

Homecare services address language barrier

By Barbara Ruben

When Al Twanmo's father suffered a stroke, he wasn't sure where to turn for help after his father left the hospital. Although Twanmo's father had immigrated to the United States after World War II and learned English here, as he grew older he reverted to speaking only Chinese.

Twanmo, who lives in Cabin John, Md., contacted home care firms for assistance, but couldn't find one with a caregiver who could speak Chinese. He finally found a local agency that was willing to go out of its way. While the agency, Options for Senior America, didn't have a Chinese-speaking employee on staff, the company advertised in local Chinese papers to find one.

The nurse that Options found took care of Twanmo's father for five years, even accom-

panying him on a trip to China. "My father was paralyzed on the right side of his body, so for her to volunteer to take the trip with him was just astounding," Twanmo recalled.

Having a serious illness can be debilitating enough without the language barrier, but finding people who can bridge a linguistic or cultural divide can make that job even more challenging, said Ramzi Rihani, senior director of Options for Senior America.

"We treat every case in a personal manner to optimize matching service as well as we can to a particular situation," he said.

In another effort to address a local need, Options for Senior America once hired four Russian surgeons who had emigrated to the U.S. They hadn't yet passed the medical board exams to practice here as doctors, but could perform other services.

The surgeons served as a springboard for Options to start working with other local Russians in the community. Options has also hired a number of Ethiopian care providers to serve that growing ethnic group in the Washington area.

Rihani, who himself comes from Lebanon, founded Options for Senior America in the Washington area in 1989. The agency now operates offices in 15 other cities.

"This represents the American dream, not only for us, but also for the care providers who work for us," he said.

Local government steps in

Options for Senior America isn't alone in working to find ways to help immigrants with their homecare needs. Last December, 31

Korean-speaking personal care assistants graduated from a special program sponsored by Fairfax County government, Inova Health System, and the Korean Central Presbyterian Church in Vienna, Va., among others.

The inspiration for the training program came from Heisung Lee, a professional nutritionist and a member of the church. When her father was battling cancer, she could find no one to care for him at home who spoke his language or understood his cultural background.

"If the aide doesn't speak the client's language or prepare the food that the client is accustomed to eating, the services provided may not be culturally sensitive or appropriate," Lee explained. "When my fa-

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- Take care of yourself; don't take on too much or you will risk becoming frazzled or run down.
- Think ahead; it is easier to gather information about doctors and finances before something bad happens.

Sterling said that is one big lesson his family learned from dealing with his mother's ailment. "We've always had our heads in the sand a little bit," he said. "She's al-

ways been fully capable, but we've always known in the back of our minds that someday we would get this call."

For more tips on the Web, see the Family Caregiver Alliance Handbook at www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=1034; access the MetLife study on long-distance caregiving at www.caregiving.org/milesaway.pdf; or visit www.aarp.org/families/caregiving/caring_parents/a2003-10-27-caregiving-longdistance.

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