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BY SARAH J. GLOVER / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Instructor David Earley dances freestyle with LIFE program participants Doris A. Lloyd (left), 64, and Ruth Sinclair, 75, at the LIFE/Penn Nursing program in West Philadelphia. That site has one of three LIFE programs now operating in Philadelphia, and two more are in the planning stages.

Nursing care takes a smart detour

A new approach to the frail elderly finds it's cheaper to help them maintain their independent lives at home — which most prefer.

By Michael Vitez
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Ruby Biggs is an example of America's looming problem — and of one solution.

How do we care for soaring numbers of old, frail people?

Biggs is young by today's standards, just 73. But her arthritis is so bad that even with a walker she can take only a few steps and is still prone

to falls. She has an ulcer, diabetes, memory loss. She has no husband, no children.

She is a classic American nursing home resident.

Except she lives at home, alone — the beneficiary of a pioneering new program in long-term care that is taking off, especially in Pennsylvania.

The program, LIFE (Living Independently for Elders), is designed to give people sick enough

for a nursing home another option — to live at home, but get their medical care, socialization, and even a hot meal at a center in their community.

And at less cost than a nursing home.

Biggs visits a LIFE center in West Philadelphia by van five days a week, where she receives medical care from a team of doctors, nurse practitioners, nurses, social workers and therapists.

She eats lunch there, plays bingo, and returns home in the afternoon. The program also pays for an aide to come by her apartment every morning and evening to help her dress and undress. On weekends, a nurse visits to help with insulin.

“Without our program she would default to a nursing home,” said Peter Stein, a geriatrician with the LIFE/Penn Nursing program in West Philadelphia.

After years of only one option — the nursing home — the federal government and states are working hard to develop options that provide more independence and autonomy for poor elderly people and cost taxpayers less.

To help make this change happen, state and federal governments have increasingly freed up Medicaid dollars that traditionally were restricted to nursing-home care.

Pennsylvania pays \$59,000 a year in Medicaid dollars for every nursing-home patient, but only \$44,000 for LIFE program participants, said Mike Hall, deputy secretary for long-term living.

“The difficulty is respecting their desire to live alone as they become increasingly frail,” Stein said. “We do not provide 24-hour care. The big problem is the risk of falls. We find members will accept a high risk of falls in order to still stay at home.”

In the lobby of her apartment building the other day, Biggs waited for the LIFE van with Verlia Chapman, 92, who recently fell and fractured her hip.

Waiting with his mother, Robert Chapman called the program “fantastic.” “As a family, we are committed to keep my mom out of a nursing home. She doesn’t want to go,” he said. “We’re trying to keep her happy, living independently. And the happier she is, the stronger she is. In all honesty, if it wasn’t for LIFE, she’d be in a nursing home now.”

3 LIFE programs in Phila.

Three LIFE programs are running in Philadelphia now — in the South, West and Northwest sections of the city. Two more are in the planning stages in the North and Northeast.

Another, covering Delaware and Chester Counties, is scheduled to open in Sharon Hill.



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Verlia Chapman, 92, is joined by son Robert at her apartment on 23d Street before heading to the Penn campus to participate in the program.

Montgomery County is exploring a program. One will open in the Trenton area next year, and others are under study in Camden, Burlington and Salem Counties.

More than 1,800 Pennsylvanians are currently enrolled in LIFE, among 15,000 nationally in 22 states. Pennsylvania hopes to have up to 15,000 enrolled by 2012, according to Hall.

The critical component of the LIFE program is a common incentive among all parties involved to keep frail elders in their homes and communities, where generally they would rather be, and out of more costly hospitals and nursing homes.

For instance, the LIFE/Penn Nursing program receives about \$6,533 a month (\$2,845 from Medicare and \$3,688 from Medicaid) to provide for all of the health-care needs, including drugs, of an elderly person who enrolls.

When Ruby Biggs was hospitalized recently after vomiting blood, LIFE had to pay the hospital bill. It is in the program’s interest to catch developing conditions early.

If LIFE neglects preventive or primary care, advocates say, it will only pay more as conditions get worse and the elder needs to be hospitalized or placed in a nursing home for 24-hour care.

The LIFE program is known nationally as PACE — Program of All-inclusive Care of the Elderly, a name that Pennsylvania chose not to use because of its prescription program with the same acronym.

To be eligible, a person must be sick enough to need a nursing home, though state officials say they would like to be able to expand this program one day to people who are not yet that ill.

Most who participate in LIFE are also poor enough to qualify for Medicaid, which has long paid for nursing homes for the indigent. But others can participate in LIFE at a cost out of pocket of about \$3,000 a month.

“We think this is the future of long-term care,” said Christine Allen, vice president of policy and research for Genesis HealthCare Corp., which runs 200 nursing homes but is starting LIFE in Delaware County. It is the first for-profit company nationally to get involved.

She called the program an example of “where the feds got it right . . . in terms of lining up the fiscal incentives exactly where they need to be.”

“You don’t just get a doctor, you get a team,” said Maureen Long, vice president and general manager of the St. Agnes LIFE program, which runs two centers in South Philadelphia.

“Your care plan is so much more comprehensive than it could ever be in a fragmented care system,” Long said. “That’s what makes this better.”

Families pitch in

Biggs receives her care through the LIFE program run by the University of Pennsylvania’s nursing school — the first LIFE program in Philadelphia, starting in 1998.

It has grown steadily, now with 300 members and a target of 500. Last month, it moved into a new building, the former Mercy-Douglas nursing home at 45th and Chestnut Streets.

“I think it’s a grand irony,” said Wayne Pendleton, executive director of the LIFE/Penn Nursing program.

Bringing hundreds of frail elderly into a center each day, caring for them, and then returning them home would never work without families providing informal caregiving evenings and weekends.

“I think the families of our members have to put a lot more into supporting their loved one in the LIFE program than they have to do in the nursing home,” Pendleton said. “That’s a choice they make. The families we work with are quite heroic. They have limited means and work like hell to help Mom or Dad stay at home.”

John Jackson, 93, for instance, goes to the center every weekday. He lives with his son, who cooks his breakfast and helps him get ready in the morning, cooks him dinner at night, and helps him to bed.

What would happen to Jackson without the LIFE program?

“Oh, man,” he said. “Whew. I hate to think about what would happen.

“I’ve never been in a nursing home,” he added. “I have a good son.”

Down the hall, Elwood Thompson, 79, was playing one of the six slot machines, set at varying levels of difficulty so dementia patients can still win — tokens, not money.

“I got a bad hip,” Thompson said. “I’m supposed to get a replacement. I joined two months ago. It’s real nice. It gives you something to do. I like to try my luck. Today I’m doing bad. If I’d been in Atlantic City, I’d be in a world of trouble.”

How would a joint replacement work in LIFE?

Pendleton, the executive director,



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Above, Ruby Biggs, 73, sits in her apartment before departing for the LIFE program on the Penn campus. Below, nurse practitioner Nicole Blackwood listens at the center as Biggs describes her symptoms since a change in medication dosage. Biggs travels by van five days a week to the center, where she receives medical care.



said a member such as Thompson would be evaluated by a LIFE doctor and referred to a specialist, and then LIFE’s team of medical professionals would decide. If a member doesn’t like the team’s decision, he can appeal, just like anyone who is denied a procedure by Medicare.

“We have actually paid for a couple of very expensive knee replacements

of late (without great clinical results unfortunately),” Pendleton e-mailed. “So the idea is to adhere to best practice standards around authorizing major orthopedic surgeries as a last resort and first try weight loss, exercise, rehab, range of motion, pain management, etc.”

Many LIFE members said they loved the new West Philadelphia facil-

For More Information

To qualify for the LIFE program (known as PACE outside Pennsylvania), a person must live in a LIFE service area and be certified by the state to need nursing-home-level care.

Medicaid and Medicare cover Medicaid-eligible participants. Others must pay about \$3,000 a month.

All health care and drugs are provided through the program.

For general information

www.NPAonline.org.

Area programs

West Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing LIFE Program, 215-573-7200, www.lifeupenn.org.

South Philadelphia: St. Agnes LIFE program, 215-339-4747, www.stagnesccc.org/services/LIFE.php.

Northwest Philadelphia: NewCourtland LIFE Program, 1-888-625-4334, www.newcourtlandlife.org.

Delaware and Chester Counties: LIFE at Home (opening July 1), 1-888-843-0443.



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Therapeutic recreation coordinator Gina Shaw laughs after Wilhemina Dow (center), 85, wins at a card game called pitty pat, joined by Isabella Ambrose, 74, at the LIFE center in the Germantown House on Wayne Avenue.

ity. There is room for rehabilitation, doctors' offices, a large public room for activities, a chapel, slots, an arts and crafts room, even a pool table.

But many activities are on the second floor, and this has introduced an unanticipated problem: the elevator, and a policy that no member ride alone.

This has rankled some members, used to roaming around the old one-level center on their own. They feel it limits their independence.

"It's all total madness," said Harry Barney, 67. "You can't even get on an elevator yourself. They think you're too senile to push buttons."

In time, the LIFE staff is confident it will figure out the right solution to the elevator problem — just one of many unexpected challenges on the frontier of an aging nation.

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LIFE

LIVING INDEPENDENTLY FOR ELDERLS



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