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**Social worker: Local programs help elderly to remain at home**

By Pam Tragesser  
 Reporter

In Brazos County there are a variety of programs — such as Meals on Wheels and Home Health Care — that help to keep elderly people out of nursing homes and in their own homes, says Albert Benavides, a social worker associate with the Texas Department of Human Services.

To provide community care for homebound people who have little or no family resources, the Department of Human Services in Bryan arranges for in-home care through contracted services, he says.

Texas Home Health Care Inc. is the only agency in this region under contract by the Department of Human Services to cover Family Care, which is for people who don't have a medical problem but still need assistance in the home, says Connie Neugent, lead supervisor at the agency.

Texas Home Health is a non-profit, state-funded organization that provides services for the elderly and handicapped, although the majority of the clients are elderly.

"The goal of our program is to try to provide a home atmosphere," Neugent says. "Keep the elderly person at home as long as possible."

If this program weren't available, most of the elderly people would have to go to a nursing home or have some other type of supervision, she says.

"The majority of the clients cannot get into the bathtub and then get out," she says. "A lot of them are weak."

The agency has three supervisors, a lead supervisor, and a secretary. They are in charge of hiring workers and then monitoring the work to make sure it is done to a caseworker's specifications, Neugent says.

When a provider wants a job, he goes through the agency, she says. Clients of home health live in both apartments and homes, and some live with family members, Neugent says.

*"The goal of our program is to try to provide a home atmosphere. Keep the elderly person at home as long as possible."*

— Connie Neugent, Texas Home Health Care Inc. lead supervisor

Many times when an elderly person is living with his family, the family members need a few hours to get out of the house. They can do this while a provider is there, she says.

This type of service can only be provided to each client for a few hours a day. This allows the elderly to be in a home atmosphere while still receiving the help they need, Neugent says. The extent of the service given depends on the individual's needs.

Since the Home Health supervisors are licensed vocational nurses, they are responsible for showing the providers proper lifting techniques so they can correctly help the patients, she says.

They also teach the providers other things they need to know, such as how to dust the home of a person who has emphysema, Neugent says.

In the Bryan office, there are several hundred providers who help these elderly people, Neugent says.

The providers go into the home and prepare meals, do laundry, give personal care, go shopping and keep the client in a clean, safe environment, she says.

The provider is responsible for basic housekeeping, Neugent says.

"Everyday things that you would do at home would be the things you would do for this person," Neugent says.

If the elderly person lives with family members, the provider's major responsibility is to keep the major living areas clean, especially the bedroom and bathroom, she says.

Clients cannot be transported with workers on company time. If a

provider wants to volunteer to take the client somewhere on his own time, it is between them, she says. Providers don't do any skilled nursing, such as taking blood pressure, Neugent says. If they discover a problem with a particular client, the case is handled through the client's doctor.

"If we feel a client's condition has worsened, we usually refer it to skilled nurses," Neugent says. "We also refer it (the case) to the caseworker."

The caseworker will re-evaluate the case and a lot of times make changes in the amount of service that can be given, she says.

Another program is called Primary Home Care, Benavides says. This covers all the services of Family Care and some medical services.

The supervisors for this program are registered nurses who can perform skilled nursing care. Primary Care services are not under contract, so clients are given a choice of the agency they want to use; there are three main agencies in the Bryan-College Station area.

To become eligible for either Family Care or Primary Care, a client must contact the Department of Human Services, Benavides says. A caseworker from the department is sent to determine the eligibility of a client based on income and physical abilities, Neugent says.

In analyzing these cases, the Department of Human Services looks at the minimal care needs of the client.

Along with income, the person's functional capabilities are analyzed

using a client's needs assessment form. A series of questions are asked (for example, "Do you have trouble getting dressed?") and then scored from zero to three, with three indicating a need for total assistance. A score of 24 points is received if an elderly person is eligible for some assistance, providing he has the income and resource guidelines, Benavides says.

If a client scores 18 points, he is eligible for Meals on Wheels. To obtain the emergency response service, the required scores are even higher, he says.

These response systems are for those elderly people who live alone or who are by themselves most of the day and have trouble dialing a phone. This system comes with a transmitter that is connected to a telephone system so all the client has to do is push it and the signal goes to a base station. This system can be life-saving.

"A lady that around 3 a.m. mashed the button and within minutes the ambulance was dispatched and she was brought to the hospital," Benavides says.

If the system isn't used, the station will test it once a month to make sure it is in working order. Costs for these programs are funded through Medicare or Medicaid. Medicare insurance is available to any person age 65 or older. If he is not covered by Medicare, Medicaid covers hospital expenses, he says.

Medicaid is funded through state. This gives the individual a supplemental insurance to supplement Medicare would pay, Benavides says.

If the elderly person has income sources greater than \$5,000 per month, the Department of Human Services cannot be provided, Benavides says.

The department tries to find programs to help these people as the Brazos Valley Development Council and local churches.

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