

Originally posted: February 25, 2009

## Hiring a companion to help in the hospital

It was agony for Cheryl Formento, knowing she couldn't be at her father's side during his five-year battle with lung cancer.

Every time this Naperville resident flew to South Carolina to be with her dad, she felt guilty about leaving her three small children. And every time her father took a turn for the worse and she wasn't with him, she felt horrible.

"I often thought – there has to be a better way. If only there was someone I could reach by cell phone whenever I needed to, who could tell me if my father was eating, what his mood was, and who'd report on what doctors were saying," Formento said, remembering her sense of frustration.

Thus was born the seed of a new Chicago-area business, [Hospital Companions](#), which has been under development for a year and officially launches in April.

It's the service Formento wishes she could have found when her father was ill: Someone who will be there at a patient's bedside, helping out and making sure family members who are far away know what's happening. The service area includes Chicago and surrounding suburbs.

Things companions can do for patients include guiding someone through the hospital registration or discharge process, serving as a health advocate, taking notes during doctors' rounds, providing company, and locating the nursing staff upon request, according to the company's Web site.

For families, Hospital Companions promises to keep track of all the medical providers caring for a patient, serve as an on-site point of contact and regularly update information about the person on a customized Web page.

"We won't be putting up medical information; it'll be information like 'Mrs. Jones is feeling well today' or 'Mr. Jones made it out of surgery and is now back in his room,'" Formento explains.

The fee is \$45 an hour for a minimum of three hours per patient. If clients want the patient Web page only, including a section where patients and their families can list the kind of help they need, that's \$100 a week. For a one-time check on someone in the hospital, sometimes requested by families who can't be there themselves, the charge is \$100.

The company also plans to introduce a similar service for patients in Chicago area nursing homes.

It's not the first organization to come up with the idea. Several home health care agencies offer what they call hospital and nursing home "sitting services" – essentially, providing a companion to someone in a medical institution when friends and family can't serve that role.

Formento says her company is different because of its patient Web pages and "patient enhancement" services such as pet or music therapy.

Barbara Eastman of Palos Park said she couldn't be more delighted with the services she received from Hospital Companions when hospitalized for a double knee replacement last July. Eastman, 71, has four daughters, all busy raising families, who arranged and paid for the day-to-day help they couldn't give.

"It was a wonderful experience," Eastman says, recalling how a smiling companion would be at her side when she woke up, dazed from the medications she was taking after surgery. Eastman remembers the companion hanging a bright painting on the wall and arranging aromatherapy – nice touches that "make you feel like you're going to make it, you're going to get out of here one day."

If you have an established relationship with a home health care agency, it's worth inquiring whether they can provide a hospital or nursing home companion when you need someone to be with a loved one and can't be there yourself.