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Health of In-Home Care Industry Holds Strong

As Population Ages, More Businesses Offering Comfort at Clients' Homes

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Mary Jane Fee hasn't tasted a hot fudge sundae in at least two years.

Since a doctor diagnosed her with type 2 diabetes two years ago, she has been more diligent about watching her weight and monitoring her blood sugar levels.

But if Fee, 84, starts to venture off into the grocery store's snack food aisle, she has someone to help her. Part-time caregiver Carolyn Cheung accompanies Fee when she stocks up on food. She also reminds Fee to take her daily medications, 12 prescriptions in all, takes her puppy for daytime walks and drives her home from swim aerobics classes.



Right at Home franchise owner Marc Gray, left, discusses care of Jeff Fee's mother, Mary Jane Fee, at her La Jolla home.

Fee is among a growing number of elderly Americans who prefer in-home care to a nursing home or other short- or long-term care facility.

The long-term care insurance industry paid out \$3.5 billion in benefits to individuals last year, according to the American Association for Long-Term Care Insurance, a trade group for agents.

Stay-At-Home Care

Forty-three percent of claims paid in 2007 were attributed to home care, while 33 percent were for assisted living and 24 percent covered nursing home care the association said.

San Diego has sprouted hundreds of businesses dedicated to providing home-based care and companionship.

Those businesses include Ohio-based Comfort Keepers, which has more than 550 franchises worldwide and a handful in San Diego; ComForcare, which has offices in La Jolla and Vista and operates 100 franchises nationwide; and Right at Home Inc. of Nebraska.

Right at Home founder Allen Hager says the business has targeted San Diego as one of its growth spots. Right at Home operates two franchises in the county and plans to add eight more. The company operates more than 150 nationwide and plans to add 80 more locations this year.

It provides assistance to seniors, people with disabilities and those recovering from surgery.

For family members stretched thin, or seniors whose family members live out of state, Right at Home sends caregivers to seniors for in-home care a few hours a day. Services include light housekeeping, transportation, bathing and meal planning.

Right at Home also tailors its services to meet specific needs, such as Alzheimer's disease or dementia care. It employs a mix of certified nursing assistants and unlicensed professionals who provide friendly reminders to take medicine but aren't qualified to administer drugs or provide nursing care.

Right at Home charges between \$19 and \$21 an hour, depending on the level of skill required.

Entrepreneurs typically need about \$45,000 to \$77,000, depending on location, to start up a Right at Home franchise, according to its Web site.

Right at Home grew its franchises by almost 30 percent this year. The company said it expects to exceed \$100 million in revenue system-wide for 2008.

Filling A Void

Hager, a former hospital administrator, says he noticed a need for long-term, personalized care that was lacking in existing health care systems.

"We have a situation that's really unprecedented in history, if you look at the number of people living long lives," he said. "Many are living into their 80s and 90s now, but the fact is that some people are living with some level of disability and they need help dealing with it."

Population projections released this year by the U.S. Census Bureau show that almost one in five Americans, or about 70 million people, will reach the age of 65 by 2030. Today, there are 270,000 people living in San Diego older than 65 and 40,000 older than 85.

"That number will more than double in the next 10 to 15 years and I think you are beginning to see that their needs are changing," Hager said.

Right at Home franchise owner Marc Gray, whose business serves 40 clients in San Diego County, says he's noticed more families turning to in-home care for their loved ones.

"Most of the cases we get are someone's been receiving care, although unofficially, usually from a spouse, but they get to the point where the amount of care is just too much to handle," he said.

Caregivers undergo background checks and brief interviews that seek to match their interests with those of their clients.

"Sometimes we get it the first time and sometimes we don't," said Gray, adding that the service will quickly correct any mistakes and find the right pairing for clients.

Fee's son Jeff, who lives minutes from her La Jolla home, says he became overburdened between working full-time, caring for a family of his own and keeping close track of his mother's daily medical routine. He says Cheung has provided an extra hand during the daytime while he works.

"It's been proof in the pudding because, prior to that, we saw inconsistencies and there were peaks and valleys with regard to her blood sugar," he said.