Howard, who is a home health aide, takes care of her grandmother full time.

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Tiffany Howard was raised by her grandmother Martha Turner, who made her have perfect attendance in school and told her, "Don't have a baby until you're married."

Howard, 35, is still hoping to get married, but she listened to her grandmother and has no children.

When Howard got out of high school, she went to work in a nursing home. She likes old people, and she thinks being raised by her grandmother has a lot to do with that.

When the health of her grandmother, now 89, began to fail, Howard got an apartment across the street in South Philadelphia. She now cares for her grandmother seven days a week.

But on Monday, Howard will be absent. She's heading to Washington to attend the White House Conference on Aging, held every 10 years.

Howard hopes to meet the president, who will address the conference, but is honored and thrilled to talk about an issue so important to her and an aging nation: living wages, benefits, and training for home health aides.

She and her grandmother represent two important trends. First is the push in Pennsylvania and across the country to make it easier for Americans to receive care in their homes rather than nursing homes.

Second, increasingly, people who receive care at home are hiring family to provide it.

Turner, who can no longer walk and has been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, is sick and poor enough to be eligible for a nursing home and have Medicaid - taxpayers - pay for it. The average annual cost to Medicaid in Philadelphia for a nursing home is about $80,000.
Medicaid pays Howard $12.83 an hour for 49 hours a week - $629 a week, $32,700 annually - to care for her grandmother at home. (Total costs to Medicaid come to $19.52 an hour for Howard with taxes and other costs.)

She is paid for seven hours a day, but says she is there all the time, beginning at 5 a.m.

"There's no on and off," Howard said the other day while preparing her grandmother's lunch. "I only get paid for a certain amount of hours. Everything else is out of the love of my heart. She raised me, gave me my values, and now it's my turn to take care of her."

Last month, Howard attended a work session at the White House in advance of the conference, and brought her grandmother. When a White House staffer walked by, her grandmother commented on her skirt, uttering, "Too short."

Everyone laughed, Howard said. Now she just shakes her head: "Oh, Grandma."

Howard does not work for any agency, but directly for her grandmother, a trend known as consumer-directed care.

Between 30 percent and 40 percent of the elderly and disabled people in Philadelphia eligible for Medicaid-funded care at home employ a family member as caregiver, said Steve Touzell, vice president for long-term care with the Philadelphia Corp. for Aging.

(About 900 leaders in aging services - including members of the Philadelphia Corp. for Aging - will attend the annual meeting next week in Philadelphia of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. Worker issues are a hot topic.)

Howard says she loves her job and only wishes the pay and benefits were better. She gets no vacation or sick pay.

She has joined the United Home Care Workers of Pennsylvania, which nominated her for the White House Conference and which is trying to organize home health workers. Howard will go to Washington with her sister, Terica Martin, also a home health worker.

The other afternoon, after lunch, Howard wheeled her grandmother back to her house for a nap.

Turner has nine steep front steps that she goes up and down daily. She reached up, grabbed two hand rails installed by the Philadelphia Corp. for Aging, and began her climb. Behind her, Howard helped and steadied her.

"Come on, Grandma," Howard said. "Put your other foot up."

Inside, ready for a nap, Turner asked for a kiss. As Howard leaned in, her grandmother said, "Thank you for all the help."