

Ethics Feature: The Challenges in Choosing an Assisted Living Facility

By Mia Grenfell

Assisted Living Facilities (ALFs) are environments for people who may need assistance with normal daily activities of daily living such as: bathing, grooming dressing, showering, laundry, cooking, transportation, house cleaning, and/or other personal care needs. As Care Managers we know that one of the benefits of this environment is that it simulates a home-like setting with the added benefit of having staff available for various levels of care. ALFs are the perfect place for someone who needs assistance in one or more areas of Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) but does not require intensive nursing or medical care.

However, as Geriatric Care Managers, we need to keep our eyes open to the growing incidence of resident neglect, medication errors, poorly trained staff, and even deaths that occur in assisted living facilities. USA Today's Web site (<http://usatoday.printthis.com>) has had some very stirring stories about how some ALFs failed to do criminal background checks or failed to keep the ratio of employees to residents at safe levels. Sexual assault is another serious issue. There is no doubt that assisted living facility residents are vulnerable, especially due to their frail conditions and possible cognitive impairments.

Families, especially those who are considered long distant caregivers, are very concerned and sometimes unknowledgeable about the fact that there are not any Federal regulations governing assisted living facilities at this time. In fact, many states do not have hard and fast regulations, policies, licensing, or even a general consensus on what constitutes "assisted living."

This makes choosing an appropriate one a daunting task. These are the features that you should look for in a good assisted living facility:

- Security—as in a secured building. In a larger city, a gated community would be ideal.
- Safety—24 hours a day, 7 days a week supervision and/or alarm response system. This will help relieve any anxiety or fears from far away family members, knowing their elder is being closely monitored.
- Accessibility—facility is specially designed for assistive equipment such as walkers and wheelchairs. Van transportation is provided at most facilities for shopping, medical appointments, and recreation. This is essential as most older residents can no longer drive or have had their licenses revoked.
- Housekeeping and laundry services —these are important services due to the physical limitations of the residents. These services usually have an extra service fee.
- Meals—three meals a day in a dining room setting can lead to improved nutrition and reduce social isolation. Improved socialization can improve depression and loneliness.
- Social activities—these should be meaningful activities that promote social interactions and use of the brain (use it or lose it).
- Assistance with medications— staff can provide reminders and assist in instructions. In some states, medications can only be administered by licensed nursing staff.
- Assistance with ADLs—this is where home care aids, CNAs, and health techs come into the picture to provide the actual physical care including toileting. A new category has been added to the assisted living facility client base— Alzheimer's Care. When evaluating an assisted living facility use a prepared checklist on one of a number of Web sites.

Just search for "assisted living facility checklist" and you will have a selection of sites containing lists one page in length to twenty-one pages in length.