
Integrating Home Modification and Home Care: The HouseWorks Model

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Introduction

For the past ten years, HouseWorks, a private-pay home care company in Eastern Massachusetts, has provided a unique combination of home modification services that help frail seniors age in place. In addition to installing grab bars, hand-held showers, and other adaptive equipment, the HouseWorks home modification team cleans out clutter-filled homes and provides other heavy-chore services that clients cannot get — or will not accept — from a conventional cleaning company. HouseWorks also brings the culture of its home care operations to its home modification division, resulting in a service that combines technical expertise with sensitivity to the concerns of senior customers, a commitment to responding with urgency to all requests, and the ability to meet home modification needs under the most challenging circumstances. The effectiveness of this approach to home modification for frail seniors has been confirmed by the company's reputation among local eldercare providers. HouseWorks is the go-to resource for discharge planners, visiting nurses, housing sponsors, and senior service providers whose elderly clients need home modification services to continue living at home or to return home following a hospitalization or rehab stay.

Staff Selection, Training, and Supervision

Like quality home care, effective home modification services for seniors requires more than technical proficiency. Not only does the HouseWorks home modification team have unmatched experience installing grab bars in seniors' homes — having done it thousands of times under more conditions that can be imagined — but they're also as skilled as the best home health aide in overcoming client resistance to services and inspiring trust. The personal qualities that HouseWorks seeks in a home care paraprofessional — patience, empathy, insight, and commitment to improving

the quality of our client's lives — we also seek in the trades people we hire to install adaptive equipment and clean out clutter-filled homes.

Like our home care staff, the home modification team is trained to provide great service for elderly customers who may have some degree of cognitive impairment and are often anxious about allowing someone they do not know into their homes. Home modification staff can also count on back-up from the office to help them when they encounter unexpected difficulties, either due to the client's behavior or the condition of the home. Supervisory staff are always available to problem-solve with the worker by phone or to join him or her at the client's home.

Taking Time to Listen

Unlike a younger adult with disabilities resulting from an accident or chronic condition, older seniors rarely research adaptive equipment options or initiate home modification projects themselves. Typically, seniors will resist changes in their homes, and their resistance often increases as health declines and choices narrow. Any change in familiar surroundings is experienced as yet another loss, and accepting adaptive equipment means acknowledging physical decline.

Seniors are more likely to accept home modifications if they are introduced by a person who takes time to listen, respects their feelings, and works with them to make choices that strengthen rather than weaken their sense of control over their lives. Whether providing home care or home modification services, HouseWorks is committed to listening to what the customer wants first, rather than telling them what we think they need.

Taking this approach when providing home modification for seniors is just as important to HouseWorks' success as familiarity with the best equipment and technology.

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Responding with Urgency

Since few seniors modify their homes in anticipation of future needs, requests for home modification services are often triggered by a health crisis such as a stroke or a hip fracture. Typically, HouseWorks gets the call when a senior is ready to be discharged from the hospital or rehab facility, but cannot go home until essential modifications have been made. HouseWorks often provides same-day response to these types of requests. Clients and referral sources can also expect to talk with an informed person whenever they phone HouseWorks rather than having to leave a voice mail message and wait for a return call. Like its attention to customer sensitivities, HouseWorks' willingness and ability to respond with urgency is consistent with our home care practices and distinguishes the company's home modification services.

Coping With Clutter and Neglect

The typical home modification provider is unlikely to have the patience or resources to deal with conditions he or she may find in an elderly client's home. Sent to install a grab bar, a handyman may find that simply getting to the bathroom from the front door is like running an obstacle course due to the clutter that blocks the way. Home care providers are all too familiar with this scenario and will sometimes refuse to provide services until the home has been cleaned out. By providing heavy-chore and clean-out services with the same sensitivity that staff brings to personal care, HouseWorks makes it

possible for clients to access both home care and home adaptation services that help them continue living at home.

Even if clutter is not a problem, installing adaptive equipment in a senior's home can be challenging due to other complications such as water-damaged walls, obsolete plumbing fixtures, loose bathroom tiles, and similar problems that develop when a homeowner is no longer on top of household maintenance and repairs. To provide effective home modification services for frail elderly clients, HouseWorks often must resolve basic home maintenance and repair problems as well.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of HouseWorks' Home Modification Division is based on a mix of technical expertise, clinical skills, business connections, and service standards that are typically associated with separate industries or professions. The model's success does not depend on combining these elements within a single company, but it does require cross-training, interdisciplinary collaboration, and shared passion for doing things right.

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• about HouseWorks

Founded in 1998, HouseWorks is an innovative company dedicated to helping seniors live independently, no matter how challenging their circumstances. The company's mission is to provide the most responsive and reliable home care services available

house  works

setting the standard in home care