

Nursing home costs creep up

The price of a year's care in Utah growing slower than nationwide

By Lesley Mitchell - The Salt Lake Tribune - Article Last Updated: 04/30/2008 12:57:01 PM MDT

The average cost of a year's worth of nursing-home care in Utah rose 13 percent over the past five years to \$57,332, a new report shows. It's below both the national increase of 17 percent and the average U.S. cost of \$76,460, the report released by Genworth Financial said. Each year, Genworth, a financial services company, surveys more than 10,000 long-term care providers nationwide. Of all categories, nursing-home care is the most expensive because it is provided around the clock. The cost of long-term care at the state level depends on a variety of factors, such as worker wages and the cost of leasing or buying a facility.

"The bottom line is that, if left unmanaged, the escalating costs could have painful personal consequences for this generation of retirees and their families," Buck Stinson, president of Genworth's long-term-care insurance division, said in an e-mail.

According to the study, the average cost of two other types of long-term care, including assisted living and adult day health care, also are lower in Utah. People living in assisted living facilities live independently but receive at least some level of assistance with daily living.

Adult day health care provides supervised care during standard daytime hours only.

Utah is slightly higher than the national average in the home care category, with the average hourly rate for a non-Medicare certified, state-licensed home health aide in Utah being \$20.56, compared with \$19.18 nationally. The cost of long-term care in Utah and other states has been climbing in recent years right along with the cost of health care, said Dirk Anjewierden, executive director of the Health Care Association. In fact, many of the problems in the health care industry, such as rising costs and labor shortages, have trickled down into long-term care. "Just try to find a nurse right now," Anjewierden said. Terri Holland, co-owner of Home Caregivers Home Health in Salt Lake City, said rising gasoline prices have driven up the cost of home health care, which already has been pushed up by labor shortages.

"Every time I go to the gas station, I think, this is going to hit us hard," she said. One month ago, Holland said she had to increase the mileage reimbursement rate for employees who have to drive to patients' homes, which drives up her small company's expenses.

The higher gas prices actually have aggravated the labor shortage, she said, because health care professionals who used to be willing to drive now want jobs that don't require driving.

"I've had some employees say 'I'm just going to go work at a hospital so I don't have to drive,' " she said. Lincoln Nehring, Medicaid Policy Director for the Utah Health Policy Project in Salt Lake City, said while his organization traditionally has focused on the issue of affordable health care access, the issue of long-term care is becoming more and more of a concern. Just as with health care, access and cost are the chief concerns, he said. "Our population is getting older, but there just aren't easy answers on this issue," he said. "It's one of those things we as a society has to figure out."