

Choosing the right home care agency

Why Asking the Right Questions Matters

Families often rely on word-of-mouth or marketing claims rather than structured evaluation. Asking clear, evidence-based questions during the agency interview helps identify whether a provider meets clinical standards, ethical expectations, and cultural preferences.

The **Aricares Alliance** framework divides key questions into five major categories:

A. Licensing and Accreditation (Key Questions)

Before hiring a home care agency, families should confirm that the provider meets all state and federal licensing requirements:

1. Is your agency licensed by the state Department of Health or equivalent authority?
2. Are you Medicare- or Medicaid-certified (if applicable)?
3. Are you accredited by a national body such as:
 - The Joint Commission (JCAHO)
 - Community Health Accreditation Partner (CHAP)
 - Accreditation Commission for Health Care (ACHC)?
4. How often do you undergo inspections, and can I review your latest survey report?
5. Do you conduct criminal background checks and drug screenings for all staff?
6. Are caregivers bonded and insured in case of accidents or theft?

Why These Questions Matter: Accreditation and licensing ensure that agencies follow infection control, documentation, and safety protocols. According to CMS (2024), accredited agencies have 20% fewer citations for quality violations than non-accredited ones.

B. Staff Competence and Training (Key Questions)

A home care agency's greatest asset is its staff. Skilled, compassionate, and well-trained caregivers directly affect your loved one's well-being:

1. What qualifications do your caregivers have?
2. What initial and ongoing training do caregivers receive?
3. How do you ensure caregivers are competent in:
 - Medication reminders
 - Transfer and mobility safety
 - Dementia or Alzheimer's care
 - Infection control protocols
4. Who supervises the caregivers — a nurse, case managers, or administrators?
5. What is your process for matching caregivers with clients (language, personality, skills)?
6. What is your staff turnover rate, and how do you support employee retention?

Why These Questions Matter: Research by Home Care Pulse (2024) found that agencies with low caregiver turnover (under 40%) maintain significantly higher client satisfaction and continuity of care.

C. Care Planning and Communication (Key Questions)

Families must understand how care is planned, delivered, and adjusted over time. Clear communication prevents misunderstandings and improves outcomes:

1. How do you assess a client's care needs before starting services?
2. Who creates the care plan, and can the family participate in that process?
3. How often is the care plan reviewed or updated?
4. How do caregivers document care tasks (written logs, mobile app, or digital charting)?

5. Who should we contact if we have questions, concerns, or emergencies?
6. How do you handle replacement caregivers if our assigned aide is unavailable?
7. Do you offer family training or education for ongoing support?

Why These Questions Matter: According to AHRQ (2023), structured care planning and family participation reduce hospitalization rates by 15–25% and improve satisfaction scores. Families should always request written copies of care plans and progress notes.

D. Safety, Quality Assurance, and Emergency Response (Key Questions)

Home care involves unique safety and risk management challenges. Families must confirm that the agency prioritizes emergency preparedness and quality monitoring:

1. What steps do you take to ensure infection control and hygiene (especially post-COVID-19)?
2. How do you monitor quality of care — do you conduct supervisory visits?
3. How are complaints or incidents investigated and resolved?
4. What emergency protocols do you follow (fire, falls, medical emergencies)?
5. Are staff trained in CPR, first aid, and fall prevention?
6. Do you use client satisfaction surveys, and can you share recent feedback results?

Why These Questions Matter: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2024) recommends that home care providers maintain written infection prevention plans, incident response checklists, and clear family communication procedures.

E. Cost, Transparency, and Ethical Practices (Key Questions)

Understanding cost and transparency helps families avoid hidden fees or unexpected billing:

1. What are your hourly and weekly care rates?
2. Are there minimum service hours per visit or week?
3. What is included in the quoted price (e.g., transportation, meal prep, medication reminders)?
4. Do you accept long-term care insurance, Medicare, or Medicaid?
5. Are there extra charges for nights, weekends, or holidays?
6. What is your cancellation or termination policy?
7. Can you provide a sample contract or service agreement?

Why These Questions Matter: Transparency protects families from financial stress. According to the National Council on Aging (NCOA, 2024), hidden service costs are among the top five causes of care dissatisfaction.

Red Flags to Watch For:

- The agency refuses to show proof of licensing or accreditation.
- Contracts or service agreements are vague.
- Caregivers are not employees but “independent contractors” (which may limit liability coverage).
- Poor communication or high turnover among staff.
- No clear plan for supervision or emergency response.

These signs may indicate poor quality control or legal noncompliance.

The Aricares Alliance encourages families to print, share, and use this guide during every care agency interview. A well-prepared question today prevents tomorrow’s regret.

To learn more, explore the resources provided below

1. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). Home Health Agency Quality of Patient Care Star Ratings. Updated 2024.
2. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). Choosing a Home Health Agency: What You Need to Know. 2023.
3. National Association for Home Care & Hospice (NAHC). Consumer Guide to Home Care. 2024.
4. AARP Public Policy Institute. Caregiving in the U.S. 2023 Report.
5. Home Care Pulse. 2024 Home Care Benchmarking Study. 2024.
6. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Occupational Outlook Handbook: Home Health and Personal Care Aides. 2024.
7. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Infection Control in Home Healthcare. Updated 2023.
8. National Council on Aging (NCOA). Understanding Home Care Costs. 2024.
9. World Health Organization (WHO). Quality of Care and Patient Safety in Home Settings. Geneva, 2022.
10. Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP). Best Practices for Home Care Providers. 2023.