

Guide to Choosing an

ASSISTED LIVING COMMUNITY



www.alfa.org

How to Use This Guide

This guide from ALFA explains assisted living and what consumers can expect from an assisted living community. Also included are suggestions for locating communities, as well as a valuable checklist to use when visiting and evaluating a potential new home for yourself or for a loved one. Assisted living is an excellent option for seniors seeking an independent and vibrant lifestyle, while also receiving the help they want and need with daily activities.

Assisted living is the senior living option that combines housing, support services, and health care, as needed. Seniors who choose assisted living enjoy an independent lifestyle with assistance customized to meet their needs, benefits that enrich their lives, and an environment that promotes well-being and family connectedness.

Assisted living promotes independence and dignity for each resident and encourages the involvement of a resident's family and friends. Staff is available to meet both scheduled and unscheduled needs. Communities typically offer dining, as well as social and wellness activities designed to support a well-rounded lifestyle.

Assisted living communities may also be called residential care communities, adult congregate living communities, personal care homes, or community residences.





A unique transition from independent living without care, assisted living communities help seniors enjoy an improved quality of life with independence and care combined.

Assisted living is a housing and health-care option that combines **independence** and **personal care** in a residential setting.

The Residents

More than one million Americans currently live in assisted living communities. Assisted living is appropriate for someone who wants and needs some level of assistance with everyday activities, such as meal preparation, medication management, transportation, and bathing, for example. Some residents may have Alzheimer's or other cognitive impairments, or they may need assistance with mobility, incontinence, or other challenges.

The Communities

Assisted living communities offer the latest amenities, privacy, comfort, and beautifully decorated home-inspired environments for seniors. The variety of settings can range from convenient high-rise apartments near metropolitan centers to campus communities with all the charms of a small town. There is no single blueprint for assisted living because consumers' preferences and needs vary widely. Most communities have between 25 and 120 suites, varying in size from a single room to a full apartment. They may be operated by nonprofit or for-profit organizations.

Typical Costs

Costs vary with the community, apartment size, and types of services needed by residents; however, assisted living often is less expensive than home health services or nursing home care in the same geographic area. The basic rate may cover all amenities and personal services or there may be additional charges for special services. Most assisted living communities charge month-to-month rates, but a few require long-term arrangements.

How to Find an Assisted Living Community

- Search the most populated online source for assisted living communities at www.alfa.org. ALFA's directory features community photos, contact information, community-specific amenities and personal care services, and much more.
- Contact the national **Eldercare Locator**, a public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging, at 800.677.1116 or email eldercarelocator@n4a.org.
- Contact your local **Area Agency on Aging**, generally listed in the blue pages of your telephone directory, or search online at www.n4a.org.

Residents and their families generally pay the cost of care from their own financial resources. If an individual has a long-term care insurance policy, some costs may be reimbursable. Some state and local governments may offer subsidies for rent or service for income-eligible seniors. Other states may also use Medicaid programs to help pay for assisted living services.

Amenities and Personal Care

Assisted living communities provide more personal care services than an independent living retirement community. They offer a less-expensive, residential approach to delivering many of the same services available in skilled nursing, either by employing personal care staff or contracting



with home health agencies and other outside professionals.

Amenities in assisted living typically include:

- Three meals a day served in a common dining area
- Housekeeping services
- Transportation
- 24-hour security
- Exercise and wellness programs
- Personal laundry services
- Social and recreational activities

Personal care in assisted living typically includes:

- Staff available to respond to both scheduled and unscheduled needs
- Assistance with eating, bathing, dressing, toileting, and walking
- Access to health and medical services, such as physical therapy and hospice
- Emergency call systems for each resident's apartment
- Medication management
- Care for residents with cognitive impairments



The Assisted Living Care Provider Philosophy

Assisted living brings the best of an independent home environment together with high-quality services unavailable at home. In addition to this guide, ALFA encourages you to look for a general philosophy of care based on 10 principles that make assisted living residents the top priority:

- Offering cost-effective quality care personalized for the individual's needs
- Fostering independence for each resident
- Treating each resident with dignity and respect
- Promoting the individuality of each resident
- Allowing each resident choice of care and lifestyle
- Protecting each resident's right to privacy
- Nurturing the spirit of each resident
- Involving family and friends in care planning and implementation
- Providing a safe, residential environment
- Making the assisted living community a valuable asset to the surrounding community

How Are Assisted Living Communities Regulated and Licensed?

Assisted living is regulated or certified in all 50 states. The license will be hanging on the wall in the community. All state laws also provide for a Resident Bill of Rights. This document, too, should be posted on the wall.

Assisted living communities are inspected by the state regulatory agency. You may request a copy of the most recent survey report from the executive director. Assisted living communities must also comply with local building codes and fire safety regulations.

Consumer Checklist

The following checklist is your guide to the important amenities, services, accommodations, and care provided by assisted living communities. Every community is unique. ALFA recommends making several visits at various times of day to each community you are considering.

Ask the community for written material, including copies of the residency agreement that outlines, at a minimum, services, fees, extra charges, move-in and move-out criteria, staffing, and house rules.

As you begin your search for an assisted living community, assess your current needs and be prepared to ask each provider how it might accommodate any changes in your needs over time. Examine your finances and ask about costs. Monthly rates and fee structures vary.

Most of all, if you are seeking a community for someone who cannot visit the community personally, it's important to respect their needs and wishes by including them in the process as much as possible. The result will be their greater satisfaction.

As you assess assisted living communities, you will likely visit a number of them. To help you determine the one that's right for you or your loved one, consider the following questions to evaluate each community based on your needs. Also ask whether the community is a member of the Assisted Living Federation of America, which demonstrates a commitment to excellence and ongoing professional development.

Environment

- As you arrive at the community, do you like its location and outward appearance?
- As you enter the lobby and tour the community, is the décor attractive and homelike?
- Do you receive a warm greeting from staff welcoming you to the community?
- Does the executive director call residents by name and interact warmly with them as you tour the community?
- Do residents socialize with each other and appear happy and comfortable?
- Are you able to talk with residents about how they like the community and staff?

Consumer Checklist

- Do the residents seem to be appropriate housemates for you or your loved one?
- Are staff members appropriately dressed, personable, and outgoing?
- Do the staff members treat each other in a professional manner?
- Are the staff members that you pass during your tour friendly to you?
- Are visits with the resident welcome at any time?

Physical Features

- Is the community well-designed for your needs?
- Is the floor plan easy to follow?
- Are doorways, hallways, and rooms accommodating to wheelchairs and walkers?
- Are elevators available for those unable to use stairways?
- Are handrails available to aid in walking?
- Are cupboards and shelves easy to reach?
- Are floors of a non-skid material and carpets firm to ease walking?
- Does the community have good natural and artificial lighting?
- Is the community clean, free of odors, and appropriately heated/cooled?
- Does the community have sprinklers, smoke detectors, and clearly marked exits?
- Does the community have a means of security if a resident wanders?

Needs Assessments, Residency Agreements, Costs & Finances

- Is a residency agreement available that discloses personal care and supportive services, all fees, as well as move-in and move-out provisions? What are the policies for refunds and transfers?
- Is there a written plan of care for each resident? How frequently is it reviewed and updated?
- Does the community have a process for assessing a

- resident's need for services, and are those needs addressed periodically?
- Does this periodic assessment process include the resident, his or her family, and community staff, along with the resident's physician?
- Are there any government, private, or corporate programs available to help cover the cost of services to the resident?
- Are additional services available if the resident's needs change?
- Are there different costs for various levels or categories of personal care?
- Do billing, payment, and credit policies seem fair and reasonable?
- Are residents required to purchase renters' insurance for personal property in their units?
- Is there an appeals process for dissatisfied residents?

Medication & Health Care

- Does the community have specific policies regarding storage of medication, assistance with medications, training and supervision of staff, and record keeping?
- Is self-administration of medication allowed?
- Is there a staff person to coordinate home health-care visits from a nurse, physical therapist, occupational therapist, etc., if needed?
- Does the community have a clearly stated procedure for responding to a resident's medical emergency?
- To what extent are ancillary services available, and how are these services provided? Ask if there is an additional charge for any of these services.

Services & Amenities

- Can the community provide a list of personal care services available?
- Is staff available to provide 24-hour assistance with activities of daily living (ADLs) if needed? ADLs include dressing, eating, mobility, hygiene and grooming, bathing, and toileting.
- Does the community provide housekeeping services in personal living spaces?
- Can residents arrange for transportation on fairly short notice?
- Are barber/beautician services offered on-site?

Consumer Checklist

- Does the community provide scheduled transportation to doctors' offices, the hairdresser, shopping, and other activities desired by residents?

Individual Apartment Features

- Are different sizes and types of apartments available?
- Are apartments for single and double occupancy available?
- Do residents have their own lockable doors?
- Is a 24-hour emergency response system accessible from the apartment?
- Are bathrooms private and designed to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers?
- Are residents able to bring their own furnishings for their apartment? What may they bring? What is provided?
- Do all apartments have a telephone, cable or satellite TV, and internet access? How is billing handled?
- Is a kitchen area provided with a refrigerator, sink, and cooking element?
- May residents keep food in their apartments?
- May residents smoke in their apartments? In public spaces?
- May residents decorate their own apartments?

Social & Recreational Activities

- Is there evidence of organized activities, such as a posted daily schedule, events in progress, reading materials, visitors, etc.?
- Do residents participate in activities outside of the community in the neighboring community?
- Does the community have its own pets?
- Are residents' pets allowed in the community? Who is responsible for their care?
- Do volunteers, including family members, come into the community to help with or to conduct programs?
- Does the community create a sense of inclusion by encouraging residents to participate in activities?

Food Service

- Do dining room menus vary from day to day and meal to meal?
- Does the community provide three nutritionally balanced meals a day, seven days a week?
- Are snacks available?
- May a resident request special foods, and can the community accommodate special dietary needs?
- Are common dining areas available?
- May residents eat meals in their apartment or suite?
- May meals be provided at a time a resident would like, or are there set times for meals?

Additional Questions

- Does the community conduct criminal background checks on employees?
- Does the community train staff on elder abuse and neglect? Is there a policy for reporting suspected abuse?
- Does the community have a special wing or floor for residents with cognitive impairments such as Alzheimer's disease? If so, is it secured?
- Does the community allow hospice to come in and care for residents?
- Does the community accept long-term care insurance?
- Does the community allow a loved one, such as a grandchild, to spend the night? Is there a charge?
- Does the community participate in the Veterans' Administration Aide and Attendance Program? Will the community help complete the paperwork?
- Does the community accept Medicaid?
- What are the most common reasons why a resident may be asked to move out of the community?



www.alfa.org