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Interim to offer Home Health Care & Staffing services in August

By : TAINA ROSA
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*E*xpects to employ more than 100 before the end of the year

The local franchise of Florida-based Interim HealthCare, the nation's largest combined homecare and supplemental staffing services provider, expects to add two new services to its Puerto Rico operations in August: Home Health Care & Staffing.

In January, the local franchise opened for business in the local healthcare industry offering HomeStyle, one of Interim HealthCare's three services. HomeStyle provides practical nurses, nonclinical personal assistants, and companions for the elderly and people of all ages with disabilities.

Home Health Care—the only one of the three services covered by Medicare—provides the elderly with physical, speech, and occupational therapy. This division will operate from Carolina. The Staffing service helps all kinds of health professionals find temporary employment in medical offices, hospitals, and pharmaceutical companies. This division will operate from San Francisco Tower, in front of San Francisco Hospital, in Río Piedras.

Setting up the three services required an investment of about \$1 million, and these services are expected to employ more than 100 before the end of the year, said local Interim HealthCare President Milton Cruz, adding that Home Health Care and the Staffing service will operate with 20 employees each. HomeStyle currently employs 45.

Home Health Care Services will be housed in a 1,250-square-foot office on Carolina's Fragoso Avenue. It will serve the people of Carolina, Trujillo Alto, Canóvanas, and Loíza, Cruz said.

Lourdes Silva, executive director of HomeStyle, explained that introducing Home Health Care services is expected to increase the local Interim HealthCare franchise's customer base from its current total of 36—served by HomeStyle—to more than 500 by the end of the year. "In HomeStyle, [because of the nature of the service] our employees can see an average of two clients a day, while each Home Health Care employee can see up to six or seven clients in one day. This is why we believe we can achieve such significant growth in our client base this year," Silva explained.

Cruz said it took him two years, after submitting the application to the Puerto Rico Department of Health, the issuing agency, to obtain the certificate of need & convenience (CNC) required by local government to open the Carolina Home Health Care office. He

attributed the delay to rival companies' opposition to increased competition. He declined to say which companies had opposed his receiving a CNC.

Some of the largest local companies offering similar services on the island are San Lucas Home Care in Ponce, Guaynabo Home Care, Condado Home Care, and Nazareno Home Care in San Juan.

Foreseeing more delays in obtaining the required permits, Cruz has already applied for CNCs to expand Home Health Care services to San Juan, Caguas, Bayamón, Arecibo, Ponce, and their adjacent municipalities. The intended purpose of a CNC is to ensure a better distribution of healthcare services within the population.

Cruz, who also owns San Francisco Hospital in Río Piedras, explained Interim HealthCare's services are more cost-effective for families who need home-care for an elderly or disabled loved one than those provided by a nursing home. "In a nursing home, you pay for 24-hour care and service, while with us [Interim Health Care] you only pay for the hours the services are provided," Cruz said, pointing out that the company's services range in cost from \$10 to \$13 per hour. The average monthly cost for full nursing-home care is \$800, according to industry figures.

The demand for home healthcare services is expected to grow dramatically in the next several years. The first wave of baby boomers is just reaching retirement age, and U.S. Census figures reveal there are about 553,000 people over the age of 65 in Puerto Rico, nearly 14% of the population.

The census estimates the number of senior citizens on the island will increase to 1 million or 22% of the population by 2025.

Interim HealthCare, with 2003 revenue of \$600 million, is the nation's oldest and most successful healthcare franchise organization, with an average owner tenure of 20 years. Interim HealthCare reaches across the mainland U.S. and Puerto Rico, with nearly 300 franchise and branch locations and 500 independent affiliates.

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