

ESSENTIAL TOOLS FOR SELECTING A HOME COMPANION AGENCY

Seeking home care for you or your loved one is often confusing and it is vital to know what to look for when selecting a home companion agency. This guide provides you with essential research based criteria and information to safely evaluate providers and assist in navigating this important decision. It is your right and responsibility to ensure that your loved ones are safe and in responsible hands. Remember, an informed decision is the best decision!

Regulations

Currently there are no regulatory agencies that provide oversight to MA Home Companion Agencies. In CT, the Department of Consumer Protection regulates home companion agencies. In Rhode Island the Department of Health regulates home companion agencies.

Review the Contract (also called “Service Plan” or “Service Agreement”)

A contract is a written document provided by a Home Companion Agency to a person utilizing services provided by such agency that should specify the anticipated scope, type, frequency and duration of homemaker or companion services that are to be provided by such agency for the benefit of the person.

- Before committing to an agency, request a copy of their contract and review it.
- Ask who is responsible for providing the caregiver’s food and verify that it is included in the contract.
- Make sure the contract is fully signed before the services are provided. An unsigned contract poses a great liability as you may have no recourse if issues arise.

Ask about the Caregiver that the Agency Suggests:

- How long has the caregiver been working in the field?
- How long has the caregiver been actively working with clients for that agency?
- Has the agency verified the caregiver’s references provided on their employment application?
- Can the agency provide references for the caregiver? If so, contact the references.
- How recently did the agency conduct an in-person interview or video call with the caregiver?
- Does the caregiver have a valid driver’s license or ID? If so, how and when were their IDs verified?
- Was a comprehensive background check conducted?
- Insist on meeting potential caregivers in person before committing to make sure it is a good fit.
- What is the caregiver’s name? Google them.
- Does the caregiver have experience caring for clients with similar needs (i.e. dementia, etc)?
- Does the caregiver have relevant experience? If so what type (i.e. Hoyer Lift, Sera Lift, transfers, bathing etc.)?
- Ask about what type (if any) of training the caregiver has
- If the caregiver will be assisting with transfers or bathing, confirm that he/she is physically able to safely support you or your loved one
- If you or your loved one has dementia or hearing loss, request a caregiver who can speak clearly and loudly.

Request that the Care Plan Include the Following:

- Confirm that the agency will provide a Care Plan
- The Care Plan must detail all of your loved one’s needs and the caregiver’s specific responsibilities. Make sure that you (or your loved one or designated rep.) and the agency sign/date it.
- Request the agency to add a clause in the Care Plan that after significant events (i.e. hospitalizations, loss of a spouse, significant change in health, etc.) that either you, your loved one, or the designated representative be consulted to update the Care Plan as soon as possible after such events. Make sure all Care Plan revisions are signed/dated by both you (or your loved one or designated representative) and the agency.
- If you or your loved one should not be left at home alone or in a vehicle alone by the caregiver, make sure it is clearly documented in the Contract or Care Plan
- Request that the agency document in the Contract or Care Plan that the caregiver record all outings in the Daily Care Log including times of departure and return. This will provide another layer of supervision.
- Ask about whether the agency can provide medications.

How Does the Agency Supervise the Caregiver?

- Ask what procedures the agency has in place to monitor the caregiver during their working hours. If you or your loved one has dementia, request extra supervision of the caregiver (i.e. additional check-ins by the agency supervisor, unscheduled video calls with the caregiver to view you or your loved one, etc.)
- Confirm that the agency will agree to make regular unannounced visits at a mutually agreed upon frequency to ensure you or your loved one is safe. Require that this agreement be documented in the Care Plan. Require that all dates/times of visits be documented and that the notes be available to you or your loved one. There is no regulation requiring unannounced visits.
- Confirm that you, your loved one, or the designated representative will be given the opportunity to sign the caregiver's time sheets to verify the caregiver's working hours. Make sure this clause is clearly documented in either the Contract or Care Plan.
- Confirm that the caregiver will keep and submit a Daily Care Log. Confirm that all copies will be left with you or your loved one. POAs (Power of Attorneys) have a legal right to these records.
- If the caregiver will be transporting you or your loved one in a vehicle, make sure the Care Plan documents whose vehicle will be used. Additionally, update the auto insurance policy to include the caregiver's information if they will be driving a car other than their own.

What is the Caregiver's Schedule?

- Verify that the agency will require the caregiver to take an adequate number of days off.
- Who will be replacing the caregiver during their time off or while the caregiver is on a break?
- How many hours per day is the caregiver considered "off duty" and during what periods? What is the difference if any between meal and break times? How many hours per night is the caregiver is considered "off-duty" for sleep? Verify with the agency that this is all documented on the Contract or Care Plan.

INFORM YOURSELF

Important Facts You Should Know:

- MA provides no oversight or regulation of quality of care of services
- Supervisory visits to clients (announced or unannounced) are not required.
- Most HCA caregivers are required to clock in only 1x/day.
- HCAs are not required to provide caregivers with any specified minimum number of days off.
- HCA caregiver jobs are considered "non-skilled" and require no minimum education, training, or certification.
- HCA caregivers are not required to be vaccinated, fingerprinted, background checked or undergo health exams.

Research the Agency's Legal History and Reviews

- Check the agency's legal history (i.e. past and pending legal actions) and complaints against them. Call: MA Attorney General's Consumer Hotline Consumer Advocacy & Response Division (617) 727-8400. Inquire about both the agency's business registration name as well as their public business name (dba).
- Ask the agency to provide documentation verifying they are insured and bonded
- Consult with care managers in your area (often called "Elder Care Managers" or "Geriatric Care Managers") who are familiar with and often recommend agencies they have vetted. This saves you time, work, and potential risk.
- Do a Google search of the agencies you are considering using both their public business name and registration name.
- Explore websites with online reviews such as:

www.healthgrades.com

www.caring.com

www.consumeraffairs.com

www.aginginplace.org

www.senioradvisor.com

www.bestofhomecare.com

www.familyassets.com

www.yelp.com

TO DO BEFORE CAREGIVER SERVICES BEGINS

- Install cameras. Place them in rooms where you or your loved one will spend time. If possible, all exterior doors including the garage should be in camera sight. Video footage could provide evidence supporting potential future allegations. Purchase cameras with a cell phone app providing the ability to monitor you (or your loved one) and the caregiver from a cell phone. Many apps allow you to speak and hear through the cameras. If you or your loved one is in a facility, verify the camera regulations. Many facilities allow cameras in residents' rooms however some in-house caregivers may have the choice not to care for residents with cameras.
- When meeting the caregiver, ask to see their ID card or driver's license and verify that the ID picture resembles the person in your presence.
- If you or your loved one has a POA (Power of Attorney), provide that documentation to the agency. It is a POA's right to view caregiver's daily care logs. Additionally, inform the agency who may have permission to receive updates and information about you or your loved one.
- Store all sensitive documents in a safe or locked room or closet. Replacing a standard doorknob with one that locks is quick and inexpensive. A handyman can easily do it.
- Remove all valuables (jewelry, cash, etc.) from the home. Alternatively, store them in a safe, locked room/closet or bank safe deposit box. Note: Some agency contracts/service agreements include a stipulation that neither the agency nor caregivers are liable for missing items.

TO DO WHEN CAREGIVER SERVICES BEGIN

Trust Your Instincts

If a caregiver causes you or a family member to feel uneasy, ask for a replacement.

Make Unexpected Visits

Stop in unannounced to check on your loved one as often as possible to make sure the caregiver is present and that your loved one is safe. Alternatively, ask family members or friends to drop by unannounced to check on you. Vary the times of visits. This provides a real time snapshot.

Maintain Constant Communication

- Make an unannounced "Face Time" or "WhatsApp" video call to your loved one. If they are unable to manage this, do so with the caregiver directly so you may see and converse with your loved one. If the caregiver cannot accommodate a call at the time, specify that you simply wish to see your loved one to ensure the caregiver is there and that they're safe. If the caregiver says your loved one is asleep, ask the caregiver to quickly show your loved one quickly so you can verify they are safe. If the caregiver says your loved one is in the bathroom, call back in 10-15 minutes. It is essential to know your loved one is safe.
- Contact the caregiver at various times to request them to e-mail or text updates/photos of your loved one.
- Call the caregiver at the beginning and end of each day for details about that day's plans. If the caregiver shares details about outings to events/programs, check them out and if you can, verify their attendance.