

Make Home Care Affordable
By Glenn Grothman

One of the most difficult and saddest decisions in life involves the decision of sending someone to a nursing home. Stroke, Alzheimer's, or simple weakness due to old age can prompt this move. In my prior job, I visited these facilities throughout the Milwaukee area and those in the Washington County are far better than most. Nevertheless, the move from a home, that one has lived in for years, to a place surrounded by strangers is never easy and should be avoided if possible.

Fortunately, a new industry providing in-home companionship services is quickly expanding. Employees, many in their sixties, live with older people, some with early Alzheimer's. It is not unusual for some people to stay overnight. Since much of the time the client is asleep or perhaps watching television, these companions themselves may watch TV, read a book, or even sleep. Nevertheless, even at a low wage, the chance to spend 60 to 80 hours a week with someone can provide a good paycheck, particularly for an older person who may have another income (a pension, social security) as well.

Unfortunately, Wisconsin's Department of Workforce Development, like many government agencies, has decided to step in and cause trouble. Under federal law, companionship services are not subject to normal overtime rules. This makes perfect sense. If someone works a 20-hour shift of which eight hours one is asleep, it makes no sense to have to pay overtime.

The state of Wisconsin has decided to go beyond federal law and require overtime payments. Since almost all of the cost of the services is labor, the industry is forced to either dramatically raise prices, switch workers every eight hours, or provide less service.

At even \$7 an hour the cost of a companion is over \$4,000 a month. If we want to keep people out of nursing homes, we cannot afford much more. Furthermore, even in situations of necessity, older people are reluctant to accept a new stranger living with them. If one cannot work more than eight hours a day, the resident may have to get used to three new people. Furthermore, companions may expect to stay 60 or 70 hours in someone's home – that's where they make their money. If that is not allowed, some companions will look for different lines of work. Finally, counties have a program known as the Community Options Program designed to keep people out of nursing homes. One obvious way is with companions. Since these programs have a fixed number of dollars, an increase cost will mean more people in nursing homes.

Most states do not require overtime for companions. This makes sense. I am using my authority as a Committee Chairman of the Administrative Rules Committee to try and derail Workforces Development's plan. I'm also co-sponsoring legislation to create an exemption for the companionship industry.

Even though these businesses are not unionized, we are fighting the service worker's union. The bureaucracy has dug in its heels with the most highly paid bureaucrat telling me that it is not healthy for anyone to work more than 40 hours a week.

As our society ages, it will become more vital to look for alternatives to nursing home care. Instead of looking for new creative solutions, our Wisconsin government is standing in the way.

Please let me know what you think on this issue. Contact me here in Madison---please call 1-888-534-0058, or in any of the following ways:

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