Long-Term Care Facilities and Nursing Homes

Selecting alternate living arrangements for a loved one is a process that requires thought, time and planning. With a variety of facilities available, the challenge lies in choosing one that's best suited to your loved one's needs. Below are a few tips that may help.

What is a Long-Term Care Facility?

Long-term care facilities are residential facilities offering 24-hour nursing supervision, together with on-call health-care providers, personal care and recreational programs.

Some also offer rehabilitation programs and pharmaceutical or laboratory services, as well as special floors for acute medical care. Some have special high-security wings for residents with Alzheimer's or other dementia conditions.

Planning Ahead

Talk to your loved one. Moving into an elder care facility is a major life change for both you and your loved one. Facilities can vary in size, location, price and service. They can also provide a variety of options in meals, medical services, nursing and recreational activities.

Make a list of what your loved one is looking for in his or her new home. This can include things such as planned activities (day trips, arts and crafts, weekly music lessons, etc.), details on resident living quarters and other available services. Involving your loved one in the decision-making process, to the greatest extent of his or her ability, will help ease anxiety levels for everyone. If you empower your loved one to speak up for what he or she wants, this will give him or her a sense of control over the new living arrangement.

Do your research. It's important to take your time when choosing an elder care facility. Collect sales brochures, make phone calls, visit websites and talk to family members or friends who have gone through a similar situation. Questions you should ask include:

- What are the qualifications of the staff? Do they receive ongoing training?
- How many complaints have been registered against the facility? Have they been resolved?
- How are medical emergencies handled? Is there a doctor on call?
- Find out when the last time the facility was reviewed or accredited. Ask to see a copy of the review or accreditation report.

Find out as much information as you can and determine if each facility's offerings match your loved one's list of needs.

Consult with your loved one's physician. Some facilities require a current physical examination as part of the admissions process. With your loved one's consent, consider visiting his or her primary care physician to help identify which level of care he or she needs. This can range from little or no health-care support, to more extensive health-care services such as the dispensation of prescription medicines or the need for nursing staff.

Discuss fees. Fees for elder care facilities can vary. Discuss what services are covered in the fee with the director of resident care. For example: Does this include food, trips, nursing and other medical aids? Does the fee require a monthly payment or do you pay several months in advance? They should also inform you of what additional charges you may have for other services. These can include personal magazine or newspaper subscriptions, phone services and dry cleaning.

Plan a visit. Before making a final decision, make plans to visit several facilities to get a feel for each place. Besides looking at the physical structure of the facility, it's also important to speak with staff and residents to

get a better sense of the facility's general atmosphere. Ask some of the residents what their experience has been.

Find out about the facility's rules, regulations and policies. Review a copy of the contract or admissions agreement. Read this carefully and be aware of specific regulations the facility may have. Ask the facility about visitation hours, privacy for residents, ease of taking your loved one off site, and whether children and pets are allowed to visit. Understanding the facility's policies (particularly around visitations) will make keeping in touch with your loved one a little easier.

Easing the Transition
The actual move into a long-term care facility can be a traumatic time for everyone. You may be experiencing a mixture of both relief and guilt that the day has finally arrived. Your older relative may also be apprehensive and/or depressed. Although nothing is likely to turn the move into a totally stress-free experience, there are things you can do before the move to smooth the process and make the early days as easy as possible.

- Find out exactly what your elder relative may take for his or her room. If it's possible to move in a favourite chair or other items, this can be comforting for him or her.
- Help your relative choose photos or other small reminders of home and family to take.
- Label all clothing. Try to avoid taking expensive or irreplaceable items as things may be lost.
- Prepare a list of likes and dislikes, including your relative's food and drink preferences.
- Write a small description of your relative that will tell the staff what your relative did for a living, things he or she was proud of, etc. Let them know something special about this person who is staying with them.

In the first few days following the move, there are additional ways for you to show your support and ensure your relative is comfortable in his/her new home:

- Connect with the head nurse or team leader on the floor.
- Have a meeting with the doctor and other health-care staff on the floor in order to have your questions answered and share information about your relative.
- Connect with other residents' family members for peer support.
- Give your relative quality time when you visit. Build on their strengths, reminisce or do whatever helps them feel good.
- If financially feasible, consider building in additional support. For example, someone who can take your relative for a walk or just sit and chat when you're not available.
- Keep your own life in balance and try to take care of your own needs.
- Expect a period of adjustment. Your elder relative may be upset and disturbed by the move in the early days. Try to be patient, supportive and positive. Let your relative know that you will be there for him or her on an ongoing basis.
- Try not to dwell on your own feelings of guilt. Remember that guilt, anger and frustration are all natural responses to a situation that you did not create. Try to accept what has become necessary and move forward into the new situation as positively as possible.

If you think that an elder relative in your life could benefit from living in a long-term care facility, this is a decision that requires much pre-planning. Be sure to conduct extensive research into any of the facilities you're considering. And, most of all, keep the lines of communication open between you and your elder

relative so that you can sure their best interests are fulfilled.