

# Help available for Medi-Cal woes

Dorothy and Den had a problem. Ben had suffered a stroke and after his initial recovery, he was moved to a local nursing home. Dorothy was worried about her ability to pay for the nursing home. Ben's nursing home was running about \$4,000 per month and his pension and Social Security came to about \$2,000. Dorothy was short about \$2,000 per month.

She went to her local county social services offices and a clerk told her that she could not qualify Ben for Medi-Cal help if they owned a home and had assets greater than \$3,000 in savings.

Dorothy and Ben did own a modest home worth about \$120,000 with a \$50,000 mortgage. Their savings amounted to \$20,000. Assuming she had been given the correct information, Dorothy liquidated her savings trying to pay the monthly shortfall. She sold her home and after paying off the mortgage, real estate fees and selling costs, she had about \$60,000 left. In less than three years, she was almost broke.

She again made her way to the Medi-Cal office, and was angered to find out that she had been given bad information. She could have qualified Ben for Medi-Cal benefits without selling her home and she could have kept all of her savings.

I asked Julie Isley, regional



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manager of Medi-Cal Regulation Specialists, how this could have happened. She said, "It is not uncommon for the counties to place their newest Medi-Cal representatives on the telephone or at the front desk to answer Medi-Cal qualification questions. If the question isn't posed clearly or if the representative doesn't check with their supervisors, poor or incorrect answers are sometimes given to the public."

According to Kathryn Humphres, owner of Medi-Cal Regulation Specialists, there are several major problems with getting through the maze of problems with government.

"First, the application process is complicated. As with many government programs, there is a Medi-Cal language understood by the case workers, but usually is "Greek" to the average person.

Second, the verification process can be difficult. Finding

all the records and financial account information may be extremely tedious and in some cases virtually impossible. In some situations, the government case worker may ask for information that is not required. Again, the typical applicant wouldn't know if the information is required.

Third, if an applicant's claim is denied by a case worker, the case can be appealed to higher authorities. Most applicants just take the bad news and let it go.

Fourth, the process is dynamic. The provisions of the Medi-Cal program change constantly.

The whole process of receiving government aid is a ticklish one. For many, it sounds like "being on the dole." It isn't. Granted, Medi-Cal is not for the wealthy, but it is also not just for the destitute. Taxpayers have been paying their taxes year end and year out, and if qualified, the benefits should be paid.

Also, many potential applicants have heard of stories about ways to qualify for Medi-Cal. Hiding assets, making gifts to children, transferring accounts to others, creating living trusts are all rumored techniques for earlier Medi-Cal qualification. There are many things you can legally do and some that are not so legal. Just knowing the rules is the most important step.

There is a new industry that is springing up to make this process easier. It is called "geriatric case management." Their purpose is to help seniors and/or their families deal with the issues of the elderly, including government programs.

These private case managers work to coordinate the care and services for the elderly. Medi-Cal qualification may be just one part of their services.

Their services usually cost between \$50 and \$75 per hour.

Kathryn Humphres said, "Our initial assessment fee is \$90. From there we can determine if an individual needs more help. Thereafter, we bill at \$55 per hour. Our average client pays about \$500 to get through the Medi-Cal qualification process."

After seeing the agony that several clients who have gone through with this Medi-Cal process, \$500 sounds like a terrific bargain. There may also be more to their work than just Medi-Cal qualification. Estate planning issues often arise. Long-term care nursing insurance is another area of concern. Using community resources and finding them is also another aspect of their work. Every family is unique and so are their elder issues.

Medi-Cal Regulation Specialists have offices in Rohnert Park serving Napa and Sonoma counties, Redwood City serving the South Bay and Newport Beach serving Southern California. Their toll free number is (877) 677-6334.

Also, if you would like a copy of a private geriatric case manager checklist, give me a call or drop me a note.

The story of Dorothy and Ben is not unique or rare. You may be thinking, no one would simply take the word of a counter case worker, but the elderly are trusting and often abused financially and otherwise.

**Notable quote:** "Most people never realize how much time they've wasted making money until they're asked to cash their life in." — Anonymous

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