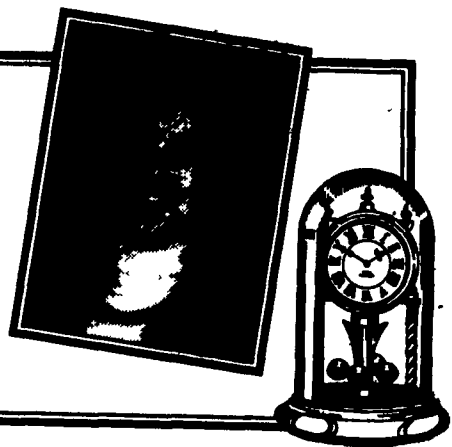


**Taking Time by Rebecca Escott**



"Home." A person's home is a very special, secure place. Unfortunately, for many people, growing old may mean leaving one's home of many years and beginning again in an unfamiliar setting. This process is a financially, physically, and emotionally draining one for families. But the strain can be eased somewhat if you prepare in advance.

Pennsylvania is an aging state. It ranks second in the percentage of people age 60 and over. According to the 1990 census, one out of every five residents is over 60 years of age. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of people aged 85 or older increased by 32 percent. There are now about 2,000 residents over 100 years in age! Although only a small percentage of these older adults lives in a nursing home or personal care facility, at some point, most families will deal with this issue.

Long before the decision needs to be made, families should gather information. Explore the options for yourself and for your older relatives. Take at least as much time to learn and compare choices as you did with your children's college or your purchase of a new house. A good decision cannot be

made quickly, and yet many people delay until their is a family crisis requiring quick placement. Making a decision hastily is not positive for anyone.

To begin, contact your local Area Agency on Aging. Review the three-month series this fall in *Consumer Reports* on nursing homes. And check out reference books like *Can Mom Live Alone?* *Practical Advice on Helping Aging Parents Stay in Their Own Home* by Vivian Carlin or *Nursing Homes: The Complete Guide* by Mary Brumpy Forrest, et al. After you familiarize yourself with the basics, begin to investigate your local options. Remember that nursing home placement is only one of many options available. Supportive care for an aging adult ranges from in-home services like respite care, home delivered meals, and emergency response systems and community-based options like senior centers and adult day care to residential communities, congregate housing and inpatient care.

One reason for early investigation is to research the waiting lists and costs involved. Fees for skilled nursing can range from \$2,700 to \$5,000/month, and waiting lists

may be long. It takes thoughtful planning to arrive at your preferred facility/service.

While you are gathering information, take time to contact Joyce O'Brien, our state's ombudsman on long-term care. She is in Harrisburg at 717-783-7247. It is her job to protect the rights and welfare of nursing home residents. She should be able to inform you of an institution's record of quality care.

After you have gathered information and listed all options, evaluate them. Try to determine "What will be the least restrictive environment for my family member?" "What setting will enable my relative to function at the highest level?" "What will be the impact on the entire family?" "What can we afford, and what financial resources are available to us?" As much as possible, the older adult should be giving input into the choice.

If after reviewing the choices, your family may determine that a continuing care facility is the best alternative. Conduct further screening using questions like these:

- Is there an entrance fee? How much is it? What are the monthly fees? How do these fees vary as the level of care increases? How often are they increased?
- What care options are offered?
- Are there any add-on fees for special services? What are they?
- How is the decision made for a person to move to a different care level?
- Can the dining room accommodate special diets?
- Are pets allowed?
- What kind of security is provided for the retirement campus?
- What is the financial status of the facility? Ask to see the disclosure statement? Ask for and read a

- copy of the state inspection report.
- If an inpatient facility is the best choice, compare locations or companies using questions like:
  - Does the resident have the choice of a private room? Are furnished rooms available?
  - What is the ratio of aides to residents? What is the turnover rate especially for nursing assistants?
  - How is the facility staffed during the evening? during the night?
  - How is food served to residents who can't handle utensils?
  - What therapy services are offered and how often? How are therapy services billed?
  - Can residents bring furnishings and other personal belongings from home?
  - What types of outings are planned for residents?
  - What costs will be out-of-pocket? What costs will be covered by insurance?
- Visit unannounced at different times of the day and week. Stroll corridors, talk with residents, and staff. If you are told you can only tour by appointment or at certain times, cross that facility off the list. Explore the facility observing its features.
  - Does the facility have a home-like atmosphere? Are residents' shared living areas comfortably

- furnished and nicely decorated? Do their rooms have personal touches?
  - How do the nurses' aides treat the residents?
  - Are residents who need attention getting it?
  - Are residents nicely dressed and well-groomed?
  - Are there handrails in the hallways and grab bars in the bathrooms?
  - Is there any place for the residents to enjoy the outdoors? A garden? A gazebo?
  - How many residents eat in the dining room? How many participate in sponsored activities?
  - Are special services like a beauty shop or library service available?

According to *Consumer Reports'* investigations, outward appearances and aesthetics are not always good indicators of quality care. Be sure to look beyond the superficial aspects of the home.

There are many issues to think about and investigate when considering a change of residence for an older adult. By learning about the options in advance and taking steps now to prepare for necessary changes, you can protect your family members from needing to make a hasty decision given few options in a moment of crisis.



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