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Staying at home with a little help

Home care, already one of the fastest-growing industries in the U.S., is expected to flourish as baby boomers age.

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Caregiver Cal Adkins has stayed up nights monitoring a retired female pilot, a Pearl Harbor survivor and former police captain, all in their Charlotte homes.

Home care jobs, which range from helping a patient to bed to providing physical therapy, are among the fastest-growing jobs in the country. Nationally, the number of home care service employees grew by about 200,000, or 26 percent, between 1996 and 2006.

In a recent report, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics labels personal home care aides who offer basic help, and home health aides who offer medical assistance, as the second- and third-fastest growing occupations. Both are projected to double by 2016, as baby boomers age, and employ more than 3 million people.

Further driving the trend: Technology and better health practices keep people alive longer, and more seniors are opting to stay in their homes rather than move to nursing or assisted-living facilities. It's also a lot cheaper.

Most clients pay for their own care, which averages between \$11 and \$15 an hour for basic services but can range higher for more intense medical care. Medicaid and Medicare may cover some of the costs. In fewer cases, private insurance may also cover some costs.

“People have worked all their lives and have lived in the same houses,” Adkins said. “They want to die in that home or stay there as long as they can.”

Today, some 100,000 people in North Carolina are working in home care jobs. And the demand will only grow. By 2030, North Carolina's 2.3 million baby boomers will all have reached the traditional retirement age, according to state reports.

Care providers run from small businesses to large health care companies. Roberta Farnum, who owns the Charlotte and Huntersville branches of the Home Instead Senior Care franchise, said her employees care for 150 to 175 people at any given time.

Carolinas Healthcare Systems, meanwhile, owns seven home health care agencies and two home medical-equipment companies, serving between 13,000 and 15,000 clients. Those operate under the name Healthy@Home.

Happier at home

Without home care services, Gladys Lavitan, 92, would be recovering from a broken pelvic bone in a nursing facility. Thanks to her live-in caregiver, Rebecca Littlejohn, Lavitan can remain in her Myers Park home of more than 50 years as she heals and receives physical therapy from another care source.

“With Rebecca's help, I can get from one room to another,” Lavitan said. The two go to temple services together and visit bookstores. Littlejohn cooks for her client, helps with daily activities and watches Lavitan's dog, Natasha.

North Carolina's in-home care options include private, private nonprofit or public agencies. The Division of Health Service Regulation licenses some 1,700 home care companies, which receive state and grant funding and offer four levels of personal-care assistance, such as bathing and eating.

In-home aides are not required to have a set number of training hours, but must be “competent to perform client care tasks or activities to which they are assigned,” according to the DHSR.

North Carolina's 200 home health agencies, which are state-certified and receive Medicaid reimbursement, provide short-term medical assistance. These services are recommended by the patient's physician and performed by a certified nurse aide.

Beginning in 2010, companion and sitter service agencies will also require a state license.

Tim Rogers, chief executive officer of the Association for Home and Hospice Care, said N.C. agencies served 425,000 clients.

“In-home care is growing and needs to be to meet the needs of the elderly, senior and disabled population,” he said.

Under new standards for home care companies, directors must meet a more strict set of qualifications, and those interested in opening a home care agency must attend an instructional class.

Complaints up slightly

Complaints against agencies average about 300 a year and are increasing slightly, Horton said. Most are filed by clients and involve a caregiver arriving to the home late or not performing all their tasks.

The DHSR is responsible for investigating agencies and taking proper action based on the allegation. Action can range from making required changes to a license revocation. For 2008 and so far into 2009, the division has revoked two home care licenses.

“Typically, we don't resort to revocation unless we believe the provider is either unwilling or unable to correct identified problems,” Horton said.

The Healthcare Personnel Registry Section handles complaints against individual caregivers. Investigations are conducted, and if the aide misappropriated property, abused or committed fraud against a client, his or her name is placed on a registry, which bans him or her from working for another health care entity.

Horton said 44 such cases have been proven this year. Last year 78 names were placed on the list, down from 112 in 2007.

Sally Olin, owner of Partners in Care, a member of The Senior's Choice, opened her agency to service Mecklenburg, Union, Cabarrus, and Rowan counties in 2003. She said her clients pay an average of \$18 per hour.

Even with the economic downturn, some agency owners said they haven't experienced a sharp decline in clientele. Olin, whose business has grown about 20 percent every year, said her client numbers never decreased.

“The phone kind of slowed down, but we didn't lose any clients,” she said. “Now we're increasing again because the need isn't going away.”