

Practical Tips for Finding Residential Care



The decision to move your loved one into residential care is a tough and troubling one. The longer you have been devoted to providing care yourself as the family caregiver, the more difficult it can be to let go and make the change.

The purpose of family caregiving is to do what is best for your loved one, not save money, not please your parents or please your children, not to carry through on a promise you made to never put someone in a facility. The original purpose was to provide the best care possible for your loved one. Sometimes that means professional in-patient residential living. When and if this time comes, it is likely to be a roller coaster of emotions just at a time when you most need objective, practical, information.

Below are tips we recommend for finding the best residential care for your loved one. These tips will help you focus your attention and your thoughts as you make your way through the process.

1. **Know your options.** To begin your search, educate yourself on the various levels and cost of care. In general, your options include Retirement Communities/Independent Living, which may offer communal meals and activities for more independent residents; Residential Care Facilities such as assisted livings, nursing homes, sometimes called Skilled Nursing Facilities and Adult Family Care Homes which are a recommended alternative to large and often understaffed institutions.

Adult Family Care Homes as well as larger **Assisted Living Facilities** are licensed in Florida through the State Department of Hospital Administration and provide, for the most part, non-medical assistance. Non-medical assistance includes help with activities of daily living (bathing, dressing, eating) and "instrumental" activities (preparing meals, taking medications, etc.). Some care facilities either specialize in or have separate units that specialize in Alzheimer's and dementia care.

Nursing Homes and Convalescent Homes typically require 24-hour nursing supervision for people confined to a bed for some portion of the day.

2. **Consider what is most important for you and your loved one.** For many families, being nearby is a major criterion in decision making, so you can visit your loved one frequently and easily or respond quickly should there be a crisis.

Understanding the general atmosphere of a facility and services that are important to your loved one is essential. For example, it might be important for your parent to bring his/her pet to the care facility. This is not an unusual request, and some facilities will

accommodate it. Some people require a wide selection of daily activities to choose from, while others might not have this need. Narrow your search based on what is most important to you and your family member.

Understanding the rules and regulations of a facility is also important. Will they allow you to bring a birthday cake or special goodies or are those treats to be left at the front desk and taken care of later by the staff? Can your mother have her hair combed whenever she wants or only in the morning when the staff is dressing residents for the day? Are lights out at 9 pm or will your loved one have the flexibility they are used to in setting their own schedule?

3. **Use your informal resource system.** First-hand information on residential care facilities and nursing homes is invaluable. Don't hesitate to ask friends or support group members if anyone can recommend a care home. Day care providers, hospital discharge planners, or community care nurses are also excellent referral resources as of course is the Care Line at Polk Family Caregivers.
4. **Visit a few care facilities before you are in a crisis situation.** It's always best to be prepared. Knowing your care options before you are in a crisis situation is very helpful and might ease your fear about moving your loved one. You might also be pleasantly surprised at what you find!
5. **Make an appointment with the administrator.** Come prepared to your interview with lots of written questions. If you are interested in the facility, make a second, third and even fourth visit at different times of the day. You especially want to observe meal time, whether the food is appetizing and healthy, and how participants are accommodated. If you are not invited to visit at any time, unannounced, you might want to rethink that particular facility. Most residences have an open-door policy for families and friends.
6. **Be prepared for a swell of emotions.** Your first visit to a facility might bring up a strong emotional reaction. Be prepared to see residents with varying levels of impairment. You might want to bring a friend or another relative with you for support and/or to help you remember the questions you would like to ask. Constantly remind yourself, placement of a loved one is about the best care for them, not about the emotional upheaval for you.
7. **Observe the general environment.** Is there a cheerful, warm interaction between the staff and the residents? Does the administrator know the residents by name? Do you feel welcomed? How clean is the facility? Do the staff and administrator seem comfortable with each other?
8. **Appearances aren't everything.** Spend time speaking with the staff, other family members and residents. Ask what they like most about living or working at the facility and what they like least. Recognize that if your loved one moves to this facility, these are the people with whom you will be developing important relationships.
9. **Is the facility licensed?** Every facility must have their license displayed. The license lets you know they are registered with the State of Florida and meet state requirements.

10. **Does the facility have a dementia waiver or hospice waiver?** Residential care facilities are not required by state law to have a dementia waiver. Facilities with a waiver, however, are required to train staff on care for individuals with dementia to safeguard against accidents and wandering. If your loved one has dementia, it might be very important to you to look for a facility that has a dementia waiver.

More and more residential care facilities are now licensed to have hospice services come into the facility to care for a resident who is terminally ill. In this way, care is not disrupted and you and your loved one do not have to adjust to a change in environment. The question to ask is, "Does this facility provide end-of-life-care?" You don't want to be placed in the position of moving your loved one at the very end of their life when they are terminally ill.

11. **Cost.** In addition to the average monthly cost for residential placement which in Polk County ranges for \$15,000 - \$6,000+ a month), the family is responsible for incontinence and personal care products. There are also usually many add-on costs, which might arise from help with bathing, dressing, eating or incontinence. Assisted livings often charge an additional fee just for carrying a meal tray to the residents room in the event they don't wish to come to the dining hall whereas adult family care homes are not likely to have so many add on cost.

You might want to ask how often the rates are increased; how much notice is given before an increase; and how it's determined when someone is to be advanced to the next level of care. Typically, there is a change in cost when the next level of care is needed.

Medicare only pays for a short-term nursing home stay for rehabilitation purposes. The average cost for a nursing home in Florida is approximately \$5,000 per month for a private room; some cost even more.

Be up-front about your situation. If your mother sometimes refuses her medication or a shower, let the administrator know. This is also an opportunity for you to ask how the staff might handle these behaviors. Remember, your role is to try to make the transition for you and your family member as easy as possible. If the facility's philosophy of care does not agree with your philosophy, this is probably not the right facility for your family.

12. **Staffing Patterns and Staff Retention.** A good staff ratio during the day shift for a residential facility is one direct care staff person to eight residents. These "direct care" staff people are usually an aide or at best a CNA, Certified Nursing Assistant. This is NOT a highly trained person by level of schooling. The staffing pattern does not include the activity coordinator, program director or on-call nurse. Fewer staff is usually scheduled for evening and overnight shifts. In an Adult Family Care Home the required ratio is two staff to six residents. However, Adult Family Care Home staff is usually responsible for cooking and cleaning as well as resident care.

To get a sense of the satisfaction level of the staff, you might want to ask how many employees have been with the facility for more than one year. Find out too if there is a

registered nurse or doctor in the facility 24 hours a day. Many facilities will glibly state “a nurse is available” which means they have her phone number!

13. **Is there a perfect situation?** Personal care and attention to individual needs should be a major priority in choosing residential placement for your loved one. If you find something lacking at a facility, it might be possible for you to supplement what is missing. For example, you could take your loved one out to a beauty shop if there isn't one on-site, or volunteer to call bingo if you believe there are too few activities. Typically, more expensive facilities will have many amenities and special features, swimming pools, spas, libraries. These amenities make the family feel good, but honestly, these services all add to overall cost. The important question to ask yourself is will your loved one participate in these activities anyway?
14. **Changing your residential placement.** Sometimes caregivers discover that their first facility choice is not a good match for their loved one. Now that the family knows what is most important, they can be more successful when choosing another site. Although we recommend you work with staff to help your loved one adjust to their living situation, we also encourage you to trust your instincts. If you believe there is a better living situation for your loved one, make the move.
15. **Helping your loved one adjust.** Although there is a brief social history of your loved one taken during the intake process, you should supplement this information with your own "Personal Profile." Include information about your loved one's life, occupation, place of birth, interest, accomplishments, history as well as information about the rest of the family. You might even choose to create a wall poster with pictures from your loved one's past, with brief subtitles under each picture. Staff will then become familiar with your loved one's history in a positive way. Knowing someone's past is the key to developing rapport and a trusting relationship with the staff. When trust is established, your parent is more likely to feel comfortable at his or her new home.

Also provide staff with a written description of your loved one's typical day. Write down your loved one's daily schedule including sleep time, bathing schedule and preference for time of bath and meals. Also let staff know if your loved one would prefer a male or female caregiver to provide personal care.

16. **You are still the caregiver.** Even after you move your loved one, you are still the caregiver. If the administrator and/or staff suggest you no longer need to be involved in care decisions, ask yourself if this is the environment you want. Remember, you might not be providing the hands-on care (although you should still have the option of doing this if it is important to you), but you will always be your loved one's advocate and care manager. Your role shifts, but is still vital to the health and wellbeing of your loved one.
17. **Take Care of Yourself.** Although everyone's experience is different, moving a loved one to a care facility might be the most difficult decision you will have to make as a caregiver. When making the transition from home to a community setting, reach out to people who understand and will support you. Don't hesitate to phone Polk Family Caregivers to locate a support group, or contact a private counselor or clergy member. Try to rest, eat well, exercise.

Research suggests that the first months may be the most difficult for anyone moving into residential placement, but once your loved one is situated and you have developed a relationship with his or her caregivers, you will experience a long over-due sense of relief. Keep in mind that often the care receiver does very well with the move. After all, their social and physical needs are being accommodated around-the-clock. You have the opportunity now to enjoy spending time with your loved one in a new way, free of the 24-7 demands of caregiving.