

Consider Changing Needs when Choosing Retirement Community

By Wesley E. Wright and Molly Dear Abshire, as published in the Houston Chronicle Senior Living Section on February 15, 2012.

Although many people dread the idea of going into a nursing home, it's often an inevitable event after other options like independent living, assisted living and retirement communities or home care have been exhausted. Choosing an appropriate long term care facility is a difficult task. When possible, plan ahead and keep in mind the needs of the person who will live there when selecting a facility. Here are some helpful suggestions to help you find the best nursing home for your loved one.

First, how will the nursing facility get paid? There are basically three options: paying privately, using long-term care insurance, or obtaining long-term care Medicaid benefits. If your loved one will require Medicaid assistance at some point, it is important to consider a home that accepts Medicaid so that you avoid having to move your loved one later on. Considering how disruptive it is for a healthy person to move residences, it is more traumatic when we are old and frail. Many nursing homes take Medicaid, but some do not.

Location should be your next priority, as you'll want a facility that's close to the homes of family members who will visit regularly. If the family doesn't live in the same geographic region, the location issue may be more connected to the airport or highway used to travel to the facility.

Reputation is another important factor. Keeping in mind that facilities change hands, what may have been a good facility before may not be today. Likewise, that which may have been bad before may now be good. Some internet resources provide data analyses to compare nursing facilities in a given area. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) offers a free booklet with nursing home comparisons at www.medicare.gov/publications/pubs/pdf/02174.pdf. For information about complaints made against a facility, visit the Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services' website for the Long Term Care Quality Reporting System.

Once you narrow your search and begin looking at specific facilities, try meeting some other family members at the home who might share worthwhile information about their experiences there. Visiting the home on multiple occasions will also help you assess the staff and the general environment. One or two unannounced visits, at different times of the day, should provide information that will help in evaluating the home. Schedule a formal tour as well and ask questions about care, personnel ratios per patient, activities and meals. Request permission to attend a resident family counsel meeting for an idea of issues being discussed by other family members.

The CMS booklet mentioned above also contains a handy checklist for collecting information about nursing facilities in a thorough and organized manner. It also guides you in testing the facility's standards in areas such as quality of care, quality of life, policies, menus and food, services and fees, security, living spaces, and resident rooms. Once you've made it through the above suggestions, you'll be in a position to choose a suitable nursing facility for your loved one.

