

RENO *Sunday* GAZETTE-JOURNAL

RENO, NEVADA • SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2010 • ONLINE @ RGJ.COM

Boom times in home care



PHOTOS BY DAVID B. PARKER/RGJ

Barbie Denmark of Comfort Keepers waters some plants for Mark de Vall on Thursday at his Reno home. A growing number of businesses are tending to in-home nonmedical needs.

Affordability, a preference to remain at home spur growing demand in care-giving industry

By Bill O'Driscoll
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Sitting behind a desk is not Barbie Denmark's idea of work.

A self-described "caring person," Denmark believes she's found her niche: Helping the needy in their own homes.

"At the end of the day, I feel very good about myself," Denmark said of her job at Comfort Keepers in Reno, one of a growing number of businesses that tend to in-home nonmedical needs of the elderly and disabled.

In an age of recession, home care is a thriving industry.

A 2009 survey by the National Private Duty Association showed 83 percent of its members were expecting to increase staff over the next year. Industry officials point to the nation's aging population, rising health care costs and a growing preference to be cared for at home in more comfortable surroundings.

"It is much cheaper to age at home rather than a care facility," said Peter Morris, owner of a BrightStar home-care franchise that opened in Reno this year. "As a startup company, I see only growth ahead."

He's not alone. Other franchises such as Right At Home, Home Instead and Comfort Keepers also are operating in the area.

The industry has caught the attention of the state, too, which in 2008 began licensing and regulating home-care companies under the Bureau of Health Care Quality and Compliance.

What started with 90 companies initially being licensed has grown to 110 now, with about one-quarter of them in Northern Nevada, Bureau Chief Wendy Simons said.

"There's an assumption that taking care of the elderly will be a growing business," she said. "We're seeing a steady increase in companies."

Bob Redding, franchise owner for Comfort Keepers in Reno for the past eight years, cites the aging baby boomer population's demand for more options.

"People avoid nursing homes like the plague," he said. "There's motivation to stay at home, if care can be done at home. It's fulfilling a niche. Eight years ago, there were a couple of companies. The competition is very high now."

Rising demand

Projections from the state demographer's office support the expectations for growth.

This year, nearly 11 percent of Washoe County's population is estimated to be age 65 or older. But by 2020, calculations show that will rise to 13 percent. By 2028, nearly 15 percent will be 65 and older.

While that portends plenty of business ahead for care givers, industry leaders said there's already plenty now.

"It's very steady. There's definitely enough out there," said Heather Matheus, operations manager at the Right At Home franchise in Reno, which has grown to 100 employees in four years. "With BrightStar and others, it's definitely much needed."

That means jobs in a region where unemployment has reached a record 13.6 percent as of July.

Morris oversees a staff of eight so far at BrightStar and is recruiting for another dozen more. He said he expects to have

SENIORS AND THE HOME CARE INDUSTRY

89
Percentage of U.S. seniors in AARP survey indicating they want to age in their own homes for as long as possible

\$69,715
Average annual cost for one nursing home resident

\$36,372
Average annual cost for one assisted living facility resident

\$18,000
Average annual cost for 20 hours a week of companionship home care

71
Percentage of National Private Duty Association members in 2008 expecting an increase in revenues

Source: National Private Duty Association



Denmark cooks a meal for de Vall in his home.

40 employees by year's end. The hours are flexible, he and others say, from part-time to full-time with, in some cases, round-the-clock needs. Hourly salaries range from \$10 to \$30.

"If they want full-time work, we have the hours," Matheus said.

Typically that involves non-medical duties such as bathing, meal preparation, transporting, running errands, help with prescriptions, light housekeeping and sometimes simple companionship.

Job rewards

Norma Feliciano was hired a month ago at BrightStar, and like Denmark at Comfort Keepers, she finds high job satisfaction in helping others.

"Sometimes just being there, talking to them, reading, interacting," Feliciano said. "Knowing that at the end of the day, it's an accomplishment. It's a great feeling. You really don't know how much time they have left to enjoy."

And it's not always senior citizens, she said. Home-care providers also assist younger people, including children, with physical limitations.

One of Denmark's clients is a quadriplegic whom she befriended before she became a home-care provider.

"I was looking for work at the time. I called Comfort Keepers," she said. "He wanted me to be his personal care attendant. It's hard to find work, so it's really worked out really well."

Redding was among those

who has pushed for greater accountability in the industry through legislation, enacted in 2007, regulating nonmedical home-care companies like Comfort Keepers and BrightStar.

They cannot perform injections, draw blood and do other procedures such as physical therapy, which hospitals and nursing homes are certified to do.

But they are required to do background checks on care givers and provide approved training in first aid/CPR, proper lifting techniques, body mechanics, nutrition, record-keeping and other concerns. And they must provide eight hours of ongoing training a year and observe employees on the job at least once a month.

But Redding question the nearly five-fold increase in initial licensing fees to \$6,476 and renewal fees to \$3,238 put in place in August.

"I don't know of many who will pay that just to get into business," he said. "But we're not even making a dent in the Reno senior population."

Simons, a 35-year veteran of the private sector before taking over at the bureau this summer, said under the law her agency regulates home-care providers that employ people and not those operating as sole practitioners.

She said her agency of 90 employees statewide operates solely on fee revenue and she cited industry growth, along with a 2009 legislative mandate to review each company every 18 months, as reasons for the state Board of Health's decision to boost fees.

NON-MEDICAL HOME CARE
COMPANIES LICENSED IN 2008: 90
COMPANIES LICENSED TO DATE: 110

TO LEARN MORE
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