

# The Genesis debate

## Tuesday vote could decide fate of nursing home administrator

By **MATTHEW McCORMICK**  
Staff Writer

It has been talked about in the board room for more nearly two years, but on Tuesday it will be voters who will sound off on Sullivan County's relationship with Genesis HealthCare.

**Unity** with the nursing home consulting company, which began Jan. 1, 2005, has been the central issue of the county commissioner's race.

Democrats Ethel Jarvis, a one-term incumbent from Unity, and Jeff Barrette, a challenger from Claremont, say that Genesis has helped institute the changes needed to put the home back in the black, and that when the contract expires in June 2007, their services no longer will be needed.

Their Republican opponents, Don Clarke, a three-term incumbent from Claremont, and Bob Beaudry, a challenger from Charlestown, are in no hurry to see Genesis go. As long as the company provides a return on the county's dollar and offers quality care, they say the contract, which includes

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External care coordinator

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having a Genesis employee as director of the facility, should be renewed.

Candidates for the Statehouse, who form the delegation that approves the nursing home's budget, are similarly split. Earlier this year, when the county commissioners voted to extend the Genesis contract, the Democrats on the county delegation considered cut-

ting a portion of the nursing home budget. In the end the money stayed, but the debate over the future has not subsided.

There is no argument, however, that the past 22 months have been a time of great change at Sullivan County Health Care, including the facility's name, which until this year was the Sullivan County Nursing Home.

The most celebrated of the changes, at least by those who support the current arrangement, has been the nursing home's finances.

For each of the two years prior to Genesis' arrival, the home ran deficits of more than \$1 million. The deficits were offset with higher county taxes.

That shortfall was reduced to just over \$200,000 in fiscal 2005, and by June 2006, the deficit was essentially eliminated, county manager Ed Gil de Rubio said.

Those monetary gains were made possible in large part by an influx into the facility of Medicare and private-pay patients, according to county officials. Because these residents usually require some form of skilled care,

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reimbursement rates from the federal government can be nearly four times higher than the \$140 a day allotted for Medicaid patients, who make up the majority of the facility's population, he said.

In the months before the county contracted with Genesis, the county had about 120 of its 156 beds filled and all of its patients were on Medicaid, according to Gil de Rubio.

By June 30, 2006, a facility census showed the number of vacant beds in the facility had dropped to 12, and of the 144 residents, 112 were on Medicaid, 15 were on Medicare and 21 were private pay.

The arrival of those latter patients was part of a concerted marketing effort led by Patti Koscielniak, who in July 2005, filled the newly created position of external care coordinator.

Koscielniak said she worked to improve the nursing home's relationship with area hospitals, as well as the community, to let people know that the nursing home was a place where patients could recover from surgery or families could find respite from the often-grueling daily routine of caring for an ailing loved one.

That talk was backed up by improvements at the nursing home that allowed it to handle a wider range of short-term patients.

The facility's rehabilitation wing underwent a \$75,000 renovation and added an in-house staff, the only nurses at the home who are employed by Genesis, which includes a physical therapist and four physical therapy assistants and an occupational therapist and occupational therapist assistant.

In addition, the home paid for the rest of its nurses to improve their skills so the home now can handle more complex post-surgical conditions, such as those involving tracheotomies, specialized wound care and IV therapy.

"We are constantly upgrading the skills of the nursing personnel here," Koscielniak said. "I'm in constant touch with both the communities and the hospitals to see what the needs of the people are and I bring that back to the facility and say, 'This is some-

thing I'm told we need at this point.'"

Since last November, Koscielniak said those changes have helped the nursing home discharge 63 patients back into the community, 43 of whom stayed at the facility less than one month.

Changes at the home have not just affected patients requiring skilled care. All residents have access to the facility's beefed-up activity offerings, which, prior to Genesis' arrival, were scheduled only intermittently during the day but now effectively run around the clock, Gil de Rubio said.

Activity director Ann Labelle said she is using that time to add new programs, including performances by musicians such as country guitarist Shep Spinney, and one-on-one activities that help patients who are unable to partake in group events get outside, read a book or just talk.

Sullivan County Health Care also has sought to improve its dining services by bringing them in-house. Whereas the home used to rely on outside companies to plan and cook their meals, Gil de Rubio said that task now falls to the facility's own dietary director, Ron McFowel.

The dining room also is undergoing a significant renovation, which is taking up a significant chunk of the \$700,000 budgeted for improvements to the facility this year, Gil de Rubio said.

The home also now has its own full-time geriatric nurse practitioner, a high-level nurse who can prescribe medicine on short notice as long as it is approved by a doctor later on, he said.

"There is a shortage of doctors out there so it's really good to know we have a nurse practitioner on staff," Gil de Rubio said.

The nursing home also has

increased its staff numbers. In October 2004, three months before Genesis came to the nursing home, the facility employed one nurse for every one and a half patients, with 77 nurses on staff to care for 120 residents, according to Gil de Rubio.

In November 2006, he said Sullivan County Health Care had one nurse for every 1.3 patients, with a total of 114 nurses to care for 154 residents.

The county manager said that even soon-to-be residents of the nursing home should notice the improvements made since Genesis took over.

Prior to the company's consulting, he said the home admitted patients only a few days a week, which meant that it could take up to a week to accept a new resident.

Now the home admits patients seven days a week, reducing the admission time from days to hours, he said.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the changes implemented by Genesis, critics of the company's relationship with the county remain. Both state Rep. Tom

Donovan, D-Claremont, who is running for re-election in District 4, and state Rep. Charlotte Houde-Quimby, D-Plainfield, said that they have received calls from families of patients and nurses saying that the home is understaffed.

"I have had many phone calls from families who feel their residents are not getting the kind of care that they need and deserve," Houde-Quimby said. "They are not being turned on a regular schedule, their food gets to them cold, there are people who need assistance with eating and that is not happening in a timely fashion."

Donovan admitted that no amount of staffing can do away with those problems completely. Nor does he contend that the nursing home

can be run without the help of outside consultants.

But he said that the facility does not need the near-constant flow of experts that Genesis now provides for 4 percent of the nursing home's revenue or \$450,000, whichever is lower.

Rather, Donovan said that with the changes recommended by Genesis now in place, the home will need fewer consultants and is confident that their services can be purchased for less than what the county now is paying Genesis.

"You're not going to be spending half a million dollars on one company," Donovan said.

Nursing home administrator Scott Wojtkiewicz, though, has said that in a field where state and federal regulations change by the day, the amount of expertise provided by Genesis is essential. To get that knowledge from several individuals rather than a single source, he said, would cost more than the contract currently in place.

Yet Donovan and Houde-Quimby are convinced that savings can be found. They suggested that the money yielded by ending the county's contract with Genesis could be used to increase the number of staff at the nursing home.

"We need to look at all ways of bringing more people into that facility," Donovan said.

However, Gil de Rubio pointed out that Genesis works for the county, not the other way around. So if the commissioners find that the nursing home no longer is meeting the county's needs and mission, they can demand the company fix the situation.

"They work for us as a consultant," he said. "If we don't like what the administrator's doing, we'll tell Genesis to kick them out."

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**Ed Gil de Rubio**  
County Manager

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