



ALASKA  
LONG TERM CARE  
OMBUDSMAN

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## The **ABC's** of Choosing a Long-Term Care Facility in Alaska

Individuals and their families often find themselves looking for a long term care facility in the middle of a family crisis, frequently after a hospitalization. Usually the discharge planner wants to find a placement as soon as possible-preferably yesterday! Most people have little to no knowledge of how to find a facility that will help someone with their daily care needs. Sometimes it is possible to arrange for a personal care attendant to come into the home for several hours a day help with bathing, food preparation and light housekeeping. If the person needs more assistance than this, there are two choices: assisted living homes and nursing facilities. Most people do not know that health insurance and Medicare do not pay for care in an assisted living home or nursing facility. Long term care insurance will only pay for the services listed in the policy. VA benefits pay for some services and not others depending on your eligibility.

Deciding what type of facility to choose and how to pay for services is a complicated process, which depends on the individual's needs, income, and resources. The best place to start is by calling the Aging and Disability Resource Center (1-855-565-2017). They will connect you with an intake specialist who will do a person-centered intake. They will help you understand what payment options are available to you as well as which type of long term care facility would be best for you.

Once it has been determined whether the individual would best be served in an assisted living home or nursing facility and how this care will be paid for, it is a good idea to call the office of the Long Term Care Ombudsman (907-334-4480 or 1-800-730-6393) to help you select a facility that will match the individual's needs and preferences. The following ABCs will help you gather the information you need to decide which long term care facility would be the best placement.

**A**

Administrator-Talk to the administrator in person. Ask how often they are in the facility. Find out if they have another fulltime job. Ask how many other facilities they supervise. Decide if the administrator seems respectful and is willing to work with you. Ask what training and experience the administrator has in running a facility. Ask the administrator how they decide how many staff they need. For example: Do they have staff who are awake all night? How many caregivers do they currently have during the day and at night? Are there any nurses working for the facility?

**B**

Behavior - Ask what training that staff have working with residents who have dementia and aggressive behaviors. Ask how the facility prevent residents with dementia from wandering away.

**C**

Call for assistance- Ask how the residents let the staff know they need assistance. Many facilities have a call button the residents can use when they need assistance. Yelling to get staff to come is not the best system especially at night when staff may be asleep. During a visit, observe how much care the other residents need and look to see if they have enough staff to meet all the residents' needs. For example: How many residents are unable to get out of bed, use a wheelchair, or need assistance with eating?

**D**

Discharge-The most common reason facilities discharge residents is behavior. This is usually when a resident is exhibiting challenging behaviors such as aggression or wandering. It is helpful to talk to staff about what training they have had in working with residents who have dementia or exhibit other challenging behaviors. Residents can also be discharged for not following the rules in the contract, so make sure the person moving into the facility is willing to follow all the rules, especially those regarding smoking and drinking alcohol.

**E**

Emergency preparedness- Ask the provider what their plan is for an earthquake, flood, fire or other disaster. Ask to see the emergency preparedness plan, equipment and supplies. Observe the abilities of the other residents and try to determine if there are enough staff to get all the residents out of the building in an emergency. Ask at what point the facility contacts the family members after a fall or when residents become ill and need to go to the emergency room. Ask the staff if they are required to contact the administrator before calling 911 as this can delay medical care.

**F**

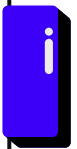
Facility-Look to see if the facility is clean and in good repair. The most common place for seniors to get injuries from falls tends to be the bathroom. Be sure to check out the safety of the bathroom by checking to see if grab bars are installed in the shower and by the toilet. Test them to make sure they are securely fastened to the wall. If the person moving in uses a wheelchair, ensure there enough space to maneuver in the rooms, especially in the bathroom. Also, check to make sure the sidewalks are clear of ice and snow. Ask to see the bedroom that is available and if the furniture is provided. Think about how you can personalize the space to make the resident feel more at home.



**G**rievance-Ask what the grievance process is when there is a complaint about the care or a specific staff person. Contact the licensing agency and ask what kind of complaints the facility has recently had that were verified (see contact information under L).



**H**ygiene-During a visit, observe the residents to see if they are wearing clean clothes and have good hygiene. Ask the staff if they do laundry for each resident and if they charge extra for that service.



**I**nsurance-Long term care insurance can be complicated. Make sure you understand what your policy covers and what it does not cover. Ask your insurance company what documentation you need to demonstrate eligibility to receive services in a facility and who needs to submit bills.



**J**oy- Having something to do each day is crucial to being happy. Talk with the staff to see what activities they provide for residents. Find out if they take the residents out into the community. Ask if the facility provides TV, cable or Wi-Fi included in the basic rate. Look to see if residents have TVs in their own rooms. Ask the staff if there are phones in each resident's room.



**K**indness-The cleanest home in the world cannot make up for brusque, thoughtless caregivers. It is important for the residents and the staff to have positive relationships with each other. During a visit, watch the staff and residents to see if they enjoy each other's company. Watch the interaction between staff and residents. Pay attention to whether the residents seem content or bored



**L**icensure- Always choose a home licensed by the state. Assisted Living Licensing (269-3640), Health Facilities Licensing, and Certification (907-334-2483) inspect all long term care facilities and investigate complaints. You can also contact these agencies to ask if there have been verified complaints or sanctions against the home. They can also provide you with the most recent inspection or survey. If you choose an unlicensed facility, it is important to know that no agency will be overseeing the services they provide and there will be no one to investigate if you have a complaint.

**M** Match-Determine if the facility is a good match for the person moving in. Observe the other residents in the facility to see if they would be someone, you or your family member would like to live with. The values of the facility and the resident should match as close as possible. Understand all the rules of the facility and make sure they are a good fit for the person moving in. For example: Does the facility allow alcohol? Marijuana use? Are you interested in a home that has staff that speak a specific language? Do you want to live with all females or all males? Are you religious?


**N** Neighborhood-The location of the facility is an important consideration. The closer it is to family and friends, the more likely they are to visit. If the facility is near where the resident used to live, it can help maintain contacts in the community such as being able to attend church, visit friends, and attend family events.

**O** Odor- When you visit the facility, pay attention to how it smells. The facility should smell like someone's home, not like urine or harsh cleaning agents.


**P** Privacy- Moving from your own home into a facility is a tough transition for the person moving, so it is nice to have your own space. Ask to see the room that is vacant. Some facilities have shared bedrooms, so it is important to ask if the room is shared. If the room is shared, ask to meet the roommate. Talk with the staff about what they do when roommates do not get along.

**Q** Quality of life- Everyone needs three things in life: positive relationships, something interesting to do each day, and to be helpful to others in some way. Find out how the facility is able to meet these basic needs. For example: Do staff provide companionship and not just care to residents? Does the facility provide interesting and meaningful daily activities or do the residents just watch TV all day? Are there plants or animals in the facility that residents are allowed to care for? Does the facility provide some type of intergenerational activities?


**R** Rights- The facility is the resident's home. Residents have many of the same rights in a facility as they would in their own home. They have the right to be treated with respect, to set their schedule including when they want to get up, to have choices in what they eat, and so on. Talk with the staff about what choices are offered to the residents.




Smoking-Many facilities, especially nursing facilities, do not allow smoking. If the person moving in is a smoker, this is an important factor in deciding where to live. Some facilities, mostly assisted living homes, allow smoking. In these facilities, ask staff how they ensure safety for residents who smoke (i.e. supervised smoking, burn proof gloves and aprons). If the person moving in is a non-smoker, make sure they move into a non-smoking facility.




Tasty food-One of the daily pleasures for residents living in a facility is mealtimes. Facilities that provide appetizing, home cooked meals usually have a waiting list. Plan a visit during a meal to see what is prepared for the residents. Also, note if the food being prepared would be a good match to the preferences of the person moving into the facility. If a doctor orders a special diet, ask the staff how they will meet the resident's dietary needs and what foods they would prepare for them. Also, observe if residents with dementia are encouraged to eat and drink when they forget.




Understand the contract you are signing with the facility and the fee schedule. Be sure you know what services are covered and what is not covered in the monthly cost of care. Private pay cost of care is negotiable and there is no limit, so do not share your income until after you have signed a contract for care. Also, ask under what conditions would the home's fees change and how would you be notified. Ask the administrator about the facility's refund policy if your relative dies or leaves the home before the end of the month. Be sure to get everything the provider promises to provide in writing. If it is not written in the contract then the facility does not have to provide it.



Visit the facility you are considering in person. After the initial visit, drop in unannounced, preferably at mealtime, so you can see what it is like when no one knows you are coming. Pay attention to everything you see, hear and smell.



Watch to see how often caregivers in the home interact with the residents who have dementia. Everyone needs loving words and kind touches. If residents with dementia are ignored because they cannot initiate social interaction, it is not a good sign.



X-rays- Ask the administrator if they make medical appointments for residents. Find out if staff can provide transportation and escort residents to medical appointments if family is unavailable. Ask if there is an additional fee for this service. Ask staff how they ensure that residents' prescriptions are filled and that residents take their medications according to the doctor's order.



Yard-During your visit look to see if there is a place where residents can go outside. It is preferable to have a space that is enclosed so that residents with dementia do not wander away. Notice if there are benches to sit on, if the yard is a pleasant place, and listen for traffic or other noise.



Zealous discharge planners- Take the time to find a facility that will make everyone happy. Discharge planners will often pressure families for an immediate discharge. It is a good idea to start looking for a facility as soon as possible, so you will have more time to choose a facility that is a good match.

We hope this information is helpful to you in choosing a facility that will be a good match. Above all, trust your instincts! If something does not “feels right” about a home, chances are you are picking up on a real problem. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the office of the Long Term Care Ombudsman at 1-800-730-6393 or in Anchorage 907-334-4480.