

Standard-Times

Nurse practitioner travels Texas fulfilling house calls

By Justin Zamudio

SAN ANGELO, Texas — The path Kaye Kendall has taken has enabled her to combine the three best things in her life: her husband, providing care for others and the open road.

An avid traveler, the Dallas-area nurse practitioner gets in some serious family time as she and her retired husband cruise Texas highways in their recreational vehicle as she fulfills house calls.

Kendall is one of 35 nurse practitioners in Texas who conduct in-home medical checkups for Care Improvement Plus, a company focused on providing care for underserved or chronically ill Medicare patients. Across the nation there are 135 nurse practitioners who are part of the company's HouseCalls program.

Of all those nurse practitioners, Kendall is the only one who has devoted her life to the journey part of the job. The other health professionals stay in their immediate area, while Kendall goes wherever her license allows her — anywhere within the 286,601 square miles of Texas.

In late May, Kendall was in the San Angelo area, where she expected to make about 100 house calls

in a two-week period. She said she has seen about 450 patients this year.

"This has been the first town that I've seen the patients for the second time," Kendall said. "I've been doing this for a year now. Just yesterday I had five patients I saw last August. It is really fun to visit with them and see how their health is progressing."

The objective of the HouseCalls program is preventive care. According to Care Improvement Plus,

patients with multiple chronic conditions account for about 75 percent of Medicare spending.

The company reaches out to people who might have a hard time making it to a physician on a regular basis and to clear up questions about their health or medications.

Diabetes and congestive heart failure are considered chronic health conditions, and are the most common cases the nurse practitioners encounter in their visits.

In one of Kendall's final visits on her most recent trip to San Angelo, she met with 71-year-old Martin Rios. He is a diabetic recovering from elbow surgery who was a chronic smoker before he quit in his 40s.



Courtesy of Derrick Tribbey

Care Improvement Plus member Pablo Garza, left, is one of 450 patients Kaye Kendall has seen throughout Texas this year.

She retrieved this information about him before she pulled up in her RV to Rios' newly renovated house in east central San Angelo.

Last year when she visited with Rios, she recalled his house undergoing minor renovations as he was installing new windows. Fast forward nearly a year and Kendall was commending Rios on a job well done as the afternoon sunshine shone through one of those new windows into the dining area of the house where the health screening was taking place.

"We've been visiting and we've had good conversation," Rios said. "I've enjoyed her company. She comes and we talk about what's right, what's wrong and what's happening with my health. We try to get everything sorted out before she leaves."

Kendall said because of Rios' active lifestyle and staying on top of his required eight pills a day, he is controlling his diabetes, which he was diagnosed in 1995. One thing Kendall has observed over her year of travels is people in general are taking better care of themselves nowadays.

"The thing that surprised me is that people are really, probably 95 percent, taking good care of themselves," she said. "Before this I was thinking there's going to be people not taking their medicine, but for the most part they are and even seeing their doctors — doing the things they need to do to make sure they stay healthy."

That overall trend observed by Kendall on her visits is the aim Care Improvement Plus hopes to achieve across its client base.

"Most of these people we serve are medically homeless or they lack the coordination, more like a quarterback, to streamline their health care needs," said Lee Spruiell, senior vice president of field operations for Care Improvement Plus.

Besides checking on the well-being of the patient, the doctors and caregivers — with permission from the patient — also get a briefing as a result of the HouseCalls visit, Spruiell said. The nurse practitioners answer questions about medications or address new health concerns the patient may be experiencing.

"By the end of my visit, we talk about things they might need to talk to their doctor about," Kendall said. She and Rios "talked about him having his colonoscopy seven years ago, and it might be time for another one, which is something the doctor didn't tell him in his last visit. I can write it up on a sheet of paper that he can give to them in case he forgets off the top of his head."

"Sometimes when they go to the doctor they are in and out so fast that something important might slip their mind. That gives them a little point of contact with their doctor to ask, and I always sign it so the doctors know who is asking them all these crazy questions."

Kendall said her passion to help people medically is something she has desired to do since she was a girl. She said she went into the field to be able to take care of her family. Her influence was her mother, who was a nurse.

After checking Rios' blood pressure and oxygen levels, and just before Kendall got in her RV to head north to Haskell, she mentioned that one of the best aspects of her job was the stories she hears from her many patients.

"Every time I knock on the door a new story unfolds — life stories," she said. "That's the type of stuff I hear all the time and I love it."