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QuietCare seen as potential lifesaver for senior citizens

By: Robert C. Pollack , Staff

SOUTHINGTON - You are a senior citizen with a number of medical problems that concern your family and have established patterns of behavior ranging from the number of bathroom visits a day to how often you open the refrigerator door or a case concerning various medications.

But on this night, you stay in the bathroom for more than 30 minutes and miss your 9 p.m. medications. Two small white sensors go off, sending a red alert to a New York computer in a life-changing system called QuietCare, run by Living Independently Group Inc.

After a quick computer analysis, a pager owned by your selected caregiver is alerted and an identical computer analysis is sent to that caregiver's computer, no matter how far away he or she is located.

A quick phone call later and help is on the way. If whomever is on call finds such help is not needed, at least the caregiver is called and told everything is all right.

Mulberry Gardens of Southington is the first senior care community in Connecticut to use the QuietCare system to help serve its residents. So far, 10 of the 100 clients in its plush, \$11 million building at 48 Mulberry St. have chosen to employ it as part of a pilot program and, according to executive director Perry Phillips, it has been well-received.

Mulberry Gardens - a 10-year-old assisted living, adult day program and memory care services center - is paying \$100 for each QuietCare installation and \$60 a month for monitoring services. But Donna Cusano, vice president of marketing for the Living Independently Group, said the cost for a senior living in a home or apartment would be \$179 and \$79.50, respectively - though the latter price might vary according to the number of sensors employed.

The QuietCare monitoring system was developed over a 12-year period by two Drexel University professors and has been commercially available the past three years. And while at first blush it sounds like something out of George Orwell's "1984" - Big Brother is watching you - Phillips is quick to point out the system is only installed when residents and/or their families request it.

"It is not invasive at all, and if you aren't looking for the sensors" Phillips said, "you would not even know they are there."

In one Mulberry Gardens studio apartment, five of the white, tube-shaped sensors about four inches long and two inches in diameter were placed strategically. One was above the door leading to the hallway and another on the wall above the bathroom door. A third was in the bathroom and a fourth was near the bed in the 400-square-foot living quarters.

Finally, one was placed on the medications case.

Before a QuietCare system is made operational, it measures and analyzes the habits, behavior patterns and typical motions of a selected client. Trips to the bathroom, bathroom stays, the number of times a client typically gets out of bed at night, use of medications and other patterns are recorded and stored.

Once the system is activated, changes in such habits cause the sensors to send signals to the Independent Living Group computer. A yellow signal means the situation needs to be analyzed while a red signal calls for an immediate visit and possible intervention, triggering the caregivers' beeper. In the case of Mulberry

Gardens, that means the chief of nursing.

For a senior citizen living in a private residence, it means the selected caregiver.

A green signal means all is well.

"It gives a lot of comfort to the family not living with a senior," Cusano said.

Erica Copes, director of marketing and business development for Mulberry Gardens, agreed. She pointed to a computer in Phillips' office that showed the patterns of behavior for the residents covered by Quiet Care in the recent past. A lot of the system "dots" were green. Many were yellow, which meant they had to be analyzed. A couple were red, which required a quick trip to the apartment.

"We decided to put a 30-minute bathroom stay on the system," said Laura Tarantino, Mulberry Gardens director of nursing. "Anything longer than that and the sensor is activated."

She said the system clearly provides a feeling of security for those it protects. "It lets us know if anything is happening out of the ordinary," she said.

Mulberry Gardens offers a pendant for its residents that, with a press of a button, can alert the staff of a fall or other crisis through a walkie-talker system. But this pendant has nothing to do with QuietCare.

According to Cusano, a similar system can be augmented through QuietCare Plus, a pendant worn as an additional safety precaution. If anyone wearing it falls down or is in trouble, a simple press of a button can send help on the way.

Purchasing QuietCare Plus, she said, raises the cost of installation by \$100 to \$299 and increases the monthly charge by \$10 to \$89.95.

According to George Boyajian, executive vice president of Independent Living Group, Inc., roughly 10.5 million senior citizens in this country live alone, and between 7 million and 10 million adult children are caring for their parents from a distance.

He said the system reduces stress for a growing number of baby boomers caring for an aging relative and gives them peace of mind as well through its 24-hour monitoring.

"The QuietCare system uses small wireless sensors, not cameras or microphones, to detect patterns of daily activity, while maintaining privacy. Whether a mile or ocean apart, family members can log on and find out how their loved one is doing, eliminating the worry and concern that comes with living remotely or traveling," he said.

Mulberry Gardens - now under the Central Connecticut Health Alliance umbrella that includes the Orchards of Southington, the Southington Care Center and the Hospital of Central Connecticut (the merged Bradley Memorial Hospital and New Britain General Hospital) - will be studying the QuietCare system carefully in the months ahead.

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