transitions begin years before a departure date, not months. Leaders who raise the conversation early, while the organization is thriving, tend to leave on their own terms rather than in reaction to a crisis.

03 Are your rising leaders getting exposure to your board and your community?

A program director or operations lead who has never presented to the board, sat in on a strategic discussion, or met key funders isn't being developed for what's next. Giving staff a genuine voice in what the organization needs from its next generation of leaders also builds confidence and reduces the anxiety that usually surrounds a transition.

04 Is succession a standing item for your seat and theirs?

Boards that only raise succession after a resignation are always catching up. The same is true of organizations that only think about bench depth once someone gives notice. Treat succession planning as a continuous practice built into how the organization operates, not a project you run once. That's what keeps a pipeline ready when you actually need it.

05 Do you know what an unplanned vacancy would cost you?

In dollars, momentum, and staff or resident and family confidence, at the top or one level down. Most organizations have never run that math until they're already living it. It's also worth deciding in advance what kind of outside support you would want for a search: the cost of getting a senior hire wrong is almost always higher than the cost of doing the search right.

06 Have you decided how and for whom you would use an interim leader?

Some organizations use an interim as a genuine bridge to the right permanent hire. Others use it to avoid a hard decision. The same clarity matters for an outgoing leader's role after a transition: bounded, time-limited, with no ongoing authority over daily operations. That protects the incoming leader and prevents confusion for staff. Know which you would be doing, for your seat or theirs, before you need to.

07 Have you talked to your last few departures about why they left?

Not just your successes. An honest exit conversation, at any level, tells you more about your bench strength and your culture than an org chart ever will. And once a transition is underway, staying visibly consistent with donors, funders, and other stakeholders protects the trust that an unclear or quiet departure could otherwise unsettle.

Filling the bench, at every level, takes more than good intentions. It takes a deliberate plan and, often, an outside partner to help build it. If it would help to think through what that looks like for your organization, we would welcome the conversation.

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About CarterBaldwin Executive Search

For over 25 years, CarterBaldwin has partnered with boards and leadership teams across nonprofit, education, and mission-driven organizations to build exceptional leadership. Our nonprofit practice supports senior centers and aging services organizations across the full leadership team, from executive director and CEO to program, development, and operations leadership.

Sources

1. NIC MAP, as cited by Incite Strategic Partners, "Senior Care in 2026": the 80-and-older population is projected to grow by over 4 million between 2025 and 2030, against a projected unit shortfall of roughly 370,000 by 2030.
2. Excelas and Marsh McLennan Agency (MMA), "The Impact of Senior Living Labor Shortages & Caregiver Burnout," citing American Health Care Association (AHCA) data: caregiver turnover exceeds 50% annually.
3. 501 Commons, "Leadership Transition & Succession Planning": more than half of nonprofit leaders expect to leave their roles within five years.
4. BoardSource, "Leading with Intent," as cited by BoardEffect: only 27% of nonprofits have a written executive succession plan.