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Aug 17, 2005

Demographics drive home care

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Contributing Writer

A longer life expectancy, the aging of the baby boomer generation and hospitals discharging patients quicker all have driven up the demand for home health. And Atlanta is no different; some of the city's largest providers are seeing substantial increases in business.

Patti Waller, senior vice president of operations for Amedisys Inc., the parent company of Central Home Health Care, said that in the first quarter of 2005, the company experienced 22 percent growth. "Georgia's growth is consistent with the company's growth," she said.

United Home Care serves 35 Georgia counties through 10 locations and is expected to grow, said Nancy Ponder, regional director of operations for the company, a division of Pruitt Corp. "In Atlanta, the percentage of health-care dollars going to home care was in the single digits a few years ago. Now it is in the double digits," Ponder said.

Mark Oshnock, CEO of Visiting Nurse | Hospice Atlanta which, at 55 years old, is the oldest home health care agency in Atlanta, said about two-thirds of the company's business is home care, while the remaining third is end-of-life care. Oshnock expects that home health care is on the rise.

According to a report by the National Association for Home Care & Hospice, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services estimated total spending for home care as \$34.5 billion in 1997. This figure rose to \$36.1 billion in 2002, rebounding from a low of \$31.7 billion in 2000. Annual expenditures for home health care were projected to be \$38.3 billion in 2003, according to the National Association for Home Care & Hospice.

But the industry is facing growing pains. "As hospitals are attempting to discharge patients earlier, the patient population coming into home care is a bit sicker," Oshnock said. "It is just a fact of life that as they are discharged earlier from the hospital, they are a little more critical than they were five years ago. It is probably one of the biggest challenges we face."

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