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The First Ninety Days: Staffing Risk Every Senior Housing Investor Should Understand

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Four in ten direct-care hires leave within 90 days. Drawing on the Activated Insights Workforce Index, Fall 2026, this paper explains where turnover concentrates, why it matters to investment performance, and what to ask operators about it.

Staffing is the largest controllable cost in senior housing and the closest link to resident experience. Its biggest risk is concentrated in one role and one window: direct care, in the first ninety days.

71.9%
annual all-staff turnover in assisted living (64.4% in skilled nursing)

~40%
of all departures occur within 90 days of hire, in both segments

92.8%
annual direct-care turnover in assisted living (80.5% in skilled nursing)

9.7 pts
typical retention gap between communities inside one assisted living operator

1. Why staffing is an investment issue

In senior housing, labor is typically the largest operating expense and the factor residents and families notice first. High turnover means more recruiting, more overtime, more agency staff and less continuity of care. For investors in operating structures, those costs flow directly into results.

The Activated Insights Workforce Index, Fall 2026, covers skilled nursing facilities and assisted living communities across the United States. Its findings show that the problem is less a general shortage than a specific, early and measurable pattern.

2. What the Fall 2026 Index found

Exhibit 1. Key workforce measures, Fall 2026

Measure	Skilled nursing	Assisted living
All-staff annual turnover	64.4%	71.9%
Direct-care annual turnover	80.5%	92.8%
Management annual turnover	39.6%	39.9%
Direct-care hires gone by day 30	21.3%	20.0%
Direct-care hires gone by day 90	41.0%	39.3%
Direct-care hires still employed at one year	29.8%	27.7%
Share of all departures within 90 days of hire	39.9%	40.7%

Source: Activated Insights Workforce Index, Fall 2026, Skilled Nursing and Assisted Living editions.

Assisted living turnover has fallen to 71.9% from a late-2024 peak of 84.6%, while skilled nursing has held steady at about 64% for two years. Management turnover is nearly identical in both. The difference between the sectors, and most of the movement over time, is on the front line.

Exhibit 2. Direct-care hires gone by day 90



Source: Activated Insights Workforce Index, Fall 2026. Selected roles.

3. One role, one window, two workforces

- **One role** — direct care accounts for 50.1% of first-year departures in skilled nursing and 40.0% in assisted living. A point of direct-care retention moves the organization’s number more than any other role.
- **One window** — of direct-care hires who leave within a year, 58.4% in skilled nursing and 54.4% in assisted living are gone before day 90.
- **Two workforces** — in assisted living, 43.6% of staff have under a year of service while 25.4% have three years or more. People who get through the early months often stay for years.

The Index’s surveys point to what matters early. New hires who reported a friend at work by day 30 were about 12 points more likely to stay; those whose expectations were met at days 60 to 90 about 20 points; and those who understood the mission by day 90 about 23 to 25 points.

4. Operators, and communities, differ

Between operators, one-year retention of new hires ranges from 29.8% to 39.7% at the quartile marks in assisted living, and from 29.4% to 45.9% in skilled nursing. Inside a typical multi-site operator, stronger and weaker communities differ by 9.7 points in assisted living and 11.4 points in skilled nursing.

> *For investors, the lesson is that operator selection matters, but so does community-level management. A strong portfolio average can hide a struggling building.*

5. Why turnover numbers are hard to compare

Turnover has no single definition. An operator that reports only voluntary turnover among permanent employees, then compares it with the Index's all-staff figures, is comparing unlike numbers and will look better than it is. Skilled nursing operators also file federal Payroll-Based Journal staffing data, a third measure.

The early warning signs also live in different places. A new caregiver may tell a survey tool she is struggling; the supervisor who controls her schedule may never see it; and the regional leader accountable for turnover sees it a quarter later, after most early departures have already happened.

6. Questions to ask an operator

1. **How do you define turnover**, and does it include agency, part-time and involuntary departures?
2. **What is direct-care retention at day 30, day 90 and one year**, by community?
3. **How large is the gap** between your best and weakest communities?
4. **What happens in a new hire's first month** — a stable unit, a consistent preceptor and a schedule that does not move?
5. **Who sees early warning signs**, such as overtime concentration, open shifts or pay errors, and how quickly?

Good answers do not guarantee lower costs or better outcomes. They show whether an operator measures the risk that matters most and can act on it in time.

Sources

1. Activated Insights, Workforce Index, Fall 2026: 236,896 employees, 2,562 communities and facilities, 202 operators. https://activatedinsights.com/workforce-index/

2. SeniorCRE, The First Ninety Days (November 14, 2026), the source research for this adaptation. https://seniorcre.com/whitepapers/the-first-ninety-days

3. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Payroll-Based Journal staffing data. https://data.cms.gov/quality-of-care/payroll-based-journal-daily-nurse-staffing

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