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TOP 10 CAREGIVER TIPS

*What Every Caregiver Should Know When Deciding Where to Find the Best
New Home for an Aging or Ailing Loved One*

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What Every Caregiver Should Know When Deciding Where to Find the Best New Home for an Aging or Ailing Loved One

Deciding when it's time to place a loved one in a skilled nursing community or assisted living residence can be an emotional rollercoaster. Financial considerations, location choices and quality of life, care and service decisions weigh heavily into the decision-making process. That's not counting the stress that can ensue from other sources – family members and even the caregiver recipient directly.

The Wealshire Rehabilitation and Skilled Nursing and The Ponds Premier Assisted Living Communities of Lincolnshire, Illinois, strive to help caregivers make the most-informed choices when it comes to finding a new home for a loved one. That's why we formed an independent Medical Advisory Council (MAC) – a collaborative effort between physicians, discharge planners, social workers and patient families – to help guide caregivers in the selection process. We also conducted interviews among caregivers of residents of skilled nursing as well as assisted living residences to understand their unique issues and insights.

We hope you find the following tips useful during your search:

TIP #1: Seek recommendations from healthcare providers.

Physicians, discharge planners, social workers and home healthcare nurses are knowledgeable sources of referrals. Based on their first-hand experience visiting or seeing residents, they can offer insight on whether a specific community would be appropriate and attentive to your family member's needs. While medical care providers do not dictate where an individual should go, they can lend valuable advice that helps narrow the list of available places. Ask your doctor or other care provider the tough question, "Would you put your own parent or spouse there?"

TIP #2: Plan a site visit.

Don't rely exclusively on pamphlets and websites. Even a referral from a friend or neighbor shouldn't be taken at face value until you've visited the community yourself. If you're making the decision for a loved one who lives out of town, try to arrange for a site visit or appoint another trusted family member to check out the place. Think of your loved one's best interests, especially if it is a long-term arrangement. Do the activities, amenities and services match his or her interests and level of required care?

TIP #3: Trust your first impression.

When you enter the doors, look with a critical eye at the community. Is it calm or chaotic? Does it smell clean? Are the residents engaged in activities or sitting idly in the hallways? Is a calendar of events posted in the elevators and in other prominent places? Is the staff friendly, professional and courteous? Also, listen for what they say when they think you're *not* looking or within earshot. Don't be rushed through the tour; go at your own pace and visit again at different times of the day or evening to get a true feel for the place at "on" and "off" hours.

TIP #4: Talk to other caregiver families and the residents themselves.

First-hand experience living at, and dealing with, the residence and its staff is powerful. Most places will be happy to furnish you with a reference list, but keep in mind that these are positive testimonials for the most part. As you tour the community, seek objectivity and ask "unsolicited" residents and visiting caregivers what they like or don't like about the accommodations. Sit and observe for a while. Remember, every residence will have its positives and negatives; you have to decide what is the best scenario for your loved one.

TIP #5: Communication is key.

Accessibility to on-site nurses and medical staff is critical to a relationship based on openness and trust. Inquire about whether there is a newsletter, e-mail communication, what the hours of telephone service are for nursing staff and how quickly you can expect to get answers to your questions. Ask if you can have direct access to the facility director. Family-run communities like The Ponds and The Wealshire have an advantage in that the owner is typically right on-site and can respond promptly to your inquiries or concerns.

TIP # 6: Don't feel rushed.

According to The Wealshire Skilled Nursing Caregiver Survey, about one-third of caregiver respondents visited an average of three nursing home facilities before making a decision. When it comes to assisted living communities, the evaluation cycle can be even longer. As opposed to just weeks, most people responding to The Ponds Assisted Living Caregiver Survey (43%) took two months to research difference facilities. The majority (71%) also visited an average of four to five assisted living communities. While *availability of rooms* was the #1 criterion in both caregiver surveys, don't be lured by high-pressure car sales-like claims such as "These apartments are going like hotcakes! We need your decision tomorrow."

TIP #7: Do the math.

If a room rate sounds lower than a Motel 6 vacancy, it's probably too good to be true. Don't be fooled by falsely deflated residency rates. Most likely, the price only includes the room itself – not the care, meals and services that one should expect in a skilled nursing or assisted living community. Also, beware of "nickel and diming" tactics. Some facilities charge extra for personal laundry, administration of medications, use of wheelchairs or walkers or meals to accommodate special dietary needs. Others like The Wealshire and The Ponds include these amenities on a complimentary basis, as part of the overall room rate. This way, there are no hidden surprises.

TIP #8: Ask for proof.

Any nursing care facility can claim that they have the highest quality certifications in town. Don't believe it. Ask to see copies of independent, third-party assessments like the HealthGrades Nursing Home Quality Report or the State Department of Health Survey. Each state is responsible for inspecting nursing homes every 9 to 15 months for license renewal, and the results are public information. The inspections (which are unannounced) assess compliance with standards such as staffing, quality of care and cleanliness. Non-compliance of standards results in a deficiency (violation). The prospective residency should gladly furnish copies of these reports to you – and even do so without your asking.

TIP #9: Consider the continuum of care.

Even if your loved one is eligible for assisted living at this time, think of the long-term. It's hard to predict when the status of one's health may change, triggering a possible transition in care or environment. If and when that happens, uprooting the individual and moving to a completely different residence can be incredibly stressful on both the care recipient and the family. For added peace of mind, look for a community that offers a complete continuum of care under one roof – from short-term rehabilitation to assisted living to specialized skilled nursing care. Some facilities like The Wealshire even offer individualized programs for persons with dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and special needs such as post-stroke therapy.

TIP #10: Think "family."

Take a long, hard look around you as you walk the halls of a prospective community. Would you welcome the other residents and even the staff members as extended family? If not, chances are your loved one won't either. Even if your parent or spouse doesn't seem like the "social type," look for a residence that is conducive to homestyle living – with specially designed common living space, social activities, group therapy programs and venues where families are openly welcomed. Loneliness and isolation are among the top reasons for depression and declined health in the elderly, so choose a community that is warm, inviting and active. After all, when you're not there, you'd want the next best thing to family for your loved one.

For additional questions or more information on The Wealshire or The Ponds, please visit: www.wealshireponds.com or call 847/883-9000 (The Wealshire) or 847/415-9090 (The Ponds).