

## With a bit of help



Sherry Harvey cleans up at Carol Graening's apartment in Broken Arrow. Rather than living in a nursing facility, Graening gets help from Harvey with everyday chores three times a week through the Medicaid ADvantage Waiver Program. Photos by MATT BARNARD/Tulsa World

## Program assists live-at-home seniors

BY SHANNON MUCHMORE  
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**B**ROKEN ARROW — Keeping Carol Graening at home costs the state one-third of what it would cost to house her in a nursing home, and she is certainly happier to have her own space and schedule.

She is able to live alone because of the help she receives from a personal care attendant, who comes three times a week to help with cooking, cleaning, laundry and errands. It's paid for through the Medicaid ADvantage Waiver Program.

"If it weren't for this program, I could not be in my home," Graening said recently during an interview in her living room. "I could not be by myself."

The program served more than 22,000 people in 2010, but providers say its success is in danger if there is no increase in the Medicaid reimbursement for direct care workers soon.

Personal care attendants make \$14.52 an hour, which a 2008 legislative study found is barely enough to meet the basic needs for a single parent and child, although it is twice the federal minimum wage.



Carol Graening (right) and aide Sherry Harvey chat at Graening's apartment in Broken Arrow. ADvantage allows Graening to live with more independence.

The study concluded that the reimbursement rate should be increased so that such workers are paid at least \$16.35 an hour.

Providers would also like to see the state adopt presumptive Medicaid eligibility, which would allow people to

begin receiving home care immediately, instead of after they have been through the lengthy approval process, said Steve Goforth, president of Oxford Health-Care, which provides Graening's service.



**Sherry Harvey cleans the kitchen at Carol Graening's apartment in Broken Arrow. Personal care assistants provide a variety of services to help at-need seniors remain safely in their homes. Services are covered by the Medicaid ADvantage Waiver Program.** MATT BARNARD/Tulsa World

## WAIVER:

Help for Graening costs \$8,800 a year. Nursing homes cost the state \$35,000.

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That provision is included in the Oklahoma Choices for Long-Term Care Act, which is awaiting final approval in the state House. The act also initiates a request for proposals to contract the day-to-day operation of the waiver program, which is currently managed by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

At a recent DHS commission meeting, Director Howard Hendrick said the rates paid to providers will not be raised but will also not be reduced.

"Aging services has the highest percentage of state dollars, but most are tied into the ADvantage Waiver, where rate reductions are being avoided," Hendrick said. "Therefore, service reductions will be made in targeted ways to minimize as much reduction to

service delivery capacity as possible."

Graening, 85, lives in an apartment complex in Broken Arrow with other Medicaid recipients. She can manage many things by herself but can't tackle all that needs doing.

The cost for Graening's services is \$8,800 a year. A nursing home would cost about \$35,000 a year, according to data from Oxford.

Graening doesn't want to burden her children, but she also doesn't want to leave her home, where her favorite pictures are on the wall and she can have a friend over for breakfast.

Sitting in a soft, blue chair next to a stack of large-print books from the Tulsa City-County Library, Graening talked about the importance of staying at home as long as she is able.

"I love my apartment," she said. "I love looking out on my lawn."

Graening's case manager, Mary Escue, said the type of care a person in need receives is adapted on a case-by-case basis. Some need help only once or twice a week, others more often. Aides can help with bathing, household chores,

grocery shopping or picking up medicines.

Escue said she believes the ADvantage waiver program can help the state financially and make families more comfortable.

"Without programs like this, our nursing homes would be filling up with people that don't need to be there," she said. "And our state could be even more broke than it already is."

Despite the savings possible through the ADvantage program, participation has decreased by 11 percent in the past two years, according to Waiver Management Information Systems.

Goforth said the public and state legislators need to be educated about the needs of the aging population and the costs associated with it.

The population of people older than age 65 will increase by 66 percent in the next 20 years, he said.

"There needs to be a wakeup call," he said.

World staff writer Ginnie Graham contributed to this story.

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