

HEALTH

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Altoona Mirror

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Helping at home

Caregivers work to bring hands-on health care to homebound patients

BY MARY HALEY

For the Mirror

Lois Miller of Altoona wants to get back to her summer camp in Glendale this summer, and with the help of her home health case manager Julie Kling, it's looking good for Lois. "Just since we've started talking about it, she's perked up," said Kling, who's a registered nurse.

Lois, 65, started having a series of health issues last year, once she returned from the camp last summer. Her husband, Bob, who is her primary caregiver, said ever since his wife got sick, she's been in and out of the hospital.

"She's spent every holiday since Memorial Day in the hospital," he said.

Lois is definitely not a fan of the hospital or an assisted living facility, both places that she might have had to go if she didn't have Julie to care for her at home, she and Bob said.

"I feel much better at home, much more comfortable," Lois said. "You get a different attitude being at home."

Kling works for Home Nursing Agency Healthcare, one of several agencies in the region that offer home health care that can enable people to

recover from surgery or handle chronic medical conditions in their home, agency personnel said. Often the agencies can help people avoid going to assisted living facilities and shorten hospital stays, they said.

Another area program that also helps is Blair Senior Services, which has 28 programs to assist senior citizens.

The group acts as an intermediary service to connect people to appropriate programs that provide the right services for them, such as meals or personal hygiene help.

Sometimes families, like the Millers, need help from more than one agency to meet all of their needs.

In addition to the nursing services from Home Nursing, they are also enrolled in the Caregiver Support

Program through Blair Senior Services. They receive reimbursement for consumable supplies and hired helpers who relieve Bob. In addition, the program provides benefits counseling and caregiving education.

"When an older adult is in need of assistance, it is often the people closest to them who are called upon to

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Lois Miller

► **INSIDE:** Home care has aided woman's parents / 8

provide the majority of the care that the person needs," said Melissa Weakland, the long term living program manager at Blair Senior Services.

"Although it is often a very rewarding experience, the role of the caregiver can be physically and emotionally taxing at times."

There are requirements for the program, such as that the caregiver must provide care on a daily basis and that the care must be hands-on care, Weakland said. Reimbursement is for care, services and supplies that supplement that which is already given by the caregiver, she said.

Reimbursement is on a sliding scale based on the income of all family members, and special funding is available for home modifications, she said.

As Kim Helsel, public relations and communications associate at Home Nursing said, the primary concern of all the agencies is the patient and their families.

"All of the local agencies work together because we want to keep people in their homes where they feel most comfortable," she said. "It really does take a village."

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Photo for the Mirror by Mary Haley

Home Nursing Agency Healthcare nurse Julie Kling wraps the leg of Lois Miller while Lois' husband, Bob, watches.

HOME: Nurses get to know patients better

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Kling, who once worked in a hospital setting at Hershey Medical Center, said she prefers working as a home health care nurse because she feels like she has a better chance to get to know her patients. She said when she makes her daily rounds, she spends on the average about one hour with each person, not only checking their medical condition, but talking to them about their personal lives if they want to talk about that.

"You're in their home, you get to know them, their families, what their goals are," she said.

Kling said she is able to maintain a flow of information to and from doctors about her patients' conditions, which is important for the patients' health.

"You're an advocate for your patients," she said. "I'm constantly communicating with the doctors about my patients."

Kling said she's noticed significant changes in home health care since she started working in the field. She said technology has allowed both herself and caregivers to do more things at home. For example, now she can do her own blood tests on patients in their home, saving them a trip to the hospital, she said.

"Just within the past five years, things have continued to grow so much," she said.

As agency representatives stressed, the goal is to help people stay in their homes as long as possible and avoid going into assisted-living facilities. Blair Senior Services is also the service coordinator for the Aging Waiver program, not only in Blair but in Cambria and Centre counties, Weakland said.

The program that currently has 400 people and is paid for through medical assistance money helps them stay in their homes as

long as possible by receiving everything from nursing care to meals, she said.

"The Aging Waiver program continues to grow in popularity as many people are choosing to stay at home instead of seeking care in a nursing facility," Weakland said.

The Home Nursing agency offers in-home health care services to people in 11 counties, such as Blair and surrounding counties and beyond to Indiana, Somerset, Fulton and Centre counties, said Janie Christner, vice president of Home Health Care for the Agency. Home Nursing is owned by UPMC Community Provider Services, she said.

Not all Home Nursing employees, most of whom are full time, are nurses, Christner said. Some are physical, occupational and speech therapists while others are nurse's aides and social workers, who help in a variety of ways. One way they help is to assist older people when they have to fill out forms if they do have to move from their home to an assisted living facility, Christner said.

"Our social workers get involved in a multitude of different things," she said.

But as with the other representatives of home health care, Christner, who has worked for Home Nursing for more than 30 years, said she has seen many changes in her field over the years but the mission hasn't wavered. The goal of her agency is to "be the eyes and ears" of the doctor as patients recover in their home, she said. Most agency patients are covered by insurance or Medicare, she said.

"The length of hospital stays has shortened significantly in recent years," she said. "That means that people are coming home still very ill, so we need to do a lot of things for them at home to help them recover."

Home Nursing Agency

Address: 201 Chestnut Ave., Altoona, PA 16601

Hours: 24/7

Phone: 800-445-6262

Website: www.homenursingagency.com

Top officer: Philip Freeman, president

Started in central Pennsylvania: 1968

Products or services: Home health care, hospice care and grief support, behavioral health services for children and adults, housing options/programs, private duty home care, Adult Center for Exceptional Learning, Pediatric Home Connection for medically fragile children, early intervention, Healing Patch for grieving children, nurse-family partnership and WIC

Primary market area: Blair, Bedford, Cambria, Centre, Clearfield, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Indiana, Jefferson, Juniata, Mifflin, Somerset and Westmoreland counties

Current number of employees: 824

2014 achievements and awards: HomeCare Elite Top 500, Best of Home Care 2014, UPMC Community Provider Services Process Improvement Award, achieved highest customer satisfaction scores in agency history in fiscal year 2013-14

Plans for 2015: As part of the UPMC health system, we are building new partnerships with physicians and health care professionals from UPMC's Aging Institute, Palliative and Supportive Institute, Disability Resource Center and Western Psychiatric Institute Clinic. Our technology including the electronic health record are increasing communication, efficiency and access to care.

How do you anticipate your business will evolve over the next 10 years? As we face increasing government regulation and declining insurance reimbursements, we are continually evolving to offer quality of care in an efficient way. In the coming decade, we anticipate growth as our government leaders recognize that caring for people in their own homes and communities is cost-efficient and effective.

Interesting fact about your company: Home Nursing Agency serves people of all ages through every stage of life, wherever they call home.



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