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Advocates for the elderly look for ways to address home care crisis

DESPO BALTOUMAS
THE TELEGRAM
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MALONE — We've all heard about it. The elderly parent who has taken care of his or her spouse for many years until they've fallen and now need care themselves. What now happens to the couple?

The question is made even more difficult when the elderly couple's children have moved far away, and they have no family in the Adirondacks. Going to a nursing is not what they want and finding a home health aide to come and perform some basic tasks is next to impossible.

The lack of home health care aides to assist the elderly has reached a crisis level, according to Becky Preve, director of the Franklin County Office For The Aging. And the problem is only expected to get worse, as Baby Boomers reach the age needing care.

According to statistics provided by the Office of the Aging, more than 13 percent of the population in Franklin County and 20 percent in Essex County is over the age of 65. By 2030, the numbers will be 21 percent and 30 percent, respectively -- higher than the projected state rate of 19 percent.

Several agencies that provide services to the elderly have been working for several years to address the problem and last year created a plan to increase the number of home health aides available throughout the two-county area. They are now launching a coalition to raise awareness and look for solutions to the lack of home health care in the region.

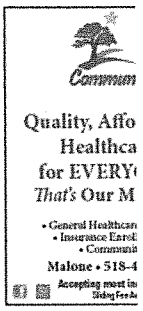
"Nothing was changing. It is time to try to elevate issues to the next level and work for solutions," said Maria Alvarez, executive director of the New York Statewide Senior Action Council Inc.,

The group wants to see changes that will attract more people to the home health aide field, including improved pay and better working conditions.

"This has nothing to do with funding," said Donna Beal, executive director of Mercy Care for the Adirondacks. "This has to do with the complete shortage of caregivers available to perform the job."

"Between January and August 2015, North Country Home Services, the major provider of home care assistance in Essex and Franklin counties, has had 6,500 hours of unfilled but authorized hours of care. In other words, people clearly need the care but are not getting it," Beal said.

Beal said that there were over 200 home care aides available at one point, but that 40 of them left the agencies where they were working because of pay, working conditions and other factors.



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The hourly wage for a home health aide is $9 to $11 dollars. "The local convenience store is advertising help wanted starting at $11-$14 per hour," a handout provided by the advocates for the stated.

And home care aides are often called on to work irregular hours, Beal said.

Some aides travel as much as 70 miles a day without reimbursement for their travel expenses or wear and tear on their vehicles, noted Franklin County Legislator Dr. Carl Sherwin. Public transportation in the largely rural counties is very limited, both Sherwin and Legislature Chairman D. Billy Jones agreed.

The county bus system is not useful to an aide who has to travel to a remote rural home in Chateaugay, said Jones, who represents that community. And caregivers need to be able to reach their clients at all hours, but "there is not going to be a bus at 6 a.m. or 10 p.m.," Sherwin added.

The lack of caregivers adds to the cost of providing medical services for the elderly, Beal said. "The percentage of acute care patients in the Adirondacks discharged to home with home care is 40 percent lower than the state average because home care services may not be available."

Some elderly are forced to move into a skilled care facility because they cannot get the home care they need.

"People want to stay in their own homes," said Jones.

The lack of home care aides adds to the stress of younger family members trying to cope with elderly parents who need -- but can't get -- qualified professional assistance. Preve introduced social worker Teena Pelkey as "the face of this."

Pelkey told the group of her elderly parents -- her 83-year-old mother has dementia and her 79-year-old father recently had a toe amputated, which made him unable to care for her mother. The couple requires around-the-clock care,

The couple is eligible to receive 44 hours of home health care per week, but between January and August, there may have been only one week this past June in which aides were available to provide the full 44 hours, Pelkey said.

Pelkey said she is very grateful the family has friends to help when services are not available, but even with that help and the hiring of outside care, "I moved home and never went back to my own house," Pelkey said.

She added that she is grateful for her job, which "still allows her to be the person that I am."

Advocates for the elderly say something needs to be done to address the critical lack of home care available in the region. Preve praised Franklin County legislators for their support for the efforts currently underway, saying "They have been very supportive and have a very distinct awareness of the issue," but she noted that addressing the problem will require more than just a local effort.

The problem is nationwide, although it is particularly acute in rural areas such as Franklin and Essex counties, Alvarez said.

"This is happening all over the country, but it is more profound here. We need to try to find a solution for now and the future," agreed Beal.

Preve said one good thing that may have come out of the recent prison break was the attention that the manhunt focused on the area. "The prison escape brought attention as to how rural we are," she said.

"We need to advocate for change" Beal said

North Country Home Services offers free training to bring staff on board, said Beal. The requirements of the job include a reliable vehicle and a caring personality.

But she and others pushing for change acknowledged that even with improvements in the pay and working conditions, the job of a home health care aide is not for everybody.

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"It takes a special person to have the ability to do this job," said Beal. The elderly must be treated with dignity and respect and you have to have the heart, said Pelkey.

"It takes a special person to clean a bowel movement," said Sherwin.

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