

Healthy Life

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Healthy happenings

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STAYING HOME

The fastest-growing segment of the elderly population is the "old old" — people who are 85 years old or more and will need help to stay living in their own homes.

**Molly Rees
Gavin**

Connecticut
Community Care Inc.
president



Irene Pierce relaxes at her Ridgefield home with caregivers Joanne Rotar, left, care manager for Connecticut Community Care, and Pat DiZazzo, case manager of Ridgefield Visiting Nurse Association.

"I'm just amazed at all the wonderful friendly people who help me."

Irene Pierce
Ridgefield resident

By Robert Miller
STAFF WRITER

RIDGEFIELD — After living in a house for 38 years, you and the place have grown used to each other. You've weather-watched through the windows through a hundred seasons and more. The chairs welcome you. You know the ways of the hallways, the kitchen table, like you know the fingers of your hand. ¶ So when Irene Pierce's husband, Edson, died in 2005, there was talk of her moving. Two of her children live in California, two in Pennsylvania, one in Connecticut. ¶ "We talked about me moving to Pennsylvania," Pierce, now 91 said. "That would be starting all over again." ¶ But Pierce had deep roots in the community. She has lots of friends and still stays busy by volunteering at the Jesse Lee Methodist Church. She's in good health for a woman in her 90s. When she gets the time, she still paints — her house is full of her canvases.

"I paint as much as I can, but I'm pretty busy," she said. Which is why, after talking to all her children, she decided to stay put.

"We decided to take it day by day," she said, hundreds of days into that agreement.

To help, Pierce enlisted Connecticut Community Care Inc., or CCCI, a private, non-profit agency that strives to keep elderly people living in their homes for as long as they are able. Pierce and her husband had actually begun using CCCI a few years before his death.

"We had talked to the town social worker," Pierce said. "We decided we needed a little help."

Through the agency, she has her own case manager, Joann Rotar, who talks to her monthly to see if there are any changes in Pierce's life that need addressing. She also gets weekly visits from Pat DiZazzo a registered nurse with the Ridgefield Visiting Nurse Association.

"It's an excellent fit," said Helen Carli, director marketing for RVNA. "We can collaborate and provide the total package to the patient."

Pierce also has a housekeeper come in twice a week to help with her chores. Because she no longer drives, she gets transportation help when she needs it. She also has a life-line button she can click if she has any emergency.

"She can call our agency 24 hours a day, seven days a week," said Delcie Thibault, spokeswoman for Connecticut Community Care.

Pierce is now one of about 100,000 patients Connecticut Community Care

has helped over the past 30 years.

The agency works to administer the Connecticut Home Care Program for Elders, which is funded by the Connecticut Department of Social Services in 124 towns in the northwest, west, central and eastern sections of the state. If an elderly person gets enrolled in this program, many of its services are free.

This program, however, has income and asset guidelines. So the agency also has a private program, Care Management Associates, to provide help for those who do not qualify.

Marlene Dube, director of care management services, said that private services costs can run from \$135 for care management — the comprehensive coordination of all the services available — to \$26 for home care. "You can get an awful lot for \$26 an hour," she said of the help a home care worker can provide.

The two programs offer a wide range of services. They do a full assessment of a home to see what help each client needs. They help them work their way through red tape to enroll in programs, and also preserve the financial and material assets they have.

They can provide meals and care from visiting nurses. They can provide help with housecleaning, shopping, transportation, chores and medication management. They can get people

enrolled in adult day care programs or send companions to the home.

"Each patient is different," said Pierce's case manager, Rotar. "In Irene's case, she's healthy, but she needs help to supplement her health care. We want to make sure all her need are met."

Pierce admitted one of the hurdles people have to pass in enrolling in the program is to acknowledge they need help.

"You have to admit you aren't independent any more," she said. "That's hard. You've been taught since birth to be independent. You don't want to be a

A look at the numbers | Average cost of elderly care (in thousands of dollars)

120

Private nursing home

42

One bedroom apartment in an assisted living complex

15.5

Home care

burden."

But Thibault said that often families learn about what CCCI offers only when there's a crisis — an elderly person falls ill, for example.

"People could be starting to use CCCI much earlier," she said.

The program is extremely economical. It now costs nearly \$120,000 a year to live in a private nursing home in Connecticut — the second-most expensive state in the United States, after Alaska,