

## A CONSUMER GUIDE TO CHOOSING A NURSING HOME

The National Citizens' Coalition for Nursing Home Reform (NCCNHR) knows that placing a loved one in a nursing home is one of the most difficult tasks a family member ever faces. But when it becomes necessary, prospective residents and their families should have the best information possible to make this decision. There are many resources that can help. The purpose of this Consumer Guide is to help you navigate those resources, understand the information, and make an informed choice. And once your loved one is in a home, NCCNHR can help you get good care there. Our website, [www.nursinghomeaction.org](http://www.nursinghomeaction.org), has more information.

### First, Explore Alternatives

Before you begin looking for a nursing home, be sure your loved one's medical condition has been thoroughly evaluated. When properly diagnosed and treated, some conditions may allow for a person to remain in their home. Since most people prefer to stay in their own home, it is also important to investigate possible alternatives to nursing home care. Sources of information about available services are the Eldercare Locator, telephone: 1-800-677-1116 or website: <http://www.eldercare.gov/> and the Administration on Aging National Aging Information Center website: <http://www.aoa.gov/NAIC/Notes/caregiverresource.html>.

### Do Your Homework

Once it is certain that nursing home care is necessary, determine which qualities of a nursing home are most important for meeting the needs and expectations of the resident. Each nursing home in your area will have unique strengths and weaknesses. As you begin to evaluate the facilities in your area, it's a good idea to do some preliminary research before you visit any nursing homes. Some quality issues are subject to personal preferences while others are critical to any resident's health and well being. Ask nursing home residents, resident's families, community advocacy groups, your physician, and clergy members for their opinions about various facilities.

Some issues to consider when evaluating your choices include bed availability, provision of services that the resident will need, affordability, quality, and, of course, location, location, location  $\frac{3}{4}$  the home must be located somewhere that is convenient for you to visit often. This Guide will help you use some important sources of information that you will want to consult as you undertake your evaluation:

- .. Long Term Care Ombudsmen
- .. 'Nursing Home Compare'
- .. State Nursing Home Inspections Reports
- .. Affordability Information
- .. Complaint Information
- .. Visits to Nursing Homes

### Long Term Care Ombudsmen: Experts to Consult

First, you will want to speak with a state or local ombudsman. An ombudsman can assist you in piecing together the different sources of information that will aide you in making an informed decision about nursing home care. An

ombudsman:

- “ Educates consumers and long term care providers about residents' rights and good care practices
- “ Provides information to the public on nursing homes and other long term care facilities and services, residents' rights, and legislative and policy issues
- “ Investigates complaints and advocates for residents' rights and quality care in nursing homes, personal care, residential care and other long term care facilities
- “ Will be familiar with the homes in your area and often with the staff and residents who reside in them.

He or she can help you as you find and interpret information about state inspections, staffing, resident characteristics, and in some states, quality measures that can be found on the Nursing Home Compare website at [www.medicare.gov](http://www.medicare.gov).

#### How to Use 'Nursing Home Compare': A Consumer Perspective

Nursing home information is provided by the federal government through the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services website called 'Nursing Home Compare': <http://www.medicare.gov/NHCompare/home.asp>. The site contains facility inspection information, staffing information, and resident characteristic information, or – for facilities in some pilot states – quality measure information. Here are consumer tips on how – and how not – to use each of these sources of information.

#### Staffing Information

Staffing levels are a critically important factor to consider in evaluating the quality of care given at a facility. Information about the hours of nursing care provided per resident day at each facility is provided on the Nursing Home Compare website. From the homepage, click on the link labeled "Begin Nursing Home Search" and then select the state you are searching and click on the button labeled "Next Step." You can narrow your search by entering the county you are looking in or by selecting the city the nursing home is located in. Once you have selected the nursing facility or facilities, you are given the option of viewing several different sources of information. To look at staffing information click on the button labeled "Nursing Home Staff." You will be able to look at the national staffing average, the state average, and the daily average for the individual nursing home you have selected.

#### Tips:

- Pay attention to the number of nursing assistants that are available to care for residents. These staff members provide 90% of the hands-on resident care.
- We recommend that consumers visit the facility and ask staff and families about the number of staff available to care for residents.

#### Cautions:

- The information provided on 'Nursing Home Compare' includes not only direct care from nurses and nursing assistants but also administrative

nursing time. This makes it difficult for consumers to know how much direct care residents are receiving.

- The data collected on staffing levels is self-reported by the facility and is not audited for accuracy.

### Quality Measures

The website provides information on "Quality Measures" for six states (Colorado, Maryland, Ohio, Rhode Island, Florida, and Washington) as part of a pilot project planned for April - October 2002. The measures are formulated using information taken from quarterly assessments of individual residents. The nine quality measures used during the pilot project (6 for Chronic Care residents and 3 for Post-Acute care residents) are:

#### Measures for Chronic Care Residents

- .. Late loss ADL decline
- .. Prevalence of infections
- .. Unplanned weight loss prevalence
- .. Inadequate pain management
- .. Developing and healing pressure ulcer prevalence
- .. Use of daily physical restraints

#### Measures for Post-Acute Care Residents

- .. Prevalence of symptoms of delirium
- .. Inadequate pain management
- .. Improvement in walking

The information gathered from the individual's assessment is then combined with the assessments of the other residents in the facility to produce a facility-wide measure for each particular category. To view the quality measures on the website, select the nursing home using the search criteria from the homepage and then click on the button labeled "Quality Measures."

### Tips:

- Compare a facility's score with others in the area or state to see how it measures up.

- Eight of the nine quality measures are negative measures. This means they measure a condition that is undesirable. For these measures, consumers should look for facilities that score below the state average – and the lower the better. The measure of improved ability to walk is the one exception. This item measures an improvement. Therefore, a high score in this category is desirable.

- If you have questions about the quality measure information that is provided, call 1-800-Medicare.

### Cautions:

- Don't assume that the information provided is 100% accurate. These measures are based on facility-reported information that is not independently audited for accuracy.

- These measures are only proxies for good care; it is possible that bad

outcomes occur even with high-quality care. And even when these measures show good care in one area (e.g., prevention of pressure sores), they don't necessarily mean there will be good care in other areas (e.g., prevention of incontinence).

### Resident Characteristics

In most states (where the quality measures project is not yet being implemented), similar information on "resident characteristics" is provided on the website. Resident characteristic information differs from the quality measure information in that different indicators are presented and different procedures are followed for compiling the information. Some resident characteristic information is taken from the quarterly assessments of residents.

To access the resident characteristics on the Nursing Home Compare site, click on the link labeled "Begin Your Search." Enter the search criteria and select the nursing home you are interested in. Then, click on the button labeled "Resident Characteristics" to view the following data:

- the percent of residents dependent in eating
- the percent of bedfast residents
- the percent of residents with restricted joint motion
- the percent of residents with bowel and bladder incontinence
- the percent of residents with unplanned weight loss or gain
- the percent of residents with physical restraints
- the percent of residents with pressure sores
- the percent of residents with behavioral symptoms.

See "Quality Measure" Tips and Cautions above for ideas for how to use "Resident Characteristic" Information.

### State Nursing Home Inspection Reports

State inspection reports contain information about any deficiencies found when inspectors complete their annual inspection of the facility. Inspections take place at least every 9 to 15 months. On the Nursing Home Compare homepage, click on the link labeled "Begin Nursing Home Search" and then select the state you are searching and click on the button labeled "Next

Step." You can narrow your search by entering the county you are looking in or by selecting the city the home is located in. Once you have selected the nursing facility or facilities you are given the option of viewing several different sources of information. To look at a summary of state inspection information click on the button labeled "Inspection Results."

Tips:

- Check the date of the report posted on the website to be sure that it is dated within the last 9-15 months. If the report is older than that, there has likely been a more recent survey. (The date of the inspection is listed right above the deficiency summary).

- View previous inspection results (by clicking on the button labeled "View Previous Inspection Results" located above the list of deficiencies) to see what the pattern of quality has been over a longer period of time.
- Compare the number of deficiencies cited to the state average.
- If a facility has received a deficiency citation in a particular area, be sure to ask questions about this area when you visit the facility.
- Obtain actual inspection reports at the facility itself or from the long-term care ombudsman program if you don't have access to the web.

#### Cautions:

- Beware of choosing a facility with a very high number of deficiencies compared to other facilities in the area and the state average.
- Don't assume that a "deficiency free" rating necessarily means that there are no problems with care at a particular facility.

You can also obtain paper copies of the state inspection reports from the licensing and certification agency, from the facility itself, or from the long-term care ombudsman.

You also might want to delve deeper by gathering information about the number and kind of complaints that have been filed against a facility. This information is not necessarily reflected in the annual inspection report, nor is it contained in the Nursing Home Compare website. Consumers can get information about complaints filed against a particular facility by contacting the state survey and inspection agency, the long term care ombudsman program or through the House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform Minority Office website at: [http://www.house.gov/reform/min/inves\\_nursing/index.htm#](http://www.house.gov/reform/min/inves_nursing/index.htm#), or through a website called Member of the Family at: <http://www.memberofthefamily.net>.

#### Affordability Information

Most nursing home residents, even if they pay privately when they enter a home, eventually run out of money because of the high costs. They then convert to Medicaid payment. Unless you are certain the resident can pay indefinitely with private funds, choose a facility that accepts Medicaid payment. Find out what your state's Medicaid eligibility rules are and what resident's rights are for Medicaid recipients. For additional information about the rights of residents paying for care through Medicaid, contact the long-term care ombudsman program and/or a local consumer advocacy group.

#### Visits to Nursing Homes: The "Scratch and Sniff" Test

Visit as many nursing homes as possible. You can learn a great deal about a nursing home by taking time to sit and observe how staff interacts with residents. Also, speak with residents to get a full understanding of life in the home. Gather information on both quality and payment issues.

It is very important to visit homes a second and third time during the weekend or evenings -- times when many nursing homes reduce their staff and

services.

And if at all possible, take the resident to visit potential nursing homes before a decision is made. This visit can give you insight into the resident's wishes and may ease your loved one's fears.

Here's what to look for on your visits:

Using your senses -- sight, hearing, smell, touch:

- “ Is there cheerful, respectful, pleasant, and warm interaction among staff and residents?
- “ Does the administrator seem to know the residents and enjoy being with them?
- “ Do staff and administration seem comfortable and peaceful with each other?
- “ Do the rooms of the residents appear to reflect the individuality of their occupants?
- “ Are rooms, hallways, and meal tables clean?
- “ Do residents look clean, well-groomed, well-fed, and free from bruises?
- “ Do many residents seem alert? happy? peaceful?
- “ Are residents seated comfortably?
- “ Is the home free from any unpleasant smells?
- “ Do you notice a quick response to call lights?
- “ Are there residents calling out? If so, do they get an appropriate response from staff?
- “ Do the meals look appetizing? Are residents eating most of their food? Are staff patiently feeding residents who need it?
- “ Are there residents in physical restraints (formal or informal devices that tie residents to beds, chairs, and wheelchairs)? Why?
- “ Are residents engaged in meaningful and pleasant activities by themselves or with others?

Things you can ask of staff:

- “ Does each shift have enough help to be able to care for residents as they'd like?
- “ Do they enjoy their work? Are their ideas and information solicited and valued by supervisors?
- “ What activities are residents involved in?
- “ Are staff permanently assigned to residents?
- “ How are the nursing assistants involved in the care planning process?
- “ How much training is given to staff? Is it enough?
- “ How often are residents who need it assisted with toileting or have their disposable briefs changed?
- “ What approaches does the facility use to prevent use of physical or chemical restraints?
- “ How does the staff assure family and resident participation in care planning meetings?
- “ What does the facility do to encourage employee retention and continuity?
- “ How long has the current administrator been at the facility?
- “ Has the facility undergone any recent changes in ownership or management?
- “ Does the facility provide transportation to community activities?
- “ What kind of therapy is available to residents?
- “ Can you give me an example of how individualized care is given to the residents?

- .. Is there a resident and/or a family council? Can you talk to members of these councils?
- .. What happens if someone has a complaint or problem? Are family/staff conferences available to work out a solution?
- .. Are residents involved in roommate selection?
- .. Who decides where residents sit for meals?
- .. Under what circumstances might a resident be transferred to another room or unit or discharged? Is the family/resident able to refuse?
- .. Does the facility employ a professionally qualified social worker?

Things you can learn from talking with other residents and their families:

- .. Does the facility respect the resident's wishes about their schedule (bedtime, baths, meals)?
- .. Is attention given to residents at night if awake?
- .. Does the resident have the same nursing assistant most days?
- .. Are staff responsive to resident requests? Do they assist the resident with toileting?
- .. Are snacks available to residents? Fresh fruit?
- .. Do residents participate in care planning conferences? Are his or her opinions valued?
- .. Has the resident had missing possessions?
- .. Who handles resident or family member concerns? Is that person responsive?
- .. Does the resident get outside for fresh air or activities as much as he or she wants?
- .. What is best/worst about living in the home?

#### Family Involvement: Getting Good Nursing Home Care

Once your loved one is living in a facility, your continued care, support, love, and involvement in his or her life are absolutely key to getting good care there. Make sure you:

- .. Speak up to raise concerns and compliments;
- .. Participate in family council meetings if a family council exists, or seek out other family members to organize one;
- .. Attend quarterly care plan conferences and advocate for individualized care;
- .. Get to know the staff and help them get to know the resident. Share details about the resident's likes, dislikes, and daily routines;
- .. Follow up on the agreed upon care plan. Make sure the resident's doctor knows what is in the plan. Notice if the plan is not being followed and request another meeting if necessary;
- .. Make contact with your community's long term care ombudsman and become familiar with the state and federal laws and regulations that apply to nursing homes; and;
- .. Document (date, time, persons involved) any problems you might observe so that managers or the ombudsman can investigate.

More information about how to get good care in nursing homes is available in NCCNHR's book, *Nursing Homes: Getting Good Care There*. Order a copy by calling 202-332-2275 or on-line by visiting the publications section of the NCCNHR website at [www.nursinghomeaction.org](http://www.nursinghomeaction.org). In it you'll find dozens of specific strategies, including checklists, standards of care, detailed examples, and patients rights.