

Nursing home pick requires research

Let's face it: nursing homes are expensive.

So if you're shopping for one, experts say, it really helps to do your homework.

"You need to be an informed consumer," said Monica Wynn, director of the Dayton-Montgomery County Long Term Care Ombudsman Program. "Whether you're paying for it privately or under Medicare or other insurance, it's a large purchase. You need to be informed."

Wynn suggests people start by looking at the online listings and rankings available on several sources. The Dayton Daily News has posted a searchable database of 940 Ohio nursing homes gleaned from inspection results the Ohio Department of Health submitted to the federal government. That interactive database is available at www.daytondailynews.com

In addition, the Long-term Care Consumer Guide sponsored by the Ohio Department of Aging has information including survey results that show patient and family satisfaction levels. That can be found at lrc.ohio.gov

Medicare has its Nursing Home Compare searchable database that includes one- to five-star ratings of the homes in four different categories. That site can be found at <http://www.medicare.gov/nursing-homecompare>

And the nonprofit, ProPublica, has a site that includes articles on nursing

homes and a searchable database, called Nursing Home Inspect, with inspection reports. That can be found at <http://projects.propublica.org/nursing-homes/>

Once you've done your research, experts say, take time for some field trips.

"Do your homework and then go," Wynn said. "Go a couple times. Take in not only the environment, but look at the interactions between the staff and the residents, between staff ... because their communication is going to impact your care."

"Then have a meal there. Meet the people you are going to be working with. A social worker at a nursing home, you will be having a relationship

with that person. Meet them, say hello, see if this is a good fit for me."

A common complaint cited in complaints to inspectors: Staff failing to give proper medication to patients or violating their rights by sharing confidential information about a patient with other residents.

"That's very basic, giving residents their medication, that's really important," said Jane Straker, senior research scholar at Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University.

Nursing homes that have low staff-to-resident ratios typically perform the best, Straker said. Some of those nursing homes might pay their employees less in order to keep staffing levels

high, she said, but employees typically enjoy working at better-staffed nursing homes because they're less stressed and have time to get to know patients better.

"They have time to give complete care," Straker said. "They have time to develop a relationship that builds that quality of life."

Karl Zalar, executive director of the Friends Care Community in Yellow Springs, said inspection reports are important but don't tell the whole story.

Bring the inspection reports to the facility and talk and ask questions, Zalar advises.

"Tell them, 'OK I was online, and I see you have two stars. Why do you have two stars?'"

That gives an opportunity for a facility to explain what the circumstances were."

And tours are fine, he said, but not the true test.

"Personally, I think you go in unannounced," Zalar said. "You show up at the building at 5 on Saturday afternoon and see if you can get a tour. Our staff is instructed if they have some time to at least give you a short tour and then set up appointment the following week."

"And then go to other facilities. Don't just go in one. You should see two or three, the same way you would do for a house."