

Sweden: boosting education and employment of the long-term care workforce in the wake of the pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted several structural shortcomings of the Swedish long-term care system. Most of these were known of beforehand, but little successful action had been taken. A new reform initiated in collaboration with the social partners could be a first step towards a more profound change.



Description

As in most other EU countries, a large proportion of the COVID-19 deaths in Sweden have occurred among older people who were recipients of long-term care (LTC) services. The most recent COVID-19 death statistics from 20 July show that slightly above 51% (2,532 deaths) of deaths among those aged 70 or above occurred in institutional care, and an additional 27% (1,339 deaths) among recipients of home care services. Given that the Swedish pandemic response was, from day one, intended to protect older persons, these figures have been regarded as a failure by many, including the government.

Unlike most other EU countries, Sweden did not respond with a total lockdown. Instead, the Public Health Agency of Sweden recommended people aged 70+ to take extra caution in physically distancing themselves; they were not to visit friends or relatives and should not be visited indoors. A while later, a ban on visits within institutional care was imposed. After an initial period of neglect and silence from the responsible authorities on the issue of LTC and COVID-19, statistics revealed that a large share of deaths had occurred within LTC facilities, which led to an intensified debate. It became obvious that the Swedish LTC system had several structural characteristics that were likely to affect the spread of the virus.

These characteristics were already known to researchers in the field and had also been highlighted in several reports also from authorities such as the

National Board of Health and Welfare. Certain issues have been of specific concern: the hectic and stressful working conditions, the low pay and status, the fact that a large proportion of the staff have no specific educational qualifications, the high staff turnover, and the fact that close to a quarter of the current 270,000 employees are being paid by the hour.

There is a high degree of decentralisation and division of responsibility between healthcare and LTC, whereby the 21 larger regions are responsible for healthcare and the 290 municipalities are responsible for LTC. Moreover, a multitude of service suppliers, both public and private, exist in the LTC sector. Taken together, these features have hindered attempts to integrate and nationally coordinate actions against the spread of the virus.

On 12 May, to come to grips with some of the factors highlighted by the pandemic, the government presented an initiative specifically aimed at improving the educational qualifications and employment contracts of the LTC workforce: the so-called "Boost for care of the elderly" initiative (äldreomsorgslyftet). The social partners were key players in this initiative. Their central role was symbolised at the press conference presenting the reform, where the Minister of Health and Social Affairs was accompanied by the chairpersons of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and the Swedish Municipal Workers' Union (Kommunal).

The social partners will ensure that those who want to enrol in the educational

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programme to become an assistant nurse (undersköterska) or care assistant (vårdbiträde) will be given a full-time permanent employment contract, with the possibility to combine work and education. The state has guaranteed to fund all costs incurred by the municipalities while the employee is absent from work due to education. This reform is expected to cost around SEK 2.2 billion (€220 million) spread over 2020 and 2021, and is expected to create 10,000 new permanent employment contracts for assistant nurses and care assistants.

Outlook and commentary

The initiative is interesting from several perspectives. It reflects the great importance of, and influence given to, social partners in Swedish policymaking – something that is notable in many areas of social and labour policies.

Sweden already had high ambitions regarding educational qualifications, but these have been hard to fulfil. The high-profile media and political discussion on the current status of LTC may however lead to greater pressure to achieve the ambitions, and the “Boost for care of the elderly” initiative can be seen as a first step in this direction.

In financial terms, one could argue that the initiative is quite modest. Even prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the problematic financial situation of the regions and municipalities was at the centre of political discussion, and the government proposed a SEK 5 billion (€500 million) increase of the general support to the

municipalities and the regions. In January 2020, the opposition was able to gain support in the parliament to increase this offer even further, with a temporary extra SEK 2.5 billion (€250 million) to “secure the welfare sector”. Given the relative autonomy of the local and regional actors, coupled with the weakened state of the economy, it is not clear how much (if any) of these two additional government grants will end up in LTC. In contrast, the new LTC initiative is earmarked money. Moreover, the reform is not only supported by the social partners, but initiated in collaboration between them and the government.

In itself the initiative will not change the LTC system, but it may be the start of more radical change. From a broader social policy perspective, it could perhaps be a first step towards putting care of older people on a par with other social policy programmes. It would be interesting to compare these moves with the development of Swedish childcare, which has benefited from several actions to increase quality during the past two decades. Childcare is nowadays fully integrated into the school system and tied to a pre-school curriculum. Moreover, there has been considerable improvement in the staff’s pedagogical and educational qualifications.

Whether LTC in the future will be regarded as a key feature of the welfare state, more on a par with childcare, is yet to be seen. The “Boost for care of the elderly” initiative is a small step in that direction. Sadly, it took a pandemic to get it started.

Further reading

Government Offices of Sweden. Press release on the “Boost for care of the elderly” initiative (13 May 2020):

<https://www.regeringen.se/pres-smeddelanden/2020/05/10-000-nya-tillsvidareanstallda-inom-aldreomsorgen/>

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