

Selecting a Nursing Facility

When someone is faced with the overwhelming job of finding a nursing home for a loved one, the question often asked is, “Where do I begin?” Although this is a job that no one wants to do, it can be done with forethought and confidence that the best decision was made for everyone involved.

When nursing home placement is necessary, it is crucial that the family and/or potential resident decide what’s most important to them in looking for a facility. It is important that the resident’s needs and wants be included in the evaluation. Things such as location of the facility, if a special care unit is necessary and type of payer source should be considered when beginning this process.

The next step is to identify the facilities in your area which meet the criteria you established above. Beyond this guide, listings of facilities in the North Carolina can be obtained from Medicare.gov, and at the end of this guide.

If placement is “down the road” and you have time, call the nursing facilities and ask them to send you their information packet including an activity calendar and a menu.

Get ready to tour the facilities you have chosen. Don’t schedule your tours. Just show up during regular business hours. You will be able to meet with the administrative staff who will answer all your questions. Next, you will want to tour a second time in the evening or on the weekend just to see if there is a drastic difference in the atmosphere of the facility or the care being provided. It is important to tour at least two facilities so you can see the difference in the physical plant and the staff. When you are touring, pay attention to your gut feeling. Ask yourself the following questions... Did I feel welcome? How long did I have to wait to meet with someone? Did the admission director find out my family member’s wants and needs? Was the facility clean? Were there any strong odors? Was the staff friendly? Did they seem to generally care for the resident? Did the staff seem to get along with each other? Listen and observe. You can learn so much just by watching and paying attention.

When touring a facility, ask any questions that come to mind. There are no “dumb” questions. Here are a few examples of questions you will want to ask to make sure that the administration of the facility is giving proactive care instead of reacting to crisis.

- How do you ensure that call lights are answered promptly regardless of your staffing?
- If someone is not able to move or turn him or herself, how do you ensure that they are turned and do not develop bedsores?
- How do you make sure that someone is assisted with the activities of daily living like dressing, toileting and transferring?
- Can residents bring in their own supplies?
- Can residents use any pharmacy?
- How many direct care staff members do you have on each shift? Does this number exceed the minimal number that state regulations say you have to have or do you just meet the minimum standard?
- What payer sources do you accept?
- How long has the medical director been with your facility?
- How were your last state survey results? (Ask to see a copy)

- How did you correct these deficiencies and what process did you put in place to make sure you do not make these mistakes again?
- Has the state prohibited this facility from accepting new residents at any time during the last 2 years?
- What is your policy on family care planning conferences? Will you adjust your schedule to make sure that I can attend the meeting?
- Do you have references I can talk with?
- Can my loved one come in on for a meal to see if he/she fits in and likes the facility?

Attached is a form you can use when touring facilities. This will help you keep track of which facility you liked best and those you did not care for.

Once a facility has been chosen, there are some definite steps you can take to make the process less traumatic on the resident. First, plan the admission carefully. If you know the resident becomes very difficult to deal with in the late afternoon, plan the admission for midmorning. Next, complete the admission paperwork before your loved one actually moves into the facility. This will allow you to spend the first few hours that they are there with them getting them settled and making them feel secure in their new living environment.

Some practical things you want to be sure to do ... mark *every* piece of clothing with a permanent laundry marker. When a facility is washing the clothes for 120 people, it is common for things to occasionally end up in the wrong room; however you can help ensure getting the item back if it is properly marked. If you are going to do your loved one's laundry, post a sign on the closet door to notify staff and provide a laundry bag where dirty clothes can be placed.

Also, bring in familiar things for the resident so that there is a feeling of home. However, realize that space is limited especially in a semi-private room.

A very important thing for you to remember is that the staff of the facility is just meeting your loved one for the first time. They do not know his or her likes or dislikes, or those little nuances that make providing care go smoother. The best way you can help your loved one is to tell the staff, in writing, as much information as possible about your loved one ... his/her likes and dislikes, typical daily schedule, pet peeves, and so on.

It is important that you get to know the people who are caring for your loved one. Most importantly, stay involved. Let everyone know how much you care and how committed you are to your loved one's care. Also understand you will not help your loved one by becoming anxious or emotional. Assure them that although this is not an ideal situation, you will be there to assist them in making it as pleasurable as possible.

Nursing Home Evaluation

As you visit nursing homes, use the following form for each place you visit. Don't expect every nursing home to score well on every question. The presence or absence of any of these items does not automatically mean a facility is good or bad. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses. Simply consider what is most important to the resident and you.

Record your observations for each question by circling a number from one to five. (If a question is unimportant to you or doesn't apply to your loved one, leave the evaluation area for that question blank.) Then total all blanks you checked.

Your ratings will help you compare nursing homes and choose the best one for your situation. But, don't rely simply on the numbers. Ask to speak to family members of other residents. Also, contact the local or state ombudsman for information about the nursing home and get a copy of the facility's state inspection report from the nursing home, the agency that licenses (or certifies) nursing homes or the ombudsman.