

Wednesday,  
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# Our Towns

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**Developer sues Paterson**

Fighting bid to grant his property historic status. **B2**

**Soldiers come home**

Two National Guard units return from Iraq. **B8**

## ‘A precious resource’

### Company offers workers incentives to stay

By **DUNSTAN PRIAL**  
Special to the Herald News

Ken Wessel knows the importance of hiring and retaining good employees. His clients, after all, make up one of the most vulnerable **HEALTH CARE** groups in society.

Wessel is executive director of HomeCare Options, a Paterson-based nonprofit that sends visiting health-care aides into the homes of

the frail and elderly throughout Passaic and Bergen counties.

“It’s hard work,” Wessel said. “Our employees really are a precious resource, and we don’t want to squander it. They’re doing something really important for the community, and if we don’t

recognize their effort no one else will.”

Using a combination of creativity, innovation and common sense,

Wessel has introduced an array of incentive and career enhancement programs that help him hold onto what he describes as his most valuable resource – his workers.

Indeed, the employee turnover rate at HomeCare Options is holding steady at around 11 percent, according to Wessel, or about half that of services of similar size, according to Wessel.

Wessel works overtime to keep his 350 home health aides happy.

In 2000, as the stock market soared and the company’s investments grew, employees received a bonus of \$100 for each year of service. One staffer took home a check for \$3,500. And each year the children of several dozen staffers are packed off to summer camp at no cost to the employee.

It seems to be working. The typical HomeCare Options employee stays for about 10 years, said Wessel. “That’s something we’re very proud of.”

Please see **HEALTH CARE**, B6



**PETER MONSEES**/Special to the Herald News

Home health care provider Teresa Romani, right, looks after Bertha Kondra, who has Alzheimer’s Disease.

# Health care: Work for low pay

Continued from B1

New Jersey's 30,000 home health-care aides make an average of about \$10 an hour, not much more than most fast-food employees. Their work is singular in its intimacy, however, requiring personal skills that go well beyond those of the average office employee.

Teresa Romani of Elmwood Park has worked at HomeCare Options for eight of the 23 years she has lived in the U.S. Last September, through a program offered by HomeCare Options, Romani became a U.S. citizen.

Two nights a week for about a year, Romani, 60, and about a dozen of her colleagues studied American history and civics with an instructor provided by HomeCare Options.

So after a full day of feeding, bathing and otherwise caring for a frail or elderly client, instead of going home to their families, Romani and her classmates headed off to HomeCare Options' head-

**"I wanted to work at something ... that could make me feel better about myself."**

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**TERESA ROMANI,**  
home care provider

quarters in Paterson for three hours of classroom work.

"I want to vote," said Romani, offering a concise reason for taking on the additional workload.

Her reason for choosing a career as a home health-care aide is equally direct.

"I wanted to work at something where I could help people, something that could make me feel better about myself," she said.

Milagros Ballista got her GED through a program offered by HomeCare Options. A native of the Dominican Republic, Ballista has worked for HomeCare Op-

tions for 12 years.

"If I want to do something further with my career, I'm prepared to do it," she said.

Wessel said he's aware — and happy — that some of his career enhancement programs could open doors that will lead some of the staffers away from HomeCare Options.

"We've got a lot of people who have a brick wall in front of them," Wessel said, referring to the fact that many of his employees lack a high school degree, an obstacle that holds them back in their careers.

Wessel sees tearing that brick wall down as a "net benefit" for everyone involved — his employees, his clients and his company.

Employees benefit by the satisfaction gained through achieving their goals, he said. Clients benefit from being served by employees with a high level of job satisfaction, and the company benefits by improving the skills and opportunities of its workers.