

THEN & NOW

Sisters turn geriatric care niche into successful business

By JIM MARSH
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Whether it's aiding a senior citizen whose nearest family is on the other side of the state or country, or an ailing widow or widower with no family left, two sisters who created Senior Solutions 15 years ago have taken the hassle out of geriatric care management.

Sheila Saunders and Aimee Stewart provide the contacts, the expertise and the legwork to connect seniors with the right level of care. Their company offers services that range from hiring a home care aid to placing someone in an assisted living facility or in a skilled-care nursing home.

The sisters grew up in Lower Merion Township, a Philadelphia suburb, attended college in Philadelphia, and both moved with their families to the Lehigh Valley in the mid 1970s.

Senior Solutions was started in 1990 to meet a perceived need.

"I had worked in geriatric care management with a public agency for many years," Saunders says. "With Pennsylvania being one of the states with the largest elderly populations, I saw there was a need for private agencies for those who did not care to deal with the public agencies."

Stewart had a business background, having partnered with another person in starting Super Sellout, a home liquidation business, shortly after she moved to the Lehigh Valley. Their backgrounds provided a good fit to start the business together.



Chris Koch, left, of Bethlehem has been a Caring Companions visiting caregiver in the Bethlehem home of Alvin Krause for nearly two years. In photo at right, Caring Companions principal Sheila Saunders, left, goes over a client appointment with caregiver Vivian Calveron of Allentown. Calveron's daughter and sister-in-law are also on the firm's caregiver roster. Caring Companions is a division of Senior Solutions Inc., and both businesses were started by Saunders and her sister, Aimee Stewart.



Photos by Jim Marsh

"When we first considered this venture, we decided we should start with what we knew," Stewart says. "Sheila knew geriatrics and I knew business, so we decided this would be a good place to start."

At its beginning, Senior Solutions worked primarily with people who were responsible for caring for elderly relatives and had to make decisions during a crisis period — when an elderly loved one suffered a fracture, or sudden onset of illness, or memory loss — any situation that created a circumstance where the loved ones could not care for themselves.

"Most people did not know what options were available, what those options would cost or how to contact those who could provide the necessary

level of care," Saunders says.

Senior Solutions either guided the family through the process, or took care of all the details when a family member lived out of the area.

"We provide information to help family members make informed decisions and walk them through the process, rather than just hand out a list of places where help is available — which is generally all hospitals generally provide," she says.

Saunders says Senior Solutions strives to "keep people as independent as possible as long as possible, and help assure they are in a safe environment."

Saunders and Stewart look not only at the current situation, but

also at the progression of care that is likely to be needed over ensuing months or years.

Rather than just leave family members to search about until they happened on the right solution, Senior Solutions was in a position to help evaluate what level of care was appropriate and link family members with the care providers.

When full-care supervision is needed, Senior Solutions can arrange companion care, nursing services, transition from home to assisted living or to skilled care, hospice care, or just monitor care of the frail in all environments — homes, hospitals, assisted living and nursing care. For those who have loved ones in the area, but live far away, Senior Solutions can take on the burden that would other-

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wise require the presence of a family member.

Senior Solutions looks at care-giving resources available, at veteran and other entitlement programs, insurance resources and public agency programs and links it all together to provide an appropriate level of care — with the close-in or long-distance involvement of family members, or as a surrogate when no family members are available.

Stewart says that its “ongoing care management” provides a competitive advantage for Senior Solutions.

“I don’t know of any other agency that will stay for years and years with the same person. The public agencies will do a little bit of that, but they are limited because they are usually paid by Medicare public funding. We are private pay, so families can hire us and we stay as



Photo by Jim Marsh

Tradition has it that the Allentown office of Senior Solutions Inc. served as a speakeasy during Prohibition, then as a Muhlenberg fraternity house, during its history that dates back to the early 1900s.

long as we are needed,” Stewart says.

She reports that she is “now seeing one lady in her 90s who I have looked after since 1991. I see her every other week to

re-assess what her caregivers are doing, and I also help the family by managing her finances — paying her bills, etc. I am in touch with family members who live far away as well as with her accountant and attorney. That helps keep everything on an even keel.”

Senior Solutions may be responsible for 65 to 80 ongoing care-management cases at any one time.

From the viewpoint of the agencies and professional caregivers, having a savvy Senior Solutions intermediary between themselves and the family or the person being cared for helps facilitate communications and save the time determining the fit between a caregiver and someone ignorant of what really is needed in any given situation.

“We know the right questions to ask, and we help make sure everyone is always

headed in the right direction,” Saunders says. “We make all the pieces of the puzzle fit so no one has to be confused by the myriad source and levels of care that may be needed.”

Caring Companions division grows to half of Senior Solutions revenues

After being in business for a few years, Saunders and Stewart saw an additional need for homemaking and companion care providers that was not being met.

They created Caring Companions, a division of Senior Solutions, in 1992.

“There were lots of places that provided skilled care,” Saunders says. “It was easy to find a nurse, but not so easy to find someone to come in and prepare a good meal, drive Mom to the hairdresser, help with the grocery shopping, monitor medication schedules and all those things which can keep people in their homes.”

The gap between skilled and companion care often means delaying the time a person might have to go into assisted living, or move from assisted living to skilled nursing home care, Saunders says.

“Many, many people would rather be cared for in their homes. And often that is the most cost-effective plan anyway,” Saunders says. “Our services help delay the time a person might need to move into a nursing home.”



Photo by Jim Marsh

Almee Stewart had the benefit of a business background when she and her sister, Sheila Saunders, started their geriatric care management firm called Senior Solutions Inc. 15 years ago.

Caring Companions keeps a registry of people able to help out at home or in an assisted living situation, and schedules the needed care — sometimes providing around-the-clock help, and the aides are billed at an hourly fee that averages about \$13 an hour.

Many of the caregivers provided by Caring Companions are certified nurse assistants, while many are also women “who have already raised a family and are just good homemakers,” Stewart says.

While many skills come into play, Stewart says, the companions do not give injections, manage intra-

venous medications or other procedures which call for skilled nursing practitioners.

In effect, the caregivers provided by Caring Companions are really “surrogate family members,” Stewart and Saunders say.

“We also try to have a very consistent group of people,” Saunders says. “Consistency is highly valued by those being cared for, so they don’t see a parade of different people coming into their home over time.”

Sometimes those being aided are under care management by Senior Solutions and a full spectrum of supervision and billing is provided, and sometimes Caring Companions provides unsupervised care..givers on just a separate per-diem basis with clients or client insurance paying the caregivers directly.

Caring Companions, which is bonded and licensed by the state, has about 80 caregivers in its registry. Caring Companions has grown to account for about half of Senior Solutions’ annual revenue.

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If you would like to have your business considered for our weekly Then and Now profile, send information about your business and what it has accomplished in the last 10 years to John L. Moore, Editor, EPBJ, 65 E. Elizabeth Ave., Suite 700, Bethlehem, PA 18018. You also can send an e-mail to john.m@epbj.com.

Business basics

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- Number of locations: one
- Years operating: 15