The distance between care and home

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Growing older doesn't always mean leaving home. But for seniors in rural southern New Mexico, getting the help they need to stay there can be difficult.

Long distances, transportation costs and limited staffing can complicate in-home assistance, leaving families to balance caregiving responsibilities with jobs, childcare and their own daily needs. Shawna Blount, general manager of Comfort Keepers in Las Cruces, said finding caregivers who live near outlying communities or can travel to them remains a challenge.

“Sometimes the clients in that area will not be able to have as much care on a weekly basis just because of the struggles of getting individuals to work in those areas,” Blount said.

Comfort Keepers provides nonmedical in-home assistance to older adults in Las Cruces and surrounding communities, including help with bathing, dressing, meals, transportation

and companionship. Blount, who joined the company in 2023, works with caregivers, clients, and their families.

The difficulties extend beyond filling a shift. Blount said rough roads and weather can interfere with reaching clients in more remote areas, while she believes transportation costs may be contributing to a decline in caregiver applications. Staffing levels fluctuate, she said, but the company was experiencing hiring challenges at the time of her interview.

Rodell Ray, who has worked as a caregiver for nearly 27 years, including seven with Comfort Keepers, said rural residents can face another obstacle when trying to access community services. He recalled difficulty enrolling clients in Meals on Wheels when they lived outside the county served by a program.

The City of Las Cruces lists living within city limits as one of the eligibility requirements for its home-delivered meals program. Applicants must also meet other criteria and undergo an assessment to determine whether they qualify. Ray's daily work involves helping older adults with meals, bathing, grooming, and grocery shopping, along with spending time with them. For the people he serves, that assistance can help preserve something they are reluctant to lose.

“It's freedom, basically. Independence, mainly. That's the hardest thing to get rid of, to let go of your independence,” Ray said.

That desire to remain at home can place considerable pressure on relatives who step in when outside assistance is unavailable or too expensive. Blount said family members sometimes struggle to manage employment and childcare while caring for an older loved one.

“Burnout is probably one of the biggest things that we see in the family members that are trying to help loved ones that need care,” Blount said.

Epifanio Torres knows what those responsibilities can demand. After his mother died, Torres brought his father, a retired Army sergeant, from Truth or Consequences to live with him in Las Cruces. Torres said his father had several health conditions, including Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease, and eventually suffered a fall while Torres was working.

Concerned about leaving his father alone, Torres said he quit his job to care for him. He prepared meals, cleaned the house and took his father to medical appointments, but there was one task his father was uncomfortable having him perform: bathing.

That was when the family turned to Comfort Keepers.

Torres said a caregiver named Eddie began helping his father bathe, change his sheets and keep his bedroom and bathroom clean. Over time, their relationship grew beyond those daily tasks. They played cards, listened to Mexican music and shared jokes and stories.

His father enjoyed having someone to sit with and listen to him, Torres recalled, while the assistance gave Torres time to manage household responsibilities and occasionally return to plumbing work.

Torres said his father was determined not to live in a nursing home. After a stay in a care facility, he made his son promise he would never place him in one again.

Torres brought his father home, where Eddie continued helping with his care. His father has since died, but Torres remembers how much he looked forward to those visits.

Ray said he understands the demands of family caregiving from personal experience because he also has caregiving responsibilities outside his job. When he visits a client, he encourages relatives to use that time to run errands or take a break rather than continue trying to manage everything themselves.

The relationships formed through that work bring their own challenges. Ray said one of the hardest parts of caregiving is becoming close to clients while maintaining professional boundaries. He tries to offer companionship and emotional support without allowing the relationship to become overly personal.

Blount said familiar surroundings can be especially important for older adults experiencing dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Remaining at home may provide a sense of comfort, she said, while allowing relatives to stay closely involved in their care.

But the arrangement often depends on support beyond the household. Blount pointed to food banks and medical transportation services as resources that can help older residents, particularly in communities where reaching medical care requires a longer trip.

Affordability remains another consideration. Blount said families must weigh the expense of paid assistance against other care options, with the best arrangement depending on an individual's needs and the support relatives can provide.

For Ray, the goal is to help older adults continue their routines for as long as their circumstances allow. After nearly three decades in the profession, he said families should not

feel they have to manage every responsibility alone.

“Just hang in there, reach out if you need support — if you need help, talk to somebody,” Ray said. “There's resources.”