



# Private Duty Homecare Association

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## How Two Private Duty Home Care Agencies Used Technology to Improve Operations

**By Alexis Gray** - Private duty home care agencies throughout the country are following the trend toward adopting new and innovative technologies to assist with daily operations. Though some snags in the road should be expected with any major change, the benefits of new technology outweigh any initial problems, said Bob Roth, Managing Partner, Cypress HomeCare Solutions LLC, located in Phoenix, Ariz.

Private duty home care is a high-touch business, said Roth. "No disrespect to my colleagues, but many agencies are antiquated. They are living in the Dark Ages and not utilizing the resources out there that could make them better at what they do," said Roth. "The solutions are out there and are economically priced - I can't emphasize that enough. In other industries, the solutions are very expensive, but in the private duty home care industry it's almost foolish not to take advantage of them."

When Roth came to work for Cypress in 2003, the company was using an antiquated DOS-based system that offered no contact management database. "They used paper for everything, and files upon files," said Roth. In order to update the office's operations, Roth bought a copying machine, a scanner and began introducing newer technologies including electronic facsimiles.

Roth said implementing the new technology was a no-brainer for him, because he was making his company's back end operations as efficient as possible, allowing more focus on the front end operations. "We were able to increase efficiency, quality assurances, marketing and performance," said Roth. He said Cypress can now track referrals, employees and potential hires.

"We now have a permanent copy of everyone's timecard in digitized form, which was the first order of business. The second was to upgrade the server and workstations in the office," said Roth. Cypress upgraded to the latest servers and software and moved to a computer program for the accounting operations. Roth said any business with less than \$10 million in revenue should use accounting software such as QuickBooks.

The final component to Cypress' technological upgrades was finding a solution for scheduling and staffing. As far as scheduling, "With our new system we can look at things more globally and see where people can get extra hours," said Roth. The Web-based system currently used by Cypress offers the company the ability to know where the business is at any given time, said Roth. "We were looking for a solution that would allow and afford our staffers and schedulers to be able to access all information relative to a client or caregiver, on real time," he said.

Cypress' caregivers can access patient information from home, said Roth, and make changes "on the fly." Through the new system, scheduling errors are also limited. "One of the beauties of the system is it offers automatic assistance to make sure we are in human resources compliance," said Roth.

Among the problems Cypress had with implementing the new technology, Roth said his company underestimated the requirement as far as the bandwidth that is needed to use the system efficiently. "It takes awhile to adjust anytime you implement change. Change is good, but there are barriers you have to overcome," he said. Many of Cypress' staff members had some old habits to break as far as using the new system. Roth said the company encourages staff to plug new information in the system while it is still fresh in their minds. Though it took some effort, staff members are so used to the new procedure that in some cases they are plugging the information into the system as it's coming to them, said Roth. Roth said that while he feels the mature workforce truly understands the nature of private duty home care work and is an asset to the company, it is challenging to find an older employee who has experience with technology.

By utilizing technology for the company's back end operations, the back office is as seamless as possible, while remaining high-touch. "We are very one-on-one when doing business with people because you don't ever want to lose that - you'll fail to exist," said Roth. When Cypress employees visit a client, they are unsupervised, and must record all information on the spot and later record it in the system. As for the company's eventual goals, Roth said he would like his caregivers to take laptops on case visits.

Other agencies dealing with private duty home care have focused on the technologies that can further their clients' well-being. Karen Thomas, president of Oxford Healthcare Home Health Agency in Springfield, Mo., said her company received quite a technological overhaul with the implementation of telemedicine. In 2002, Thomas' company started using telemedicine, and purchased monitors to track a person's heart rate; blood pressure; oxygen; weight; temperature and blood sugar rate.

The monitors are set up in the homes of Oxford's clients, and agency staff teaches the patients how to use the equipment. The monitor operates through a regular telephone line, said Thomas, so a person can check their vital signs immediately when they wake up and that information is transmitted to the agency. The equipment also asks the client a series of questions regarding their health status. When the agency sees that a person's data is abnormal, the system will triage patients for the home care agency.

Thomas said, "The monitoring system does a lot of things for us. It enables us to have some sort of contact with the patient on a daily basis so they know if they're fitting into parameters or having a problem. If there is a rapid weight gain with a congestive heart failure patient, then we know immediately that's an issue," said Thomas. "The equipment helps us to schedule visits to home when they are needed, rather than on an arbitrary schedule. By doing that, it also gives us a wonderful opportunity to educate patients. For instance, if a diabetic's sugar level is high at certain levels a day, we can find out what they're eating and if they got enough sleep or exercise."

Thomas said the equipment can also give a patient's physician accurate information so the doctor can "make the right call" as to whether further action needs to be taken. Thomas said physicians are provided with accurate health information, in case a client does not come forward with things that are going wrong with their health. "The doctors say it's almost as if the equipment is taking calls for them because it's easier for the patient to figure out what is wrong and if anything needs to be done," said Thomas. The equipment has also significantly reduced visits to hospital emergency rooms, she said.

When Oxford initially bought the equipment, the manufacturer sent its employees to train the agency's staff. The machines were introduced to Oxford's client base with very little resistance, said Thomas. "The machine happens to be very simple to use, and we have very few people who did not want to use it - and there were some people who were quite elderly," said Thomas. The telemedicine machines are useful even for those who are vision-impaired, she said, because "it talks to you!"

Oxford's original intention for implementing this technology was due to the nursing shortage. "We wanted to find a way to provide the best of care and also deal with employee shortages," said Thomas. The new technology provided Oxford with more benefits than the company had anticipated. "We saw it as a way to connect with the patient, especially when the patient doesn't know they need help or something might be getting worse with their health." She added the equipment gives Oxford's employees closer contact with clients, while also improving the quality of care.

Thomas said the equipment has really made a positive difference in her company's operations, and she recommends that other private duty home care organizations consider this type of technology. "People are really involved with this thing," said Thomas. "Patients and clients feel they have input in taking care of themselves."