SIPTU

SIPTU The Heath Care Assistants Union

Survey 2024 Initial Results

Forward

The health care assistant (HCA) is a vital yet often underappreciated cornerstone of Ireland's health and social care system. These workers provide essential care and support, ensuring the well-being of patients and enabling the smooth operation of our healthcare services. However, despite their critical contributions, HCAs frequently face significant challenges, including low pay, poor working conditions, and a lack of professional recognition.

SIPTU undertook this survey to give HCAs a platform to share their experiences and to ensure their voices are heard in the ongoing discussions about the future of healthcare in Ireland. The findings presented here provide a clear and compelling insight into the realities of working as an HCA, highlighting disparities between public and private sector roles and underscoring the urgent need for reform.

This document is not just a report on the challenges; it is a call to action. The issues identified by HCAs must be addressed if we are to build a healthcare system that values and supports its workforce. SIPTU is committed to driving this change and calls for the implementation of collective bargaining for HCAs in private settings, the establishment of safe staffing levels, and the introduction of professional registration for all HCAs.

The initial headline results of the survey are included in this report, a deeper analysis of the results and their regional breakdown will be undertaken and published in early 2025.

We hope this report will serve as a foundation for meaningful dialogue and tangible progress, ensuring a better future for health care assistants and the communities they serve.

Sharon Cregan,
SIPTU Sector Organiser

Introduction

The role of the Health Care Assistant (HCA) is a cornerstone of Ireland's health and social care system. Working across hospitals, nursing homes, and community care settings, HCAs provide essential support to patients and service users, as well as to their colleagues in nursing and allied health professions. Their contributions ensure the delivery of high-quality care and enable the smooth functioning of services that are crucial to public health. Despite the pivotal nature of their work, HCAs have long operated in a system that often overlooks the unique challenges they face and undervalues their indispensable role.

In recent years, the demands on HCAs have grown significantly. Increasing patient acuity, staffing shortages, and a lack of clear career progression pathways have created a challenging working environment. Many HCAs report experiencing high levels of workplace stress and physical strain, compounded by inconsistent recognition of their professional scope and skills. These challenges not only affect HCAs themselves but also have a ripple effect on the broader health care system, undermining service delivery and patient outcomes.

SIPTU, the union representing thousands of HCAs across Ireland, has been at the forefront of efforts to address these issues and advocate for the recognition this workforce deserves.

Through sustained campaigns, collective bargaining, and direct engagement with policymakers, SIPTU has championed improvements in pay, conditions, and career progression opportunities for HCAs. The union's advocacy was instrumental in securing formal acknowledgment of the role of the HCA within the health care system.

To better understand the realities of working as an HCA and to ensure that the voices of these workers are central to SIPTU's ongoing campaigning efforts, the union recently conducted a comprehensive survey of its members. This survey aimed to capture the lived experiences of HCAs, identify the key challenges they face, and gather insights on their priorities for the future. The findings presented in this document shed light on the vital contributions of HCAs, the barriers they encounter, and the steps needed to ensure that these workers are properly supported and recognised in both public and private settings.

By analysing the survey results, SIPTU seeks not only to inform its strategies but also to amplify the voices of HCAs in the national conversation about health care reform. This document serves as a testament to the union's commitment to empowering HCAs and ensuring that their essential work receives the respect and recognition it merits.

It is our hope that these insights will contribute to meaningful dialogue and action, fostering a health care system that values and invests in its workforce, ultimately improving outcomes for all.

Overview

SIPTU conducted this survey targeting its members employed as health care support assistants, health care assistants and home support health care assistants, while also encouraging non-members to participate.

Efforts included wide distribution of the survey across the relevant members of SIPTU via email, reminders to members in private settings via email and phone calls; calling for participation via social media; and calls for broader engagement across the sector. The survey ran from the 30th of October 2024 to the 9th of December 2024; and 1426 responses were received. Nineteen percent of respondents identified themselves as working in private nursing homes or private home care settings, offering valuable insights into the diverse experiences of HCAs.

The survey revealed significant differences in the challenges faced by HCAs depending on their work environment. Across all respondents, the top three issues identified were low staffing levels, low pay, and a lack of recognition. However, those in private settings highlighted low pay, a lack of benefits, and low staffing levels as their primary concerns. This disparity underscores the inconsistent application of what are considered basic terms and conditions across different sectors, a finding that aligns with anecdotal evidence from SIPTU officials across the country.

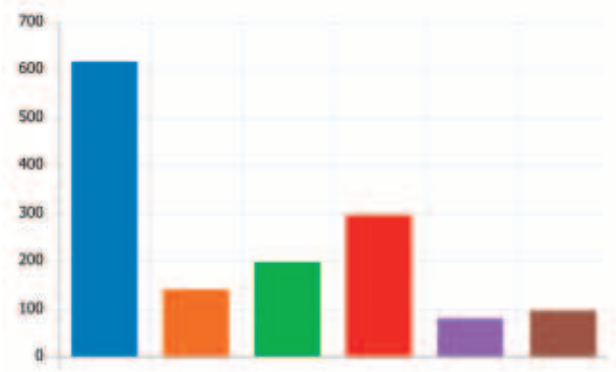
Despite these differences, there was strong consensus among respondents on key issues. An overwhelming 91% expressed support for enabling HCAs in private settings to negotiate pay collectively, reflecting a shared desire for fair and equitable treatment. Additionally, there was broad backing for a campaign advocating for professional registration of all HCAs, seen as a crucial step toward securing the recognition and respect they deserve.

These findings highlight the urgency of addressing systemic inequities within the sector and reinforce the need for collective action to support HCAs in achieving better pay, conditions, and professional recognition.

Respondent Profile - 1426 Responses

Where do respondents work?

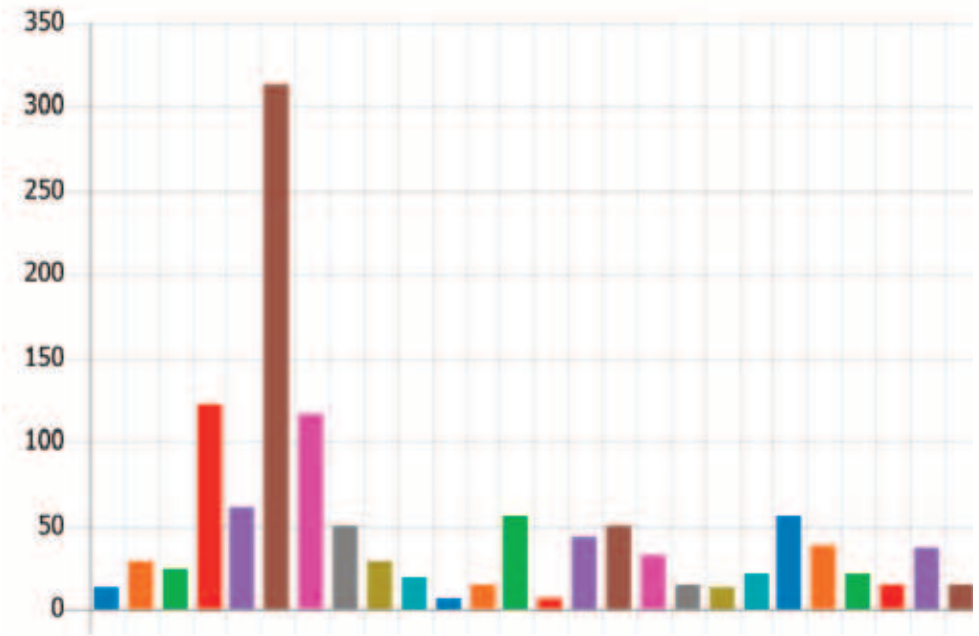
Hospital	616
Nursing Home (HSE)	140
Nursing Home (Private)	198
Home Care (HSE)	297
Home Care (Private)	80
Other	95



Almost 20% of respondents advised that they currently work in either private nursing homes or a private home care service.

What county do you work in?

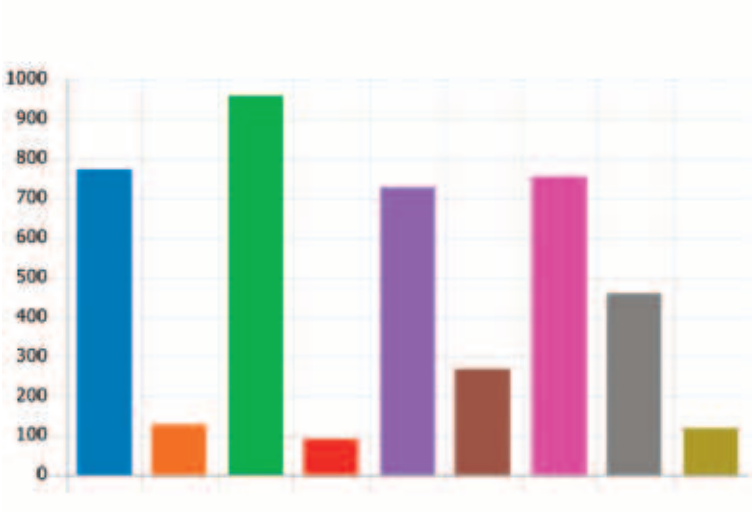
Carlow	12
Cavan	29
Clare	24
Cork	122
Donegal	61
Dublin	314
Galway	116
Kerry	49
Kildare	29
Kilkenny	19
Laois	6
Leitrim	15
Limerick	55
Longford	6
Louth	43
Mayo	50
Meath	32
Monaghan	14
Offlay	12
Roscommon	21
Sligo	55
Tipperary	38
Waterford	20
Westmeath	14
Wexford	37
Wicklow	15



The Issues

What are your 3 biggest issues in the workplace?

Low pay	771
Access to training	128
Low staffing levels	961
Family reunification	92
Stress	729
Lack of benefits (e.g. pensions, maternity pay etc.)	267
Lack of recognition	754
Unmanageable workload	457
Other	119



In private nursing homes and private home care services, specifically,

- **93%** of respondents said that low pay was one of the biggest issues they faced in the workplace.
- **50%** of respondents said that a lack of benefits (such as contributory pensions, maternity pay etc) was one of the biggest issues they faced in the workplace.
- **49%** of respondents said that low staffing levels was one of the biggest issues they face in the workplace.

[They also cited stress (36%), lack of recognition (35%), unmanageable workloads (18%) and family reunification (11%) as being issues they face in the workplace).

HCAs in private home care and nursing homes should be able to negotiate a national pay deal to get the pay and recognition they deserve?

- Yes 1281
- No 14
- Unsure 110

SIPTU should continue to campaign for a national HCA uniform.

- Yes 1118
- No 84
- Unsure 218

Do you think that the HCA should become a professionally registered grade in Ireland so that they will be recognised for the standard of care they give to their patients?

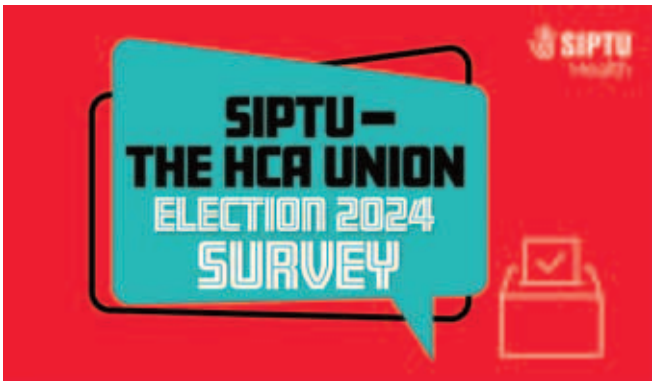
- Yes 1361
- No 18
- Unsure 45

What the HCAs are saying

We care for the sick and aging population of Ireland. Yet the pay received and low staff levels put added strain on workers to get the work done. That's it. There is no time to be with or present with our clients.
HCA, Private Nursing Home, Waterford

More recognition sought from higher colleagues, more training opportunities, allow us to expand our role, team leader positions for HCAs.
HCA, Hospital, Wexford

There is no access to career progression as a HCA. The only training offered is mandatory training. They never encourage courses or further education for HCA's so no chance of diversifying.
HCA, Hospital, Tipperary



HCAs keep people in their own homes and familiar surroundings but there is little or no recognition for the job we do.
HCA, Home Care, Cork

Mileage should be paid in all care companies, not happening in my one. The company send you really far away, with your car and not paying mileage.
HCA, Private Home Care, Dublin

Conclusion

The findings of this survey underscore the pressing need for targeted action to address the challenges faced by health care assistants, particularly those working in private nursing homes and home care settings. The disparities in pay, benefits, and working conditions between private and public sectors highlight systemic inequities that cannot be ignored. These inequities not only undermine the well-being of workers but also compromise the quality of care provided to patients and service users.

SIPTU firmly believes that meaningful change is essential to support and empower health care assistants across all settings. This requires immediate action on three key demands:

1) **Collective Bargaining:** Establishing a formal process for healthcare workers in private nursing homes and home care settings to negotiate pay and conditions collectively. Such a mechanism is critical to ensuring fair and equitable treatment for all workers, regardless of their employment sector.

2) **Safe Staffing Levels:** Implementing mandatory safe staffing levels across all healthcare settings to address the chronic understaffing highlighted by respondents. This is vital not only for the well-being of HCAs but also for the delivery of safe, high-quality care.

3) **Professional Registration for HCAs:** Introducing a professional registration system for health care assistants to formally recognise their skills and contributions. This would be a significant step toward securing the respect and acknowledgment that HCAs deserve within the healthcare system; and would also benefit the people in their care.

The voices captured in this survey send a clear message: health care assistants are ready for change, and the system must rise to meet their expectations. SIPTU is committed to leading this effort, ensuring that the essential contributions of HCAs are recognised, valued, and adequately supported.

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