

Finding the Best Assisted Living
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From ElderCare Resource Services

It is very important to find the right Assisted Living for your relative. If there is a match between your relative and the facility, everyone is happy and overall stress is reduced.

Under the umbrella of "Assisted Livings" in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is: Independent Living, traditional Assisted Living, and memory impaired units. All of these cater to seniors and their needs.

Assisted Livings provide a home-like environment for seniors who can no longer live completely independently. The facility provides care and promotes independence while maintaining dignity.

Independent Assisted Living

The independent piece is for the senior who is still self-sufficient with care and has good judgment. The Independent Assisted Living has activities catered to the independent senior. In some communities, the independent living residents will have their own apartment allowing them to cook their meals, a parking space or garage for those still driving, and units separated from the traditional Assisted Living. The cost of the independent Assisted Living is less than the Traditional Assisted or Memory Impaired because hands on services are not provided.

Assisted Living

Traditional Assisted Living is typically for the senior who needs some help with personal care, meal preparation, some redirection, and someone who may have some forgetfulness. It is NOT for someone who needs skilled medical care.

In Massachusetts if a senior takes a medication, the staff is not allowed to dispense that medication. Many facilities have a program called "SAMM" or self-administration medication management. The staff is able to remind the senior to take their medication. The staff can check the medication packaging of the senior, can observe the resident taking the medication, and then document in writing the observation of the resident taking the medication.

Some Assisted Living facilities have a program called "LMA" or limited medication administration. There is usually a charge for this program. This program allows a nurse, medical practitioner, or family member the ability to administer medications.

The nurse's role in an Assisted Living is closely regulated and the role of the nurse is to complete a service plan or plan of care at least twice per year, and to review the service plan with the staff and the resident/family. Some nurses are responsible for a wellness center but the role of the nurse is limited by Massachusetts guidelines. It is also important to ask who makes the decision to call 911 when there is an emergency and what is the protocol?

Memory Impaired Unit

The Memory Impaired Unit within the Assisted Living provides the most care. This unit is for a senior who has poor decision making, needs continual care with bathing, grooming, and dressing, and whose memory loss has progressed. Some seniors have difficulty expressing themselves or answering questions.

This unit is usually locked for the safety of everyone. There is higher staff ratio on this unit because of the needs of the seniors. All activities occur on this unit such as eating and social activities. The cost for this unit is higher than the other units because of the increased care.

Strategies for Researching Assisted Livings

As family members tour Assisted Livings it is important to tour more than once. Visit at different times of the day or later in the day or even on weekends. Observe how the staff makes eye contact with the seniors; this is how the staff will respond to your relative. Speak with family members for their opinion asking them to share any problems; if the Assisted Living responds to their questions (how long does it take someone to call back), and has the Assisted Living made any changes positive or negative recently in their policy or protocol.

Closely observe the seniors. Does your relative have similar needs of the other residents and will your senior find activities of interest? If your relative prefers to spend the day in their current home/apartment and is not social then it is important to make sure that situation can still occur. Someone who is not social may not suddenly become social just because programs are offered. Many people have established patterns that are comfortable for them.

Fees and charges must be discussed before admission. The Assisted Living facilities will provide a fee schedule with all costs. Ask about additional costs; specifically if your relative needs more care (how is it decided when more care is added, what is the cost, and how is it monitored), laundry (if the staff does the laundry there is an extra fee), how much advance notice when fees are increased, and does the monthly fee go up yearly and if so what has been the percentage in the past? Find out how much extra it will cost if your relative needs transportation to a medical appointment. Understand who is responsible if there is an accident or spill that destroys the physical property such as a rug. Keep asking questions about fees so you can plan ahead.

When you are ready, it is very important to have an Elder Lawyer review the facility contract. The contract explains payment, deposit, and refunds. Every facility has their own policy on refunds and deposits.

Assisted Living facilities are a business. It is important to ask what happens when the money runs out. Some Assisted Living facilities have a program called Group Adult Foster Care program that will allow a senior to stay in the Assisted Living if their income is low and if they need help with personal care. Some Assisted Livings will reduce the monthly fee if a resident exhausts their funds and has lived at the Assisted Living for about 4 years. Discuss this upfront with the facility Admissions Coordinator.

Other discussion points include physician coverage. Ask if there is a physician who comes into the Assisted Living or if the family is responsible for taking their relative to the primary care physician. Ask about staff ratio and compare that to other facilities. Ask about bringing in agency staffing if that should be required at a certain point and ask under what conditions can the Assisted Living discharge your relative. The more questions asked the better prepared you can be when a situation occurs.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has the Ombudsman Office that keeps track of complaints by consumers in Assisted Living facilities and is another resource for families. The telephone number is 1-800-882-2003 or www.mass.gov and search for Assisted Living and Ombudsman Office to read more on the regulations for Assisted Living.

Summary

In summary, tour the Assisted Living at different times, look at the residents to see if the Assisted Living is some place your relative will fit in, ask about staff ratio, ask about the cost and increased costs, observe the staff interaction, have an Elder Lawyer read the contract before it is signed, and understand what the Assisted Living provides and what they do not provide.