

Visits to Nursing Homes

Before making a decision about nursing home placement, visit any facilities you are considering. 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 and their family members 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. 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 his or her fears.

Here's what to look for on your visits:

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

- Do you notice a quick response to call lights?
- Are there residents calling out? If so, does staff respond quickly and kindly?
- Do the meals look appetizing? Are residents eating most of their food? Is the staff patiently assisting residents who need it?
- Are there residents in physical restraints (formal or informal devices that hold residents in beds, chairs, and wheelchairs)? Why?
- Do resident rooms appear to reflect the individuality of their occupants?
- Are rooms, hallways, and meal tables clean?
- Is the environment noisy?
- 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 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?
- 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 the staff permanently assigned to residents?
- Are temporary staffing agencies used?
- How are the nursing assistants involved in the care planning process?
- Is the facility currently implementing any "culture change" or "Pioneer Network" practices? (for more information, see www.pioneernetwork.net or call 585.924.3419)
- How much training is given to staff?
- How often do residents who need it receive assistance with toileting?
- If residents are using disposable briefs, how often are they changed? Why are briefs used instead of toileting?
- 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? Will the facility give you contact information for the leaders 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?
- Does the facility employ a professionally qualified social worker? (“Professionally-qualified” means with a bachelors or masters degree in social work.)

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

- Are residents treated with respect and kindness?
- Are residents helped with meals?
- Does the facility respect the resident’s wishes about their schedule (bedtime, baths, meals)?
- Is attention given to residents at night if awake? Is there anything for them to do?
- Does the resident have the same nursing assistant most days?
- Is there a family or resident council? If so, is the council led independently by families or residents or is it directed by staff members?
- Is staff responsive to resident requests? Do they assist the resident with toileting?
- Are snacks always 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 s/he wants?
- What is best/worst thing about living in the home?

The importance of fire safety in nursing homes:

A nursing home, like any institution, should have plans in place regarding fire safety precautions to ensure the safety of residents, staff, and visitors. This is especially important for nursing home residents who are frail, ill, may be unable to walk without assistance, or are immobile.

Unfortunately, despite the importance of automatic sprinkler systems, new federal regulations regarding fire safety standards in nursing homes issued in January 2003 do not require that all nursing homes have sprinklers. Only those facilities recently constructed or undergoing major renovations or modernization projects are required to install sprinklers. Below are some questions to ask and things to look for regarding fire safety during your nursing home visits.

- Is the building well maintained? Are hallways and doorways clear of clutter, paper products and debris?

- Are sprinklers, smoke detectors, and emergency lighting systems installed throughout the facility? Are these systems all in working order and frequently tested?
- Is there an evacuation plan in place, are staff aware of the plan, and do they drill on the plan?
- Is there a notification system in place that alerts the fire department should a fire break out?
- What is the facility's smoking policy?
- What is the staff to resident ratio during all shifts? Fires usually occur during the night when staffing is most limited.
- What is the plan for notifying family members should there be a fire?

The importance of knowing the facility's emergency evacuation plan:

A nursing home, by law, is required to have emergency evacuation plans in place in the event of a natural or man-made disaster. When visiting a nursing home you should inquire about the facility's emergency preparedness and evacuation plans. These plans should be very detailed. Below are some questions to ask staff about emergency preparedness plans.

- ***The plan*** What is the facility's emergency plan for evacuation and for "sheltering in place"? Plans will be different for hurricanes, tornados, and terrorist attacks.
- ***Staffing concerns*** Are there enough staff to carry out the evacuation plan during all shifts? What are the training procedures for staff related to emergency evacuations? Are evacuation drills practiced during all shifts?
- ***Coordination with other resources*** How is the plan coordinated with other facilities in the area? Are there contracts in place with transportation and other facilities to provide housing for displaced residents? Are all the facilities contracted with the same transportation company and if so does that company have enough vehicles to accommodate all the facilities? How is the plan coordinated with other community resources, the city, county, and state emergency management agencies?
- ***Supplies*** What type and how much emergency supplies does the facility have on hand? (food, generators, flashlights, water, oxygen, etc.) If the facility needs to be evacuated, are there plans for supplies to be transported? Can residents have their own emergency supplies in their rooms?
- ***Resident information*** How are the residents informed about the plan? How will residents be identified in an evacuation? How will information about the resident and supplies such as medications be transported? Will these go with the resident or separately?
- ***Role of the family*** How and when will family members be notified about evacuation plans? How can family members be helpful in an emergency situation? Can family members meet the residents at a designated location and/or can they come to the facility to assist? Family members have the right to evacuate their loved-one on their own and move them to a special needs shelter if they choose.

Information that all nursing homes must post and make available to residents:

When you visit a nursing home, check to make sure the following information is clearly posted and visible. If this information is not easily accessible, you should ask the staff where this information is normally posted.

- **Daily staffing of licensed and unlicensed nursing staff for each shift.** As of January 2003, all Medicaid and Medicare certified nursing homes must publicly post the number

of nursing staff they have on duty to care for residents on each daily shift. Licensed and unlicensed staff include: registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and nurse aides.

- **Name and contact information for all State client advocacy agencies** including the State Ombudsman program, the state survey agency, the protection and advocacy network, and the Medicaid Fraud Control Unit.
- **Results of the most recent state or federal survey.** All facilities must make recent survey information available and easily accessible, where individuals wishing to examine survey results do not need to ask for them. Easily accessible means in a place such as the lobby or other areas frequented by residents, family members, and the public.

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:

- **Visit frequently** and encourage others to visit;
- **Speak up** to raise concerns and compliments;
- **Attend** quarterly care plan conferences and advocate for individualized care;
- **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;
- **Get to know** the staff and help them get to know the resident. Share details in writing about the resident's likes, dislikes, and daily routines;
- **Participate** in family council meetings if a family council exists, or seek out other family members to organize one;
- **Make contact** with your community's long-term care ombudsman, any local citizen advocacy groups 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, the ombudsman, or state survey agency can investigate.