

ASK THE EXPERT

Finding reliable home care

The problem: My 82-year-old mother needs help with personal care, meals and taking her medications while I'm at work. How can I find a reliable and trustworthy home health aide?

The expert: Taryn Birkmire, president of the Long Island Chapter of the New York State Association of Health Care Providers.

The rules: Any home health-care agency you contract with should be licensed by the New York State Department of Health, which surveys agency performance to assure compliance with state and federal regulations.

The strategy: Research several home-care agencies that hire, train and employ home health-care aides. The Long Island Chapter provides a comprehensive list of member home-care agencies in Nassau and Suffolk counties at nyshcp.org/lichapter.shtml.

How it works: Ask the director about screening procedures. Do they verify identities and thoroughly check references? Do they do fingerprint and criminal history background checks? Ask about any individual aide's training and certification. Most quality agencies offer their own training — usually a two-week course conducted by a registered nurse — where aides learn and are tested on various skills. During training, they

should be observed to determine that they have the required interpersonal skills and maturity for the job.

If an aide comes to an agency already certified, ask whether they verify previous employment and also validate the aide's certification with the provider who conducted the initial training. Don't hesitate to ask about supervision and continuing education. New York State requires that home health aides be evaluated annually. In addition, agencies supervise aides on an ongoing basis throughout the year. Home-care aides should complete 12 hours of continuing education yearly.

Finally, it's always a good idea to meet an agency's director or representative and visit the office. This enables you to see firsthand the quality and professionalism — or lack thereof — of the agency.

The results: Peace of mind. Although there is currently no central registry for home health aides, the New York State Association of Health Care Providers, nyshcp.org, is lobbying for the creation of such a registry, which would be similar to the Nurse Aide Registry, www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/healthinfo/nar.htm.

— KAREN E. KLEIN

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