



Ten Things to Ask Before Hiring a Home Care Agency

Today's seniors have more options available to them than ever before. When physical capabilities diminish or while recovering from a short-term disability, seniors often prefer to be treated in the comfort of their own homes by a personal nurse's aide or companion. Home care is considered by many to be one of the most desirable options, because it allows seniors to maintain their independence while remaining in the one place where they feel most comfortable.

As in choosing any type of long-term care, there are many pitfalls to watch out for when hiring a home care worker to care for you or a loved one. In any given city, a quick look through the Yellow Pages may reveal dozens of competing companies offering what appear to be the same services. It's up to you to investigate the differences and find the one company that best suits your home health care needs.

To help with this task, here is a checklist of questions to ask each home care agency during the initial phone call. If they can't answer these questions to your satisfaction, move on to the next agency until you find one that can.

How long has your company been in business?

There are a lot of new companies entering the marketplace, many of which have little experience or expertise in the special challenges of running a successful home care company. Well-established companies have extensive records of caregivers' past performances.

Are your workers bonded and insured?

The company you want to work with must have extensive insurance, including Professional and General Liability, Non-Owned Auto, a Dishonesty Bond, and Worker's Compensation policies. Believe it or not, there are some companies that have minimal insurance coverage and others who have none at all.

How extensive are your criminal and background checks?

You must do business only with companies that provide a criminal background check on each person they employ. It's important that they not only run a check on the last place their caregiver worked, but also on all the places they've lived for at least the last five years. Ask them to provide you with written reference check reports.

Does your company have a Licensed Vocational Nurse or RN on staff?

Most reputable agencies have a licensed nurse on staff to ensure that proper protocol is being followed in the care of a client. A trained nurse can help a caregiver identify safety hazards, recognize symptoms, observe special diets, familiarize them with infection control procedures and universal precautions, establish hygiene standards and more. In most cases, home health care aide agencies that have a licensed nurse on staff are going the extra mile to provide quality assurance to the services their caregivers provide.

How do you select your employees?

Many agencies hire home care aides who have little experience and even fewer credentials. Reputable agencies, however, have minimum requirements for years of experience and levels of certification. The best agencies will even take into consideration such factors as demeanor and professionalism. Make sure you choose an agency that sets high standards in its hiring policies.

Can you send me information describing your services and fees?

A company that has not spent the time developing important informational materials such as these probably hasn't done many other important tasks either. Not only will these materials help you compare their services to those of other agencies, but they may also provide useful details you hadn't thought of earlier. An agency that sends you detailed, carefully considered materials has most likely gone the extra mile in other aspects of its business, as well.

What is your company's caregiver replacement policy or guarantee?

In most cases, a good agency will give you as many replacements as needed, whenever needed, without limitation. For those people wanting a caregiver on a referral basis, wherein you handle the payroll and insurance obligations, you should have at least three months to see if the individual will be suitable to you.

What are your financial procedures? Are your rates negotiable?

Most agencies have a lot of fixed costs to incorporate into their quoted rates. However, they also know not all clients have the same ability to pay. Some agencies may be prepared to make a deal. If you're flexible about the age, number of years of experience of the caregiver, or English-speaking abilities, perhaps you can get reduced rates. Most agencies come in contact with eager, honest and hardworking people who are anxious to gain experience and English skills. So if money is an issue, this approach may work for you. In any case, ask to see written statements explaining all the agency's costs and payment plan options.

Can you provide me with references?

It pays to find out if the agency's clients are satisfied with the services they're getting. Sometimes old references don't reflect current management conditions, so it's best to ask for testimonials from their more recent jobs. You might also want to talk with clients who have had a long history with the agency, so you can get a good sense of how they do business and what you can expect.

Can we set up a time to meet to discuss the details of my care needs?

It's always a good idea to meet the agency's principal(s) or representative(s) and to see their place of business, if possible. This will help you make some assessments about them you can't just by talking on the phone. Are they organized and corporate? Are they a small company or a large one? It's also good to have them come to your home, as well, so you can meet them at your convenience. Home care can get expensive, so you want to be sure the people you'll be dealing with can be relied upon to give you the best service possible.

This article was written by Shirley Cohen, President and C.E.O. of Home Sweet Home Care, Inc., a private-duty home care agency providing quality home care aide services to seniors and convalescing adults in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1990. Shirley founded Home Sweet Home Care in response to her own urgent need and desire to find the right home care help for her mother, who had suffered a sudden and paralyzing stroke. www.homesweethomecare.com

