

## Choosing and Evaluating a Nursing Home

Can there be a more difficult job than finding a nursing home for a parent or spouse? No one wants to live in a nursing home. They serve as institutions of last resort when it's impossible to provide the necessary care in any other setting. And, typically, the search takes place under the gun – when a hospital or rehabilitation center is threatening discharge or it's no longer possible for the loved one to live at home. Finally, in most cases, finding the right nursing home is a once-in-a-lifetime task, one you're taking on without the experience of having done it before.

That said, there are a few rules of thumb that can help you:

1. Location, location, location. No single factor is more important to quality of care and quality of life of a nursing home resident than visits by family members. Care is often better if the facility knows someone's watching and cares. Visits can be the high point of the day or week for the nursing home resident. So, make it as easy as possible for family members and friends to visit.
2. Get references. Ask the facility to provide the names of family members of residents so you can ask them about the care provided in the facility and the staff's responsiveness when the resident or relatives raise concerns.
3. Check certifying agency reports. CareScout is an unbiased source for ratings and reviews of eldercare providers nationwide. Detailed, 7-10 page Nursing Home reports are available for a small fee, and include over 100 pieces of information on quality, resident population profiles, and health violations.
4. Talk to the nursing home staff. Talk to the nursing home administrator or nursing staff about how care plans are developed for residents and how they respond to concerns expressed by family members. Make sure you are comfortable with the response. It is better that you meet with and ask questions of the people responsible for care and not just the person marketing the facility.
5. Tour the nursing home. Try not to be impressed by a fancy lobby or depressed by an older, more rundown facility. What matters most is the quality of care and the interactions between staff and residents. See what you pick up about how well residents are attended to and whether they are treated with respect. Also, investigate the quality of the food service. Eating is both a necessity and a pleasure that continues even when we're unable to enjoy much else.

And, here's a checklist of questions you may need to answer before choosing a nursing home:

1. Facility Certification and Financial Matters. Is the facility certified by Medicare and Medi-Cal? How long has the facility been certified?
2. Specialty Care Available: Does the facility have an Alzheimer's unit or other special care area restricted to patients with special care needs? Is the specialty unit separated from other areas of the facility?
3. Physical Considerations: Is the facility well lit, clean, safe, and welcoming? What diagnostic treatment facilities are available at the facility? What bathing facilities are available and how is bathing handled when the person needs assistance?
4. Staffing. What is the ratio of staff to residents during each shift?
5. Mental and Emotional Well Being of Patients. What kind of activities are planned each day for the residents? A good activities program should have regularly scheduled events, such as a weekly movie or musical event (even if it is just a "sing along" ), religious services, physical

exercise activities (exercise classes or even dancing), bingo, educational classes, and other social events. Is there a library available for residents with large print and audio books? Is there a small for "store" for purchasing personal items, such as shaving cream, hair care products, and snacks? Is there a safe place for residents to enjoy outdoor areas, such as an enclosed garden? Are plants, pets, and other natural elements added to the residents' environment? Are residents taken to special community events and cultural activities?

6. Room Sharing and Furnishings. Will the resident share a room and/or a bathroom with one or more other residents? How are roommates and rooms selected? If the resident is dissatisfied, can roommates be changed and how is that accomplished? Can the resident bring some of his or her own furniture?
7. The Resident's Care Plan. Individual care plans must be implemented with each resident. How often is the care plan reviewed and changed? What is the protocol for handling problems? A resident of a nursing home must be under the care of a licensed physician. The physician must evaluate the resident's needs and prescribe a program of medical care, including therapy, diet restraints, and medication.
8. Employees. How are employees selected? How are employees screened for drug use, criminal records, and other potential problems? What is the turnover rate for skilled employees? What is the turnover rate for employees who perform ancillary services, such as meal preparation and financial record keeping?
9. Physician. If there is a physician that is used by the majority of residents, what are her qualifications? How often is the doctor on premises? What is her bedside manner with residents?
10. Meals. Are meals served in a communal dining room or is each resident brought her meal in her room? If communal, how are tables assigned in the dining room? How long does it take for a meal to be delivered to a bedridden resident? How does the food taste and how is it presented to the resident? Is there a means of heating food that has become cold?
11. Admission Requirements. What financial information will the facility require during the admissions process? Can the patient or his representative have copies in advance of all admissions documents and contracts for review? How long does the process take?
12. Cost of Care. What is included in the cost of care? How are "extra" items billed? Can laundry be taken off premises and does this save the resident some costs? How are prescription drugs handled? What is the cost difference between a private room and a semi-private room?
13. Transportation Services. If required non-emergency medical services are not available on premises (such as dialysis), how is transportation arranged? What about transportation to other places, such as local stores and religious services?

This article is one in a series of articles dedicated to the need for long-term care planning in a comprehensive estate plan.

If you need help finding the right nursing home or paying for it without going broke, please give us a call. We can help.

JAMES E. BERGE, JD, CPA, LLM  
Certified Specialist – Estate Planning, Trust and Probate Law  
California State Bar Board of Legal Specialization  
1101 S. Winchester Blvd., Suite I-208  
San Jose, CA 95128-3904