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Photo by David Tucker

Local home health agency offers services a la carte

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PORT ORANGE -- A 92-year-old widow fell asleep on her couch one evening. When she awoke, she had trouble moving her legs.

So, she touched a button on an emergency-alert pendant and, within minutes, a nurse was at her side, checking her vital signs.

"It turned out she was OK and didn't need to go to the hospital," said Barbara DeBernardo, a nurse with the newly launched HomeFree Extended Family.

The client, who prefers to identify herself just by her first name, Charlotte, said she was glad she didn't have to dial 9-1-1. "I don't like all those bells and whistles coming up to the house," she said, referring to the EVAC ambulance and city fire engine that responds to all emergency calls in Port Orange.

A few days later, DeBernardo returned to Charlotte's home to help her do a few arm-and-leg strengthening exercises with a two-pound strap-on weight. She also made phone calls to help her patient set up an appointment with an eye doctor. Once a week, an Extended Family staff member does Charlotte's grocery shopping and prepares seven dinners that Charlotte can pop into a microwave.

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Charlotte still drives a car short distances during daylight hours, mostly to church services. After nightfall, she depends on Extended Family or friends for transportation.

Extended Family, with a staff of eight, is the latest licensed home health agency to join 35 others in bringing medical and non-medical services into the residences of Volusia-Flagler's senior population. It is seeking to distinguish itself from its competition by selling memberships, costing about \$125 a month, which provide a basic package of services. Members then can add extra services on an a la carte basis. They range from simple walks around the block to day trips, yoga lessons, gardening and investment counseling.

"We also do advocacy if our clients have to go into a hospital or nursing home," said Angela DeBernardo, Barbara's daughter and executive director of the agency. "We'll bring flowers, check up on their care, doing anything we can to decrease their chances of infection, a common problem when seniors are hospitalized."

Since opening in January, the Jackson Street organization has signed on nearly a dozen home-based clients and a few others in nursing homes. In most cases, out-of-state relatives sought out the agency for help in keeping tabs on their frail elders.

Charlotte said she realized she needed some outside help when she suffered fainting spells due to medication. A niece in Virginia visited for a while and then arranged for regular check-ups for her aunt by Extended Family.

The Jackson Street organization is the first franchised branch of a company started in 2005 by nurse Barbara Trimble in Portsmouth, N.H. Its other operations include branches in Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Barbara DeBernardo works as an obstetrics nurse at Halifax Medical Center, but she said she is considering an early retirement buyout that Halifax has offered her. She and her three daughters, who also are nurses, have known the Trimble family for years and like their company's highly personalized approach to elder care.

"We take time to match a client to the right caregiver," she said. "That person stays with the client long-term. We don't send a lot of different strangers into their home."

Extended Family accepts private long-term care insurance but isn't certified as a Medicare provider. The DeBernardos said that gives them flexibility to provide care the patient desires rather than be restricted by government reimbursement limits.