



## **Guidelines for Choosing a Nursing Home or an Assisted Living Facility**

Here are a few guidelines to help you know what to look for when visiting a nursing home or assisted living facility. Keep in mind your particular needs as you read through, as some of the points will be more relevant than others to the care you are seeking.

### **Getting Started**

Call the facility to set up a tour. You should have no problem scheduling a meeting within the week. As you drive to your appointment, think about the length of the ride for the simple reason that a shorter car ride will facilitate visits.

As you pull into the driveway, think about the specific location of the building—is it located on a busy street or a more rural setting. Does the nursing homes location affect the residents' access to green space, their general quality of life, and their safety?

### **First Impressions**

You will develop a first impression of the home when you walk through the front door and take a seat in the lobby. If there are residents in the lobby as you wait for your guide, chat with them! Ask them how long they have been residing in the home and how they feel about it. Also if you are waiting in the lobby for awhile, look for the official inspection report. Nursing homes are required by law to make their most recent report available for public viewing. Feel free to ask where it is, to ask for assistance interpreting it, and lastly ask about how the home has addressed any inspection violations listed in the report.

Your tour guide will usually come out to the lobby to greet you and will most likely be the director of the admissions department—someone who is hired to present the facility to families and potential residents. You will probably have some time to sit down and talk with the nursing home's representative before you begin your tour. Use this time to inform them about your background, preferences, needs, or anything at all that you think might be helpful to know, so that they can cater the tour to your individual case and interests. Give your tour guide a sense of your priorities and they will be able to respond accordingly, by showing you what they have to offer. Don't hesitate to ask questions, and hopefully they will be addressed throughout your visit.

## Observing as You Go

- As you begin the tour, try to note the way people are interacting around you.
- Are the resident's needs being met? Are they calling out for assistance?
- Is the staff caring and considerate?
- The smell of a nursing home is only an issue if you detect one, which you should not.
- Observe resident's hygiene and the effort that was put into their appearance (jewelry, festive accessories, painted nails). These details are a reflection of how much effort and consideration the nurses' aide's put into a resident's dressing.
- Do the common spaces have a homey feel? Do the lounges have comfy chairs for the residents? What are the other forms of entertainment besides television, puzzles, daily newspapers, etc?
- How easy is it for residents to move about the facility? Are there handrails in the hallways? Are rooms marked clearly and is important information such as activity calendars posted in large print?

## Residents' Rooms

Your tour guide will show you a resident's room to give you an idea of what they are like. Is there adequate space? Look around the walls when viewing residents' rooms. Many homes wallpaper their residents' rooms or at least put a border up to make them homier. Some even give every individual room a different pattern or color scheme. These little touches make the difference between a hospital room and a bedroom.

Ask if residents can bring personal belongings (even furniture) from home. Another thing to look for is a curtain or divider between the beds of a semi-private room. Also look closely in the bathrooms to see if they are for just the residents in that room, or residents in the adjacent room as well

As you peer into residents' rooms, notice what they are doing—walking around, sitting up, reclining on their beds, or lying in them. While a nurse or nurse's aide cannot keep a resident awake and alert all day, he or she can at least get residents out of bed and dressed. Lying in bed all day is detrimental to a resident's state of mind and furthermore, it can result in bedsores. Observing whether residents are up and about may also shed light on the vitality of the nursing home's resident population (If everyone is in bed, there won't be much going on!). Bear in mind the time of day you are touring and know that in the early morning and afternoon, residents will be more likely to doze off.

## Recreation

When your tour guide takes you into the recreation room, look around carefully. Some nice touches in recreation departments are seasonal decorations, monthly birthday boards, and photo displays of the residents doing activities.

Make sure to ask the recreation director how he or she goes about gathering residents to participate in activities. No matter how prominently displayed an activities calendar is, some residents will forget about activities they want to participate in. A good recreation worker will go out into the hallways and into residents' rooms to announce activities and encourage the residents to join in. Take a look at the recreation calendar. Are there a variety of activities?

There should be a healthy variety of activities that serve a number of purposes. These include mental stimulation, entertainment religious worship, social events, fitness, interaction, creative opportunities and smaller group activities. Having this kind of wide array of activities may not be as important to you if you or your loved one is more likely to spend the majority of the time in his or her room. If this is the case, at least check the activities calendar for "room visits," which are scheduled time slots during which activities workers visit with the residents who attend activities less often. You may want to ask about this type of recreational outreach if you do not see it on the calendar, because it may be done informally. Lastly, remember to ask if every resident receives a copy of the monthly activities calendar.

You may pass a chapel, meditation room, or some other type of religious room. Ask about what kinds of services are held there. Some homes have their own chaplain, daily services, prayer groups and special holiday services. Other facilities have only a weekly Sunday service.

## **Therapy**

You need to be equally as observant when your tour guide takes you to the therapy department. If you or your loved one will be in a short-term rehab unit, this may be the most relevant and crucial part of your tour. First, ask about the staff of the department, namely their qualifications (whether they are licensed therapists, physical therapy assistants, or therapist aides) and whether or not they are staff employees or employees of an outside contractor.

Regular staff employees can usually offer greater continuity of care and are usually more accessible because they are in the facility daily. With outside contractors you are usually not going to find this regularity and continuity because staff can change from day to day. Keep in mind though, that some facilities, due to their size, do not have the need for regular therapists and outside contractors are their most reasonable option. Also, some facilities do outpatient therapy. This may be a good indicator of a therapy department's extensiveness.

Once you have this basic information about the staff, watch how they operate their department. Ideally, the therapists should be working with residents one-to-one. The room itself should be designated for therapy only and spacious, with plenty of room for therapy equipment.

Some occupational therapists go the extra mile and go out into homes to do home evaluations. If this sounds like something that would benefit you, ask about it. If you have the chance to talk to a therapist, ask how long their individual treatments typically run. A thorough treatment usually lasts about a half hour to forty-five minutes.

## **Dining**

The dining room will undoubtedly be another stop on your tour. If you are touring during mealtime, observe how much attention residents get and whether they finish their meals. Also, ask your tour guide what happens if a resident misses a meal. In addition, you may want to find out the facility's policy on allowing residents to eat in their rooms. It is a resident's right to eat in their room, but staff should always encourage residents to come out of their rooms and dine socially. Glance over the day's menu (which should be posted) and see if the main meal or alternative choice sounds appetizing.

## **Special Units or Neighborhoods**

If the facility you are touring has any special units separate from the main long-term care unit, make sure that you pass through those as well. Most Alzheimer's/memory care units have very different feels. You need to find out what makes this unit different from the main long-term unit other than the lock or alarm on the door. The unit should have a simple layout (often circular) that allows for safe wandering and that is clearly marked. The staff in this unit should be specially trained to deal with Alzheimer's and dementia residents.

Furthermore, this unit should have a separate recreation program designed specifically with its participants in mind. Look to see if they have activities scheduled more frequently than the regular recreation department (some have activities continually throughout the day). Something else to look for is an enclosed outdoor area with a circular path. Noting these specifics should help you to determine whether the special unit has much to offer its Alzheimer's and dementia residents.

## **Stepping Outside**

The last major stop on your tour will likely be the outdoor area of the facility. You can easily evaluate this part of the facility by simply viewing it. The first and most important is the accessibility of the area. It should ideally be located in a place that is easy for residents to get to. The paths and doorways should not create obstacles for someone in a wheelchair.

There should be ample sitting areas and a way for residents to enjoy the fresh air without being in the sun (an awning or gazebo). Nice extras include wheelchair accessible gardens and wheelchair swings.

## **Concluding**

Once your tour is complete, you will probably return to the admissions office to talk with your tour guide about any questions that you have. Fire away! Although admissions directors are eager to portray their home in a positive light, they should generally be very honest and helpful. Use this time to get a better feel for the nursing home's philosophy, because the attitude of the staff is ultimately what nursing home quality boils down to.

Listen for mention of things like efforts to make their facilities homier, accommodating the needs of the individual over conforming to company policy or the tight knit community of residents and staff. If the person you are meeting with has pride and personal investment in the home—which is obviously a wonderful thing for nursing home employees to have—it will come across in this type of conversation.

If family involvement is an important issue for you, ask your tour guide to talk about how involved family members can be in their relative's care. To design a resident's care plan, different members of a facility's staff meet to come up with an interdisciplinary plan of care. Some facilities invite family members to be active participants in these meetings.