

A place to call home

Facing housing issues for the elderly

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Picture this: You're about to walk out the door to go to your daughter's softball game when the phone rings. It's your mother. She's distraught, crying and not making much sense. It seems that your father has had a severe stroke and is paralyzed on his right side. Therapy will help, but it's a long and difficult road ahead.

Your mother is a mess, and her arthritis flares up during stressful times. She will become the caregiver for her husband, but someone needs to care for her. You're shocked as the enormity of the situation sinks in. Your parents are getting older and many decisions are now up to you.

It's always a surprise when parents get sick. They seem so healthy and self-sufficient that you imagine it will be years before you'll need to think about assisting them with the tasks of daily living. All too often it takes a crisis to set in motion the dynamics of becoming a caregiver. People do not think it will happen to them, but over 22 million families in America provide physical and emotional assistance to older relatives or friends. The average caregiver devotes 18 hours a week. We must deal with many issues as caregivers, but one main issue is that of housing.

The best choice is often enabling your parents to remain at home as long as that doesn't compromise their health, safety and wellbeing. Perhaps a few home modifications are all that would be needed to allow parents to safely remain at home. Maybe you need to install safety bars in the bathroom, widen doorways for a wheelchair and build ramps and other simple changes to make the home more safe and elder-friendly.

If staying at home is not an option, assess your parents' capabilities and the amount of care they will need. Other options include living with you or your siblings, an independent retirement community, an assisted-living facility, board and care homes, nursing homes and Hospice care.

Even though your parents might seem active now, plan with your parents for the time when they will need help. So when that phone call comes, you'll have

the informed decisions at the ready to ease the transition.

Support services

Its sometimes tricky to know when to ask for help. Below are some questions to help a person decide if its time for support services:

Is the health, safety or wellbeing of the elder person or his/her caregiver compromised?

Does the elderly person need assistance with activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, grooming or eating?

Are any of the following difficult for the caregiver to help with:

Getting in or out of bed

Bathroom activities

Cooking and food preparation

Taking medications

Telephone usage

Driving

Laundry

Paying bills or handling money

Socialization

Care options

When it is time for outside help, the caregiver must decide exactly what kind of help would serve the elder loved one the best. For a complete listing of types of facilities in northern Colorado, go to the Larimer County Office on Agings website at

www.larimer.org/depts/humanservices/office_on_aging.htm. Below are some of the options.

Companionship: This option offers non-medical in home support and care.

Home health care: Here, medical assistance is provided in the home.

Respite: This option offers temporary care to give permanent caregivers a break. The elderly person can be dropped off at a providing facility or a caregiver can come to the home.

Levels of care

Independent living: Usually the elderly person has an apartment but shares some meals in a common dining room. Other support services can include activities, transportation, house cleaning and laundry.

Assisted living: The elder person has his/her own room or apartment with all of the above as well as medication supervision, assistance with personal care

and 24-hour nursing oversight and the facility is licensed by the state.

Board and care: The same services as above are offered, only at a smaller facility.

Nursing home: Services include 24-hour nursing care, transportation and social activities plus occupational, physical and rehabilitation therapy.

Rehabilitation facility: Available is skilled nursing care with focus on rehabilitation and recuperation.

Hospice unit: Here, a person will receive 24-hour skilled nursing care, as well as pain and symptom management, grief counseling and bereavement support.

Case or care manager: Managers provide oversight of supports for physical, medical, emotional and social needs for older adults and coordinate and supervise those services.

When deciding to look for help from a facility, tour a few places to find the right fit. When you find one you like, tour it multiple times and at different times of day. Some questions to ask on your tour include

Can you see your family member (not yourself) fitting into this setting?

How do you think your loved one will respond to the sounds, sights, smells, lighting and general ambiance of the place?

What is the staff like? Are they courteous to you? Do they interact well with residents? How do they treat each other?

Where is the dining room and what is it like? Do the residents have enough time to eat? Where do residents with special needs or equipment eat?

What are the costs? When is the next rate increase expected? What are rate increases based on? What services are included in the rate and what will cost extra? What would the costs be in your case? If it is an assisted living facility, is it Medicaid certified? If it is a nursing home, is it certified for Medicare or Medicaid?

How will medical problems be met? How will unforeseen problems be met?

When is someone not appropriate for that facility?

Last, what is your gut reaction?

When considering a nursing home, look at the results of the most recent Colorado Department of Health survey. Check out Medicare's website,

www.Medicare.gov/NHCompare/home.asp for survey information.

Another option some consider is moving the elderly person in with the caretaker. Many times, this means that adult children become the round-the-clock caretaker of an elderly parent. While there are certain benefits to this arrangement, there are also definite drawbacks.

Advantages

- Easier to assist with activities of daily living
- Safety
- Socialization/stimulation for the elderly person
- Eliminates extra driving to their home
- Medications can be monitored
- Grandchildren can help with grandparents needs and can be involved in the caregiving process
- Easier to monitor potentials for abuse or fraud
- Saves money
- Your elderly parent might be able to help with some household chores thus boosting their morale

Disadvantages

- Less privacy for all family members
- Elderly taken out of their routine and forced into someone elses
- Others living in the home can feel ignored
- No time off from physical assistance
- More planning/coordination needed for food preparation
- Physical space limitations
- Need to mesh different lifestyles and roles

Kirsten Hartman consults with families as they consider housing options for elders in need of assistance

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