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REGULATION STRUGGLES TO KEEP UP WITH RAPID GROWTH IN CAREGIVING INDUSTRY

Striving for higher home care standards

State considers wider oversight, awards voluntary license honoring high quality

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For more than two years now, Evangeline Ligon has been a live-in caregiver for Frank and Fran Jenkins -- helping the Charlotte couple, both 87, with daily activities, and, as Ligon puts it, "loving up" on them.

In that time, Ligon has become a treasured member of the Jenkins family. She's also a front-line worker in home care, an industry that's booming as the nation ages.

In North Carolina, the number of licensed home care agencies grew about 36 percent, to 1,745, from July 2003 to January 2007, when the state instituted a moratorium on most new licenses.

The industry's rapid growth has raised concerns about quality, with the state fielding a growing number of cases in the past five years involving fraud and theft by personal care workers or agencies.

It has also prompted a push -- by both the state and the home care industry -- to raise standards.

In 2005, legislators passed tougher regulations for agencies that provide hands-on care, such as bathing and dressing. They're now considering licensing businesses that offer companion and sitter services.

State officials also hope many agencies will voluntarily seek a prestigious new license that requires higher standards. So far, just two N.C. home care agencies -- one in Avery County and Ligon's employer, Charlotte's Partners In Care -- have earned the license, known as the North Carolina New Organizational Vision Award, or NC NOVA.

Hiring and keeping good caregivers is the toughest part of the home care business, says Don Olin, who owns Partners In Care with his wife, Sally. Pay is typically \$9 or \$10 an hour. The work is hard, and turnover is a huge problem.

That's why the Olins sought the NC NOVA license. The program aims to raise training standards and job satisfaction of front-line workers such as Ligon.

"In the long run, happy employees mean happy consumers," Sally Olin says.

`Blessed' to have good help

The Jenkins family found Partners In Care after cancer and chemotherapy left Frank Jenkins, a retired Duke Power senior vice president, weak and unsteady. Ligon's help has allowed them to remain independent, in their own home. And it has eased their children's minds. "We all feel like we have one of our family representing us here," says Jan Pendleton, the couple's daughter.

"It's been wonderful," Fran Jenkins says. "We're very blessed to have been matched with her."

Like many people, the couple pay for their own care, though Medicaid will pay for personal care services for low-income seniors.

These services don't require years of training. Caregivers must master skills such as bathing bedridden clients or transferring them from bed to wheelchair. They often help groom and dress clients, fix meals, do laundry.

But supervision and regulation are crucial, senior-care experts say, because caregivers often work alone with elderly clients, which leaves the clients vulnerable to theft or abuse.

In 2005, N.C. legislators approved new regulations aimed to help prevent such problems. Among those rules: tougher licensing standards and state inspections every three years. Until then, agencies had often been inspected only when the state got a complaint.

In January 2007, legislators placed the moratorium on new licenses, now set to expire at the end of 2008, to give the state time to hire more regulators and inspect existing agencies.

Azzie Conley, who oversees home care for the state's Division of Health Service Regulation, says the new rules were overdue. They now require agency owners to get training before they can get a license. Previously, Conley says, state officials were seeing applicants who lacked adequate training.

The stepped-up inspections have resulted in more sanctions against agencies. Next year, the N.C. Senate is likely to take up a bill requiring licenses for agencies that offer companion services, such as cooking or cleaning, but not hands-on care. The N.C. House has already passed the measure.

Such private-pay agencies are a fast-growing segment of the home care industry, says Tim Rogers, who heads the Association for Home and Hospice Care of North Carolina.

His group backs the measure. More than a dozen states already license such services. "It's a growing trend," Rogers says. "We're working to raise the level of professionalism."

What to Ask When Choosing a Home Care Agency

- Can I have references from other clients?
- Do you do national criminal and driving record background checks as well as drug screenings?
- How often do you monitor the caregiver in the client's home? (The best agencies may make visits every 30 days.)
- How are emergencies handled after normal business hours?
- Does the agency conduct a home visit before starting the service? (It should.)
- Will my family member receive care from the same caregiver or team of caregivers?

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