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HEADLINE: Valley big on adult day
care ; The area's poverty
and emphasis on family are feeding
the trend.

BYLINE: Alison Gregor

BODY: BROWNSVILLE - Care of the
elderly is big business in the Rio
Grande Valley, but not in the form
that's becoming familiar to many
Americans.

Outside of the Valley, more people
are choosing assisted-living
centers to care for elderly
relatives - centers that provide
services
in a residential setting to those
who need help, but not 24-hour
nursing care.

In the Valley, though, adult day
care centers are much more popular
than assisted-living centers.
Indeed, more than half of Texas' 365
adult day care centers are found in
a 19-county South Texas region.

Adult day care centers operate much like day care for children; seniors arrive each morning and return to their families at night.

Culture, income and unfamiliarity with assisted living facilities are key reasons why experts say adult day care most likely will continue to be the growth industry for care of the elderly in the Rio Grande Valley.

"Adult day care works really well down here," said Robert Morris, director of the Alzheimer's Association, Rio Grande Valley chapter. "I think that has a lot to do with our population - their inability to pay for out-of-home care and the strength of their family systems."

Santos Barrientos, director of the Sun Valley Adult Health Center in Harlingen, said adult day care centers have proliferated since they began opening in the Valley about 14 years ago.

"Right now, the market's very saturated in the Valley," said Barrientos, who began his career with Sunglo Fellowship Centers Inc. in Harlingen. The company now has eight adult daycare centers in the Valley.

Still, a small number of assisted living entrepreneurs have forged

ahead.

Brownsville native John Beaman opened The Bridges at Edinburg four years ago. The 32-unit home was the first such facility in Hidalgo County. He recently opened his second center, The Bridges at Mission, a 33-unit facility tailored for people with Alzheimer's disease.

"I have yet to find someone who came here and can afford it, who said, 'I'd rather be in a nursing home,'" Beaman said.

It's hard to pin down the number of assisted living centers in the Rio Grande Valley. But populous Cameron and Hidalgo counties appear to have about a dozen licensed facilities.

It doesn't help that residents of assisted living centers can't get government help in paying for their care. Almost all assisted living centers are private-pay, and the monthly cost ranges from \$700 to as much as \$4,000 or \$5,000.

That's a stretch for most residents of the most impoverished region in the nation.

"I'd consider assisted living," said Santa Rosa resident Anna Moreno, who takes her father and mother to adult day care. "But only if all my

brothers and sisters put together their money."

By contrast, fees for adult day care range from about \$27.50 to \$66 a day for someone paying out of his or her own pocket. Many clients, though, receive help from Medicaid and Medicare. More than two-thirds of Texans receiving government assistance for adult day care live in the South Texas region.

Entrepreneurs building assisted living centers also face a marketing challenge, because experts say most people believe assisted living is a nursing home by another name. (Nursing homes offer a more intensive level of care.)

Texas now has more assisted living centers - 1,276 - than nursing homes, at 1,210, according to the Texas Department of Human Services. Many nursing homes have failed in the face of dwindling government reimbursements, while still others earned unsavory reputations as places offering inadequate care.

Stella Mora Henry, an El Paso native who co-owns an assisted living center and nursing home in Culver City, Calif., said Hispanics need to know more about assisted living to become customers.

"I think what we're starting to see is they're becoming familiarized with it, but not enough," said Henry, who is writing a book on long-term care options for the elderly.

Monica Chassee, sales and marketing director for Canterbury Court Retirement and Assisted Living in Harlingen, agreed that "people don't know enough about assisted living. All they know is, 'I'm going to stay home in my house until I have to go to a nursing home.' They don't realize there's an in-between."

Chassee said Canterbury has seen fluctuations in occupancy at the 99-unit facility, which includes a 34-unit wing for people with Alzheimer's disease. But she remains encouraged because she believes usage of assisted living centers will grow in the Valley.

"There is a market for it," she said. "We are filling it up with residents, and we have a whole list that are coming in."

Assisted living boosters note that adult day care has its limitations. It provides many of the same services as assisted living - meals, social activities, transportation, medical oversight and nursing - but typically only during the work week.

Beaman said his dream is to serve the retired middle class. A client at his center will pay \$2,100 to \$2,800 a month, and the Mission facility also has an adult day care option costing \$1,000 a month.

"My mother is a retired schoolteacher," Beaman said. "Her pension almost covers the fee. And with her savings, she could afford it."

Winter Texans are another potential market. About 143,000 seniors from other parts of the country spend months in the Valley each year. Some become permanent residents, said Paul Ballard, chief operating officer of the McAllen Medical Center, a minority partner in The Bridges at Edinburg.

"Demographics seem to indicate that at least a certain segment of the elderly that have relocated from up north have the ability to afford to live in an assisted living center, especially since they may not have family here," Ballard said.

The market "may not be quite as great, obviously, as in some other parts of the state," he added.

A limited number of families can get help from the Community Based

Alternative Program, a state vehicle that provides Medicaid money for home health care or assisted living.

But that program has a long waiting list and historically has run out of money each year. Also, the funding has traditionally served those seeking home health care, not assisted living, said Michael Jones, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Human Services.

Each region in the state receives a designated number of slots in the program, he said. The South Texas region has 7,603 slots out of the 30,336 offered by the state, and only 28 of those slots are used by people for assisted living.

Hispanics eventually will embrace assisted living; it will just take time, said Henry, the Texan who co-owns the California assisted living center.

"The Latino sector isn't going to go easily into an assisted living," she said. "They're staying out of there because they know that if at all possible, the family is going to be that central support system for the older adult."

But as the first wave of a flood of Hispanic baby boomers turns 65 in

2011, the much smaller younger generation - their children - may not have the ability to care for them at home.

"We've become pretty Americanized," Henry said. "And the stress and the pressures of American life are there."

Others, including Fernando Torres-Gil, former U.S. Assistant Secretary on Aging, believe Hispanics in the Rio Grande Valley will never turn to assisted living in great numbers. Valley residents "may well hold on much longer and with greater tenacity to taking care of their own, assuming they are able to financially and emotionally," he said.

But Janie Perez of Harlingen, who has two aunts in adult day care, speaks for many of her generation when she says that assisted living isn't an option.

Perez learned how to manage a feeding tube and turn a bedridden person so she could take care of her terminally ill mother.

"I wouldn't put my relatives in a home," she said. "I'd keep them with me. The last few years, or days, that we have them, we want to be

close to them."

agregor@express-news.net