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## **BEGINNING THE SEARCH FOR RESIDENTIAL CARE HOUSING**

The goal when searching for and choosing residential care housing is to get it right the first time, without becoming trapped in "analysis paralysis" and postponing a decision for too long out of fear of making the wrong choice. You must balance optimism with the realism, knowing that you or your loved one's current care needs may not match anticipated needs as aging progresses. Strive to choose a community that is equipped to provide care now and in the future.

The size of a residential care housing establishment can range in size from a small "board and care home" tucked into a residential neighborhood (also termed a "Residential Care Facility for the Elderly" or "RCFE"), caring for five or six residents, up to a large self-contained Assisted Living Community of 60 residents or more. A larger facility will often offer a greater variety of care levels and options, so an Assisted Living Community may be the best choice for a spousal couple who want to stay together over time, even as each spouse's health and other care needs may change dramatically over time.

Other than the size of the community, the determining factors in selecting residential care housing for yourself or a loved one should be:

1. Care needs at the time of the move.
2. Care needs anticipated over time after the move, preferably informed with a medical doctor's prognosis.
3. Budget.
4. Location.

Carefully consideration must be given to health issues that you, your spouse, or your parent has now, as well as health issues that may likely develop or get worse over time. A "health care needs prognosis" or "best guess" that the senior's physician and medical specialists have outlined regarding what support may be needed in the future is very helpful. This should include a plan for an increasing need for memory care if there is already some cognitive impairment or diagnosed dementia. It is much better for everyone involved to choose a community that can handle future needs rather than having to move to another community, starting the whole process over again.

When the time comes that the need for a move to residential care housing is obvious, have the senior's physician complete a "physician's report for community care facilities" form.

Find your local Long-term Care Ombudsman at [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov). They will tell you about any local senior housing communities that have a history of violations or substandard care.

Then enlist the help of a 'senior advocate,' a knowledgeable senior living placement and referral professional who establishes a long-term care plan and shows you the residential care facilities in the area. Many senior care placement agencies are managed by a geriatric care planning expert who can provide an assessment as well as assistance with managing the situation, including crisis management, interviewing in-home help, as well as placement when the time comes. A professional local placement expert can evaluate the senior's care needs, help define budget, and provide tours of licensed RCFEs and Assisted Living Communities that fit the senior's situation. These professional services are free as long as the agency is able to make a placement within a certain time frame, usually 90 days.

Distant family members may want the senior to move close by so that they can better coordinate care and visit often. Planning early, well before a move is necessitated, and especially if the senior will be making a long-distance move to be close to family, will lessen stress and help the process go much more smoothly.

A trial run respite stay at a care facility may lessen the senior's fear when the time comes for a permanent move. A respite stay is a good way to get a feel for a community before making a big commitment. A short stay gives the senior a chance to get comfortable with a choice that with which they were initially not comfortable.

Higher priced residential care housing provides apartment-style living with a scaled-down kitchen. Mid-priced board & care homes provide private rooms in a house in a residential neighborhood, while lower priced board & care homes require each senior in the house to share a room with another senior. All residential care housing has a group dining area and a common area for social and recreational activities. Pricing for residential care housing for seniors with dementia is much higher.

Don't hesitate to ask questions and record observations during senior housing tours. Ask each RCFE owner or Assisted Living Community administrator for a brochure, sample menu, activity/social calendar, admission agreement, and housing rules list. Discuss your impressions with the placement agency and with the senior being placed, family members, and other interested parties. Ask the facility everyone favors for placement to evaluate the senior for their assessment of placement suitability. Get a notebook and make notes as you tour each facility and also in the parking lot after you leave the building.

Do not judge residential care facilities by their outside facades and interior luxury. Polished ambience is nice but not necessary. Clean and tidy is enough. A beautiful luxury building may be given daily care to keep new patients coming in, but caregivers in that building may not be focused on the most important aspect of choosing residential care housing: caregiver experience and empathy. Look for housing staffed by enthusiastic and experienced caregivers, and populated by residents who are smiling and happy. Ask for references and check them. Speak to the residents. Note their appearance and how the staff interacts with them. Speak privately with staff about their level of satisfaction.

Ask both residents and staff about the bulletin board listing daily activities. A vibrant activity program can slow an aging senior's deterioration. Are the activities always actually done? If not, how often are activities cancelled or delayed? The meals might seem "gourmet" in the brochure, but actually are high

calorie, low fiber, and low protein. Ask residents about this. If you see family visiting, stop and talk to them. If the community claims to have a nurse on staff, talk to that nurse to be sure they are always on-call and available.

Location is important but not a deal breaker. The intention of visiting a parent every day does not often result in consistent daily visits. Life gets in the way. When a better housing option is a couple miles further, go with the best fit.

Check the housing and care contract for additional fees and price increases. Some communities charge one fee for room and board, and a separate fee for care. Other communities charge individually for each service or they may determine the level of care that a resident needs and charge accordingly. Some communities provide all-inclusive pricing.

Loss of independence can be depressing for the senior having to move to residential care housing. When considering a move away from a senior's home and into a residential care facility, it is important for the senior and their family to keep in mind that this event, though often sad and stressful, may actually reduce loneliness as it will likely lead to new experiences, new friendships, and finding new interests never considered before. Be mindful that care received in the Residential Care Facility for the Elderly board and care home or an Assisted Living Community may actually prolong the senior's ability to maintain at least some of their overall feelings of independence and well-being that in actuality would have been lost staying at home alone. Moving to residential care housing may negate the need for nursing home care later on.