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## After troubled past, eldercare agency has new owner, name, home

BY ERIC REINHARDT

JOURNAL STAFF

CAMILLUS — A Camillus-based eldercare agency, which has had legal trouble in the past, is under new ownership with a new name and home.

Dean Bellefeuille acquired VIP Companion Care, Inc. on June 6, 2008 and has renamed the organization At Home Independent Living, Inc. The company provides elderly clients with live-in companions who can cook, clean, entertain, or shop, but will not provide medical or personal care, says Bellefeuille.

The business just moved into its new, 1,100-square-foot office space at 4464 Milton Ave. in Camillus April 1.

"We were able to get a space with a large room that we're calling a community room," says Bellefeuille, noting outside organizations, such as the Central New York chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, could use the room for support group sessions.

Bellefeuille also likes the location, which is near West Genesee Street and along a Centro bus route.

At Home Independent Living previously operated in a 700-square-foot space at 14 Fennell St. in Skaneateles.

The business leases its current office space from Richard Aupperle. Bellefeuille declined to disclose the monthly lease amount.

In acquiring VIP Companion Care, Bellefeuille purchased the firm's customer list. Bellefeuille wouldn't disclose financial terms.

David Trust, vice president and principal at Syracuse Business Advisors, LLC, represented the former owners — Giridon Buck, Cecile Buck, and Andrew Buck in the transaction.

At Home Independent Living has hired a service coordinator for the Camillus area and is in the process of hiring additional coordinators for Syracuse, Skaneateles, Cazenovia, Auburn, Oswego, and Cortland. The idea is they'll work from their homes and be closer to their clients.

At Home Independent Living currently employs about 25 people. Bellefeuille foresees that number potentially doubling to 50 by the end of 2009. "I expect that to be a reasonable number," he says.

He declined to disclose a revenue projection for 2009 but expects to "conservatively double" the revenue stream from where it is this month.

Bellefeuille says At Home currently serves about 18 clients but adds he's not as concerned about the number of clients as he is the amount of revenue they generate. At Home may serve some clients round-the-clock during the week, while other clients may only receive 8 to 12 hours per week.

Bellefeuille says 10 clients being served 24 hours per day will mean more revenue to At Home than 50 clients receiving services for 10 hours per week.

### Work-force technology

At Home Independent Living is using a mobile, work-force management system designed for a home-care business, part of which monitors staff members as they conduct their work in the field. It requires home-care companions to punch a computerized time clock through the client's telephone. The system can be set to alert the office, a service coordinator, and Bellefeuille if a home-care companion is late for an appointment.

"It also means there's no fraud in the billing system," he says, adding the bill cannot be produced without the home-care companion arriving and punching the telephonic time clock.

The system also alerts Bellefeuille when the drivers' licenses, insurance cards, and sheriff's department companion-care identification cards of his home-care companions are expiring.

Prior to At Home, Bellefeuille spent 25 years in technology consulting and always had the desire to operate his own business. He worked previously as a business technology consultant with the former NYNEX in Syracuse

and as director of professional services for Entex Information Systems in its Albany, Rochester, and New York City offices. He was also previously manager of Time Warner Cable Business Class in Syracuse, providing commercial high-speed Internet, data, and video services to businesses.

Bellefeuille says he saw VIP on the Internet, was interested, spoke with the owners, and conducted research into the business. He also researched and compared the strengths and weaknesses between buying an existing business and getting into a start-up franchise.

"It was a far better deal to buy an existing business with cash flow than it was to invest in a start-up through a franchise," he says.

### VIP's past

Bellefeuille assumed control of a business that dealt with legal issues in the past.

The New York Attorney General's office sued VIP Companion Care in July 2004 over allegations the company failed to comply with a 1991 Onondaga County law requiring providers of companion-care services to obtain the results of criminal background checks and identification cards for prospective employees from the Onondaga County Sheriff's Department.

The suit also alleged billing irregularities and failure to comply with New York's Door-to-Door Sales Protection Act, requiring the company provide consumers with notice of their right to cancel a contract within three days.

VIP Companion Care settled the lawsuit in October 2004. It agreed to conduct criminal background checks of its employees, modify its advertising practices, reform its billing procedures, and pay for an independent audit of its billing practices for the year 2001 to resolve a finding by the attorney general's office that the company over-billed its clients and to repay any overcharges.

VIP also agreed to make an immediate payment of nearly \$18,000 in restitution, fines, and penalties.

*The Central New York Business Journal* attempted to reach Girton Buck for comment on the story, but Buck didn't return the call.

In addition, a past president, Arnold Benson of Manhattan, pleaded guilty in December 2001 to submitting a false payroll tax return for VIP in 1998. He admitted defrauding the United States out of \$125,000 in payroll taxes by underreporting the number of employ-

ees who worked for him, according to documents from the office of the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of New York.

Benson served 15 months in prison, paid a fine of \$4,000, and, upon completing his prison sentence, was placed on three years of supervised release, according to the U.S. Attorney's office.

Bellefeuille acknowledges the company he purchased had "a black eye years

ago," but also believes, from customers he's spoken with, that the business also had an overall good reputation.

Since acquiring the business, his focus has been on improving its services, including the new management software, and moving the company forward, Bellefeuille says. □

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Contact **Reinhardt** at [ereinhardt@cnybj.com](mailto:ereinhardt@cnybj.com)