



**Determining the Superior Staffing Method in Assisted Living Facilities:  
Ratio versus Acuity-Based Staffing**

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This research brief summarizes a study completed by Tera Finley to fulfill requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. OPAL highlights some such projects when the research findings are likely to be of particular interest to various constituencies. The original report may be found at [this link](#).

Approximately 2.5 million older adults live in a long-term care facility in the United States and one million of those are living in assisted living facilities, which includes memory care facilities, a subcategory of assisted living ([Kinsella, 2010](#)). Despite being a growing industry and popular choice of long-term care for older adults, assisted living facilities in the United States do have documented issues of concern, especially neglect and abandonment of residents due to dangerous and irresponsibly low facility caregiver staffing levels. A factor likely contributing to these problems is the fact that there are not standardized regulations for assisted living facilities. Rather than being federally regulated, assisted living facilities are regulated at the state level and therefore there is a wide variety of regulations for this key form of long-term care in United States. There are two main approaches to assisted living staffing regulations in the United States -- required staff-to-resident staffing ratios in which the number of residents in the facility determines the minimum number of staff and acuity-based staffing where facilities may individually determine what the acuity (i.e., level of care needs) of their resident population is at any given time and then determine the appropriate amount of staffing based on that acuity level. As of October 2018, only 12 states use a required staffing ratio of some kind to regulate their assisted living facility staffing levels and the other 38 states do not have a required ratio and instead leave staffing decisions ultimately in the hands the facility administrators using acuity-based staffing practices ([LTCCC, 2023](#))

*This study was conducted to assess which approach to staffing—ratios or acuity-based staffing—best ensures adequate assisted living facility caregiver staffing levels as measured by the number and type of violations a facility receives in a year from the state long-term care licensing department. Random samples of assisted living facilities were collected from two states, one that required staffing ratios (New Mexico) and the other that allows for acuity-based*

staffing (Oregon). Violation data was grouped into three categories of violations: abuse, unsafe environment, and unsatisfactory care. Abuse violations were also grouped into the seven types of abuse. Four other facility characteristics were controlled for: size (i.e., total number of residents able to be housed in the facility), profit status (i.e., non-profit vs. for-profit), Medicaid certification status, and rurality. A year's worth of data was collected and the year 2019 was selected for this study since it was the last full, 12-month year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which likely caused unique impacts to long-term care data. Negative binomial regression analysis was used to compare the effects of staffing approach and types of facility violation.

The regression analysis did not find a statistically significant relationship between staffing approach and total number of violations, but it did find statistically significant relationships between staffing approach and each type of facility violation. The presence of a required staffing ratio reduced the expected number of abuse violations a facility would receive but increased the expected number of unsafe environment and unsatisfactory care violations. The expected rise in these latter two violation types, however, was determined to likely be due to causes other than staffing approach type. *Analyses of specific types of abuse show that neglect comprises 80% of all abuse violations, with the presence of a required staffing ratio significantly decreasing the expected number of neglect violations in an assisted living facility. This is the key finding of the study because, of all the violation types, neglect most accurately speaks to the issue of the assisted living facilities having insufficient staffing levels. Therefore, because required ratios reduce the expected number of abuse and neglect violations, the results of this study do ultimately show that ratios are the superior staffing method for assisted living facilities.* In light of this finding, this paper argues in favor of federally mandating required staff-to-resident ratios to keep assisted living residents safe, especially those in memory care facilities.