

Valley firm takes senior care in new direction

By Madeleine Mathias
Of The Morning Call

Every day, it was the same ritual for Alvin Krause. Get up, make breakfast, change the sheets on his ailing wife's bed and see his mentally challenged son, 63, off to a workshop.

Krause was cook, laundryman, house cleaner and doer of a thousand other jobs.

At 83, the Bethlehem man was looking after everyone but himself.

That changed when a local geriatric care management firm, alerted to his situation, came into his life.

Today, at 87, Krause has recaptured a quality of life that all but disappeared as he tried to look after his family.

Two sisters, Aimee Stewart and Sheila Saunders, owners of Senior Solutions Inc., Allentown, found a nearby nursing home for Mrs. Krause and arranged for caregivers to handle daily chores for Krause.

"Because of our intervention," Stewart says, "Alvin can stay in his home and be independent."

Since 1990 when they launched Senior Solutions, the sisters have worked with more than 1,000 clients, resolving the care of loved ones for husbands, wives, children, other relatives, as well as individuals with no family.

Before they went into partnership, Stewart ran her own business, Super Sellout in Allentown, which handled tag sales and estate liquidations, while Saunders did the same kind of work she does now for an Allentown family service agency.

They rented one room on the second floor at 44 S. Fulton St., a charming Victorian home with stained glass windows and wide window sills. They still have their offices there today, however, now they occupy all of the first floor as well as that single room on the second floor where they have conferences.

While waiting for clients, Stewart says they advertised

Advocates for the elderly



Cherie Kemper-Starnes Special to The Morning Call

SENIOR SOLUTIONS co-owner Aimee Stewart visits client Alvin Krause in his Bethlehem home. Stewart and her sister/business partner Sheila Saunders helped the 87-year-old man regain his quality of life by finding a nursing home for his wife and help at home for him.

and wrote letters to physicians, lawyers and others who might make referrals, initially without much success.

But within a year, they saw growth. "Each year it has gotten better," Stewart says. Today, Senior Solutions has between 60 to 80 ongoing clients who the sisters and five other care managers visit in their homes or institutions and/or serve as advocates for, if necessary.

Both certified care managers, Stewart and Saunders speak affectionately of their clients. And those who live away from their families in the Lehigh Valley, often call the sisters, whom they have hired to look after their loved ones, their "surrogate daughters."

Their first task for any client, Stewart says, is to make an assessment of existing problems, determine assistance eligibility and financial assets and what services might be necessary.

The needs are always different. Saunders relates the

story of a couple, both in their 70s, who were "the most in love couple" she had ever met.

The wife, although in fragile health, was trying to take care of her husband who had dementia. She was determined to remain at home.

Saunders says she placed a live-in caregiver, enabling the couple to stay together until his death.

Another client, Faye Exaros, was devoted to her husband's parents, who had lived with them in their Bethlehem home for about nine years.

But the debilities of age began to take a toll on not only her beloved in-laws but on her and her family. The father had had a stroke, suffered macular degeneration and was having hearing loss. The mother had Alzheimer's. And although employed as a school nurse, Exaros says she really was on duty 24 hours a day, taking care of her in-laws' needs while at home.

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About two years ago, Exaros told her husband, William, that although they had help six hours a day, she worried about her mother-in-law letting strangers in the house and her father-in-law, still so alert, lacking socialization.

After hearing about Senior Solutions, Exaros met with Stewart who suggested moving the couple to an assisted living unit and found an opening at Country Meadows in Bethlehem Township, about 10 minutes from the Exaros' home. Stewart also arranged for aides to watch over the couple.

"They had to stay together," Exaros says. "They will be married 63 years in September."

"Aimee [Stewart] alleviated so much guilt for us," Exaros says. "We went in feeling like failures. She helped us know that what we were doing was appropriate."

The need for such services as provided by Senior Solutions is bound to increase in future years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in March that life expectancy hit a new high — 77.2 years in 2001.

The U.S. Administration on Aging last year noted that those 65 and

older numbered 35 million in 2000, an increase of 12 percent since 1990 and the baby boomers — those 45 to 64 — who will reach 65 over the next two decades, increased by 34 percent during the last 10 years.

And almost half of those baby boomers will be taking care of aging parents as well as their own families, according to AARP.

Stewart says the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers had 350 members when they opened their business and now have 1,800. Stewart is president of the Philadelphia chapter and Saunders is past president.

Only a portion of Senior Solutions services involve placement in nursing homes and other institutions. It also monitors the frail elderly in hospitals and nursing homes.

"We are not afraid to say this facility is not meeting the client's requirements and move them to another place," Saunders says.

Stewart and Saunders often suggest a client hire his or her own care manager to be the voice for adequate hospital, medical and therapy care.

They also will act as liaison to families who live out of the area, making sure their relative is getting the proper services and alerting them to problems. They visit and make phone contacts with seniors who live alone. They help older people move to or from a retirement

community or a nursing home.

They evaluate nursing homes and alternative living arrangements and review financial, legal and/or medical issues to conserve assets. For all these services and more, Senior Solutions charges \$95 an hour.

Through their separate business, Caring Companions, they screen, arrange and monitor in-home help.

They have about 80 companions, who are paid \$13 an hour with a four-hour minimum, who go into homes to help out with bathing, dressing, laundry, driving, shopping for clothes and groceries.

"We go with them to the doctor's office, to relay information, to get medication instructions," Saunders said. "We take notes, get the meds filled, call the families to make sure the doctor's instructions are carried out. We also communicate with the families to tell them everything is fine or not so fine."

And they listen. As Saunders says, some clients just want someone to talk to. One lady liked to go out to lunch, but her daughter lived out of the area, so Senior Solutions filled that need.

The daily goal of Senior Solutions, Saunders says, is to assure a client — no matter whether he or she is 65 or 95 — has a good quality of life .

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