

LIFE programs offer a 'nursing home without walls'

Penn, St. Agnes
Provide Services
At Your Home

By Cathy Green for Milestones

Few expressions sound more ominous to older people than "nursing home". To many, it sounds like the end of the line, a surrendering of independence ... and a great financial drain.

However, some 400 Philadelphians are taking advantage of an alternative. It's a "nursing home without walls," as Emily Amerman, executive director of LIFE-St. Agnes Continuing Care Center, describes it. They stay in their own homes, but receive a full spectrum of care, either at a day center (transportation provided) or at home, with 24-hour access to emergency staff, seven days a week.

A personalized plan for each

LIFE (Living Independently for Elders) is based on a national model called Program for All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly, which is an apt description of its services. Teams of nurses, physicians and other health professionals, operating out of comprehensive care centers, draw up a personalized plan for each person enrolled.

The services, based on individual need, may include medical and nursing care, prescriptions, meal planning, home-delivered meals, physical therapy, podiatry, vision and hearing care, dental care, psychiatric services, prostheses and durable medical equipment, caregiver respite, pastoral care, personal emergency response systems, personal care and homemaker services and transportation.

To be eligible, you must require nursing home care. You must be at least 55, and live in a center's service area. A LIFE physician will be the primary care provider.

The program is funded by monthly payments from Medicare and Medicaid.

2 programs in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia has two LIFE programs, begun in October 1998. Each serves a different area. Penn Nursing Network operates two facilities, at 4101 Woodland Ave. and 3821 Market St., serving West and Southwest Philadelphia and sections of Fairmount. The St. Agnes Centers -- at 1500 S. Columbus Blvd., and 30th and Moore Sts. -- draw clients from South Philadelphia and Center City.

Wayne Pendleton, executive director of LIFE at Penn, said those who visit its centers can take part in traditional program activities like those offered at senior centers and adult daycare centers, and also receive other services they need. Anyone with severe dementia can be supervised, giving the caregiver at home some relief.

LIFE also offers hospice care and end-of-life care.

The St. Agnes LIFE Centers operate similar programs and offer the same services. Private participants are few, Amerman said. They pay what Medicare pays the centers, \$4,257 a month.

Less costly than nursing home

"It's unusual to pay that much for a non-residential program, but it's less than a nursing home would cost," she said. "And if they have spent all their assets, they become eligible for Medicaid."

LIFE centers are licensed through the Pennsylvania Departments of Health and Aging. They are monitored by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and the Center on Medicare and Medicaid Services.

The Philadelphia centers reach out to prospective clients by having speakers at senior centers and apartment complexes. Many people learn of the service from others already enrolled.

Information about the Penn LIFE program is available at 215-573-7200. The St. Agnes number is 215-339-4747. Representatives will determine whether a caller is eligible and arrange for an interview and evaluation. In addition, people are encouraged to visit the centers to evaluate the programs and facilities for themselves.