

Area Agency on Aging *Connections*

Ask questions and do research when choosing a nursing facility for your loved one

By Daniel Casciato
For Pittsburgh Senior News

Placing a loved one in a nursing home can be an overwhelming and emotional undertaking for both the individual being placed and the family and friends helping in the process. Prior to placement, many factors should be considered in reaching this decision and in making the selection of a nursing facility to care for your loved one.

According to Toni Allen, ombudsman caseworker supervisor for the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Area Agency on Aging (ACAAA), the first step is to get a complete medical evaluation and discuss if a nursing home placement is right at this time or if you should consider alternatives. Talk with family and friends to get their input and experiences with nursing homes. It can also help to speak with their physician or an ombudsman who has knowledge about the process.

Ombudsmen are advocates for nursing homes, personal care homes, assisted living and Dom Care facilities. They help residents resolve problems and respond to complaints. They have extensive knowledge about facilities and can aid families in how to find a facility, but they cannot recommend one over another. The ombudsman program is part of ACAA.

Payment concerns are usually first on the minds of seniors or their families. Facilities can set their own rates and payment varies by resident based on an assessment and plan of care. Long term care insurance, Medicare or private pay are some of the ways in which to pay for care. Private pay can at times be used with private insurance. It is also important to know that Medicaid pays the cost of nursing home care for people with limited assets and money. Eligibility varies by state.

After determining your financial situation, obtain a listing of nursing homes in your area to visit. According to Toni, the most important part of finding a nursing home is the visit. "I think you really need to visit the nursing home before you place a loved one," she said. "If time allows, visit it more than once. Also, try to look at it together with your loved one. Remember, this nursing home will now be their home so make sure you make them part of the selection process."

Since the first visit will be a guided tour, make sure to have a list of questions before visiting so you can be certain that they will be answered. When looking at different nursing home facilities, here are a few factors that should be evaluated:

- 1. Facility cleanliness.** Make certain that the nursing home is clean, well lit, a comfortable temperature and is free of odor.
- 2. Safety.** Be sure that it is a safe environment with fire extinguishers, open pathways and smoke detectors.
- 3. Rooms.** When touring the rooms, look to see if personal items are displayed for each resident, if call buttons are accessible and how many people are put together in a room.
- 4. Bathrooms.** See if the bathrooms are clean, have handrails and a call button that can be easily reached.
- 5. Dining.** Observe mealtime. Look for a menu that posts meals for the month. Does the food look and smell appetizing? See if staff



spends time helping to feed residents and are not rushing them through their meals.

6. Social Activities. Look to see if an activity calendar is posted. Make sure they offer a variety of activities to meet the needs of your loved one.

7. Staff. Ask the staff if they enjoy working there. Do they have enough employees to meet residents' needs? Look around to see if the staff is visible and willing to talk with you. Do they speak the same language as your loved one? Does the staff get residents up and dressed each day? Ask if background checks are required upon employment at the facility. Are a social worker and a dietician on staff? Observe the interaction between coworkers and between staff and residents.

8. Residents and family members. Residents and family members are the best source of information because they provide first-hand experience and insights on the facility. Ask both the residents and their families what they like most and what they like least about the facility. Overall, do you find that residents are content and happy

or do they seem depressed and despondent?

9. Documents to get. Make sure to obtain a duplicate of the state inspection report. This document will affirm the facility's deficiencies and overall ability to meet guidelines provided by the state. Request a written description of fees, services and charges of that facility.

"Don't be afraid to ask questions and to talk with residents," Toni said.

Finding a nursing home can be a difficult and confusing experience. Plan ahead, make a checklist and visit facilities on several occasions, on different days, without tour guides and at different times of the day. Talk with as many people as possible—from friends to social workers and doctors, local ombudsmen and family members.

"Getting family involved as early as possible is very important," Toni added.

Which facility is right for you ultimately depends on your preferences, how much assistance you will need and your resources. By researching your options carefully, you will come to a decision that is best for you and your loved one.

Compare care facilities in any county of any state through the Medicare website www.medicare.gov. The site lists the characteristics and health deficiencies of facilities issued during the three most recent state inspections and recent complaint investigations. State survey agencies perform onsite evaluations at least once during a 15-month period, or as a result of a complaint being investigated. The evaluations ensure that the residents receive quality care and services in a safe and comfortable environment.

For information on care facilities in Allegheny County, call Senior-Line at (412) 350-5460. **PSN**