

Posted on Mon, Apr. 18, 2011

More businesses offer in-home care for the elderly

By DIANE STAFFORD
The Kansas City Star

The solution to growing old in one's own home may be to invite strangers in.

And the industry designed to provide those "strangers" is booming.

The frail-elderly population in the Kansas City area already provides a bumper crop of clients for a mushrooming collection of in-home caregivers. And growth prospects are fertile.

Chris Fay, owner of Benefits of Home-Senior Care, estimated about 90 companies in the Kansas City area provide some level of "private-duty" in-home care, many of them recent franchised arrivals.

Some of them are members of the Kansas City Regional Health Care Association, concerned with nursing and private-duty care plus the equipment needed to help people age in their own homes.

It's an industry riding on a demographic wave and personal preference.

"If people can be safe and comfortable, they don't want to go anywhere," Fay said.

But challenges lie in the cost of visiting care — Is \$18 to \$24 an hour affordable? — and compatibility — Can the hired caregiver and the client get along?

Just three hours a day can cost \$2,000 a month, though providers note that's at least half of the cost for similar care in an assisted-living center.

Steve Weinrich, owner of Home Helpers, said business would grow even more if Medicare covered the in-home services his company provided. But most in-home care is "private pay" — for the companionship, cleaning, meals, errand-running or medication dispensing that homebound seniors need.

Many providers require a minimum commitment, often three or four hours a day per client. Some providers are moving toward bundling clients in geographic areas and within independent-living centers to reduce travel times and minimum-hour requirements.

"But the reality is that if a caregiver drives 20 minutes each way, and is paid \$11 an hour, they don't want to do a job for less than three or four hours," said Randy Block, president of Enhanced Home Care.

That financial reality points out another challenge in the home care arena: Although elderly clients view the services as costly, the caregivers are relatively low-paid.

"Quality caregivers who enjoy working with old people and can communicate well are the key to making this business work," Block said.

Kelly Loeb, manager of the KC Caregiver Support Line operated by the Shepherd's Center, sees the need for and resistance to in-home care.

"First of all, some services simply may not exist exactly in the form needed," Loeb said.

"Secondly, there are many people who can't afford available programs or don't qualify for free aging services. Money more and more these days is the big barrier.

"But the third barrier is that they don't want strangers in their home. I have to tell them that you're going to need to get over that."

Adult day care: An option to consider

Kansas Citian Laurelle O'Leary was in the vanguard of people who realized that adult caregivers needed a break.

In 1976, she began her ongoing crusade for a senior version of child day care — professional, organized care for seniors and disabled people who are mobile but who can't stay home alone during the day.

There now are about two dozen such licensed operations serving the Kansas City area.

"These are vital for the elderly and for their caregivers who need help," O'Leary says.

The service isn't cheap. An adult day care center that provides health services as well as activities can easily cost \$70 a day.

Less expensive recreational venues for nondisabled seniors who don't require medical assistance are located in many community and recreational centers throughout the area, such as Don Bosco, El Centro and the Shepherd's Centers.

Information about licensed adult day care centers can be obtained from the Kansas Department on Aging and from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services.

Information also is available from the National Adult Day Services Association and from the National Alliance for Caregiving.

© 2011 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.

<http://www.kansascity.com>