

Hiring From Provider Agencies

Getting Started

If you choose to hire your support from a company or an agency, the first step is making contact.

Of course, many provider agencies can not only manage your support, but can also help identify your needs and assist you with record keeping and tax issues.

If hiring from a provider agency seems right for you, first you must find out what is available. Asking the following questions may give you a place to start:

- Who are my long time friends and social contacts? Might they know of some agencies?
- What organizations have been helpful in the past?
- Have I heard any good "word-of mouth" advertising about particular agencies?
- Do I already know someone who works at a local agency?

When talking to potential provider agencies, take notes. List the date of your conversation, the agency's name, who you spoke with, their telephone number, and any comments that might help make a decision later.

Among other forms and worksheets, at the end of this handout you will find a checklist of questions you might want to ask when talking to potential providers.

Benefits of Hiring from a Provider Agency

"One stop shopping". Many agencies offer a wide menu of supports, ranging from personal care to on-the-job assistance. This means that instead of receiving support from several sources—which may be confusing and difficult to juggle—your support comes from one single place.

Back- up help. If your primary support person is unavailable due to illness or personal emergency, a provider agency may be better able to send you a substitute, so you won't find yourself worrying about being without support; the agency does the worrying for you. Also, this arrangement may work in cases where your primary support person is an independent contractor (more about independent contractors in the handouts *Hiring Your Own Support* and *Taxes*), but your back up worker comes from the provider agency.

Less paperwork. Many provider agencies can take on the responsibility of keeping records such as personal information, payroll, insurance, and taxes. Make sure to ask each agency about this option. (Such services may also be available through fiscal intermediaries and employers-of-record. See these handouts for further information.)

While the above benefits may make provider agencies the right choice for you, keep in mind such services almost always cost more than you will pay if you choose to hire your own support. As with everything, you must weigh the costs against the benefits you receive in return.

Questions to ask Potential Provider Agencies

Most provider agencies are happy to give you information about their services, either over the phone or through the mail. Of course, it's always best to "shop around" and compare the services, philosophies, policies, and fees of the various agencies you are considering. *Remember, you're the customer. Don't be afraid to ask questions!*

Ask the agency to send you written information about their services, fees, and policies. Do they offer what you need? Shopping assistance? Home healthcare? Employment support? Financial management?

Ask about billing. How often do they bill? Are there charges or late fees? Do they have a selection of billing options or periods that might work better for you?

Ask about schedules. Are services available at night, on weekends and holidays? If so, do these services cost more? How many employees will be assigned to help you? Can you choose your own support people from among their staff? Will the agency make arrangements to have "back-up" workers available?

Ask about employee training and education. What kind of training do they undergo? Are they licensed and registered, if necessary?

Ask about supervision. How are employees supervised? How is performance evaluated? Can you direct employees yourself, and to what degree?

Ask about contact people. Who do you talk to about billing, scheduling, the care you are receiving, etc.?

Ask about suspension or termination of services. If you must temporarily cancel or terminate services with the agency, how much notice do you need to give? Will you have the authority to terminate or suspend employees yourself?

Ask about hiring employees for private work. Is it allowed? What, if any, policies apply to your situation?

Ask about insurance. Is the provider agency insured against liability and/or malpractice?

Ask about bonding. If the agency's employees are not insured, are they bonded? Much like liability and malpractice insurance, bonding is designed to protect agencies against claims filed in cases of accident or criminal accusations.

Example: Suppose you believe an employee has stolen an antique from your home, which you later prove in court. An employee bond would pay for whatever settlement the court orders. Be aware, however, that bonding only provides this protection if the theft is proven in court, and that the amount of protection is limited by the size of the bond. So, if the stolen antique was worth \$6,000 and the bond protection is only \$5,000, that is how much you would receive in compensation. (You can get more information about bonding either from your insurance agent, or you can check the yellow pages under "Bonds—Surety and Fidelity".)

Lastly, inform the agency about any of your special needs. Can they address those needs? If so, how will they be handled? Example: You have pets that might need daily attention. Can the

agency handle that? Once you've settled on a provider agency and have drawn up a letter of agreement with them, make sure you have in writing a list of the services the agency will be performing. Not only will this help prevent conflicts in the future, but if, for any reason, you need to suspend or terminate their support, you can refer to this list to ensure you've cancelled all the services. Once the agency begins providing support you may be asked to sign vouchers that confirm employees' work hours and/or the tasks they've completed. Before signing any voucher, review it thoroughly and keep a copy for your records, as vouchers can be used to double-check bills and statements.

What to do if you Have Complaints or Concerns

Before you enter into a relationship with a provider agency, ask about their complaint process. Most agencies are required to have procedures in place to investigate and resolve complaints. Understanding how and to whom to address your concerns may save you from future frustration. If you have a complaint, your first step should be to inform the agency. Give them a chance to resolve the problem. More often than not, they will work hard to address your concerns and find a solution.

If, however, you've informed the agency of a concern and are dissatisfied with their response, you may contact one of the following three organizations for help:

State Office of Ombudsman for Mental Health and Mental Retardation

121 7th Place East
Suite 420
Metro Square Building
St. Paul, MN 55101-2117
651-296-3848 or 800-657-3506

Minnesota Office of Health Facility Complaints

393 North Dunlap
P.O. Box 64970
St. Paul, MN 55164
651-643-2520 or 800-369-7994

Minnesota Department of Human Services

444 Lafayette Road North
St. Paul, MN 55155-3857
651-296-6117 or 800-627-3529

Evaluating Provider Agencies - A Sample Checklist

When you call the agency, is the phone answered promptly and politely?

Are your questions about services and costs readily/competently answered?

When listening to your concerns do the agency's staff appear attentive and interested? _____

Are you satisfied with the agency's billing system?

What training and education do the agency's personnel under go?

How does the agency handle employee substitution in times of absence?

How are the agency's employees supervised/evaluated? How much input would you have in this process?
