

Homecare can help those who wish to live at home

For the most part, seniors want to stay in their own homes and remain independent, even if a health problem arises. Homecare and home health care offer ways they can do that. There is a difference between the two.

Home health care requires a doctor's prescription in order to be covered by insurance or Medicare. A person must also be homebound and need the services of a registered nurse or physical, occupational or speech therapist. Medicare's home health care benefit requires the provider to be Medicare-certified and licensed by the state.

Homecare is for those who do not require skilled care, but need assistance with bathing and grooming, light housekeeping, laundry, cooking, shopping, medication reminders, errands, etc.

You can go through an agency or hire a person on your own for both kinds of care. But, before you decide what to do, it is best to give consideration to what your needs are.

Your doctor may say you need help and order specific care. A family member may be concerned about your safety or whether you're eating properly. Or you might realize some things are getting more difficult to do. The more specific you can be about your needs, the better.

Perhaps you need a registered nurse to manage a medical condition or dispense medication. Maybe you need help bathing or transferring from bed to wheelchair. Or, perhaps, you need someone who comes once a week to help with household chores and laundry or to prepare meals, provide transportation or take you to a doctor's appointment.

Once you've determined the level of care, figure out how often you need it. Some need only a few hours a day or week, while others may need round-the-clock care.

Whatever your need, the goal is to reach your optimum health level as soon as possible. Homecare and home health care can help you age in place – your own place – rather than in a care facility.

Going through an agency

There can be several advantages to using a home care agency. For one, the agency is responsible for hiring the homecare aides and making sure that the aide assigned to you has the skills to provide the care/services you need. In addition, make sure the agency has a plan in place to assess your situation and coordinate your care.

So, as you contact different agencies, ask the following:

- ▶ How long have they been in business? Are they licensed, bonded and insured? Are all of these current? Are the homecare aides insured and bonded? Does the agency accept insurance?
- ▶ What is the minimum time? Two hours, four hours? Maximum time? 24 hours? Can the agency respond to unexpected needs 24 hours a day?
- ▶ Since you pay the agency (not the homecare aide) ask about its hiring process. In addition to the

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required Washington State Patrol background check, are any other background checks conducted? Ask about their policy regarding reference checks.

▶ Homecare aides are required to participate in state-mandated training. Does the agency require the aides to pass a written and/or skills test and does it offer and/or require additional training?

▶ Reliability is important. How does the agency deal with a situation when the aide does not show up as expected? This is particularly important for those who receive care from a registered nurse or therapist.

▶ There is also a tax issue. When the homecare aide is employed by an agency, the agency takes care of employee taxes such as social security. The agency's liability insurance also takes care of work-related injuries.

Another offering from some agencies is nurse delegation services. By law, under strict guidelines, RNs can, with client consent, delegate certain tasks that were previously required by an RN to certified nursing assistants. The nurse teaches the aides how to administer medication, check glucose levels, give insulin injections, change colostomy bags and apply prescription creams. The nurse must continually supervise and go back into the home to follow up on change of doctors' orders.

Nurse delegation provides a safety net since it would be very expensive to have an RN come every time you need this kind of care.

Hiring on your own

You may prefer to hire a homecare or home health care worker on your own. Although you probably will find someone who is capable and compassionate, remember that just as with an agency, this is a business arrangement. Here are some things to consider:

▶ You will be granting the person access to your home so be cautious whether you put an ad in the paper, go online, call a nurse registry or get recommendations from friends. Do not include any personal information; just provide a phone number.

▶ Write a job description so you can tell callers what you need. Include whether the person needs to be able to lift a wheelchair and what hours and days you require help. Know how much you can pay so you don't waste time with people who charge a higher rate than you can afford.

▶ Ask all applicants to provide a resume, names and phone numbers of two or three work and character references, photo identification and social security number.

▶ When you interview a candidate, take note of promptness, grooming, ability to listen, etc. Keep things friendly, but professional. You're looking for compatibility and capability. Ask about his/her experience and any special training he/she has had. Ask why he/she wants the job and whether transportation will be a problem.

▶ Talk about vacations and time off. Because you must report the aides earnings to the IRS, discuss how taxes will be handled. If you're hiring a skilled care worker, make sure he/she has the appropriate insurance.

▶ It is crucial that you do a reference check. You and the applicant may hit it off, but you should always check references to find out what the person's responsibilities were and if he/she is reliable.

▶ A criminal background check is imperative. You will have to pay for it, but it will be money well spent. You want to be as assured as possible that you will be safe with the person you're bringing into your home.

If you hire a homecare aide, insist on a 30-day trial period which will give you a chance to see how things go. Also provide, in writing, a job description, salary and pay schedule, amount of time for breaks, and a vacation and termination policy. Both of you should sign it and receive a copy. You might also want to also give a copy to a trusted friend or family member.

Regardless if you are working with a homecare agency or hiring an individual on your own, many problems and misunderstandings can be avoided by making everything clear from the start.

And finally, whether you are working with an agency or an individual, it's important to have good communication. If there's something that is bothering you, speak up. And encourage your homecare aide to do the same.

Once the air is cleared, you might find you really want to continue together.

However, termination should be immediate if there is theft or abuse. Contact the police and adult family services the moment either occurs.