

What is Assisted Living?

It's no surprise that this term is confusing to most people. Even in the Senior Housing and Care industries the term "Assisted Living" can take on many different meanings.

Broadly speaking, the term "Assisted Living" can mean that "care services are available" at some particular level. It is often used where a distinction is necessary to differentiate between "retirement or independent living" where care services are not so readily available (or not available at all) and a community or facility in which services are readily available.

The term "Assisted Living" may be used to describe:

- Personal and/or nursing services received in a Retirement or Assisted Living community
- Care received in an Adult Care Home
- Care received in certain areas of a Skilled Nursing Facility
- Care received in your own private home

Assisted Living in a Retirement or Assisted Living Community

In the state of Arizona senior living communities are required to obtain an Assisted Living License in order to provide assisted living-type services. The licensure has the same requirements as Hospitals and Nursing Homes. Assisted living typically refers to assistance with activities of daily living such as:

- Dressing
- Grooming
- Bathing
- Toileting
- Eating / Meals
- Transferring (getting from place to place)
- Medication monitoring or distribution
- Housekeeping & laundry services
- Activities

Assisted Living is separated into three divisions. Supervisory, Personal, and Directed. The first level is called Supervisory. This includes general supervision, including daily awareness of resident functioning and continuing needs, the ability to intervene in a crisis and assistance in the self-administration of prescribed medications.

The second level is called Personal. Personal care services: Assistance with activities of daily living that can be performed by persons w/o professional skills or professional training and includes coordination or provision of intermittent nursing services and the administration of medications and treatments by a licensed nurse.

The third, and highest level is Directed. Directed care services include programs and services, including personal care services, provided to persons who are incapable of recognizing danger, summoning assistance, expressing need or making basic care decisions.

There are many different types of Assisted Living Communities. You'll want to be aware of the many different hats that a community that offers "Assisted Living" care can wear.

When you contact a community, you may be calling:

- a business that offers many levels of care rather than just Assisted Living.
- a retirement community that offers moderate levels of supportive care services.
- a community where most of the residents require some level of assistance.
- a building providing care to people with cognitive impairments and memory concerns.

The First Step

When you first call on an Assisted Living community, you're most likely going to be put in touch with a marketing or community relations person. This individual is responsible for providing information regarding services, rates and programs offered by the community. They are also responsible for asking appropriate questions to determine whether the services and rate structures offered are an appropriate match for you on a long-term basis.

If you are prepared to do so during your visit, you will want to make it clear as to your intended time line for considering a move. If you are simply collecting options for a move that may occur more than three months from now, you should tell this to the marketing person so that they aren't focusing on what apartments are available at this point in time. Letting the community representative know any specific timing issues with your possible move will allow them to give you more complete and relevant information.

Each community has its own unique personality. The sense of spirit of a building is comprised of the staff's enthusiasm for providing services, the residents' interest in participating and becoming involved and the family members and friends that interact within the community. Added to this is the overall sense of purpose and philosophy of service present in the business structure of the organization. You can sense the spirit of a community by visiting multiple times, even unannounced. This gives you an opportunity to simply catch a glimpse of life in its natural state.

By visiting multiple times, you'll have an opportunity to meet many different residents and to view the interactions they have with each other, with visitors in the building and interactions they have with staff. Some communities maintain a more professional feel to them - others feel like a family gathering. Choosing the environment that best matches your personality is an important part of the decision-making process.

Consider asking the marketing person to arrange for you to have a meal in the dining room with two or three other residents. Request to meet alone with the residents rather than having a staff member present. If you want to understand how things operate - simply ask a resident.

Once you have visited two or three of the communities that are of the most interest to you, you'll want to spend some time reviewing your thoughts and feelings. If several family members can visit the building, it is helpful to discuss your opinions with each other.

Things to Consider & Questions to Ask When Choosing a Community:

Atmosphere:

- As you arrive, what is your first impression of the front of the building?
- As you enter the building, how are you greeted?
- Do you see residents? If so, what are they doing?
- Are you encouraged to talk to residents and are you introduced to residents?
- When staff walks by each other, how do they interact?
- When a staff member walks by a resident, what is their interaction?
- Are you encouraged to drop in for a visit at any time?
- How long are you kept waiting by the staff when you visit?
- How well is the housekeeping staff keeping things in order?
- What does your nose tell you about the general cleanliness?

Physical Appearances:

- Is the community well designed to meet the needs of older adults?
- Are there an ample number of elevators?
- Is parking adequate?
- Are the hallways accommodating to wheelchairs and walkers?
- Are there useable handrails available for people with mobility concerns?
- Are floor surfaces logical - no throw rugs, no thresholds, no slick surfaces?
- What is the temperature of the community areas? Resident apartments/rooms? Hallways?
- Is the lighting appropriate?

Medication & Health Care:

- Is health care managed by a nurse or by a non-health care professional? Is this person a Licensed Practical Nurse or a Registered Nurse?
- How often is a Registered Nurse in the building? (Number of hours and number of days)
- What type of training do the care givers receive?
- How many care givers are staffed during each shift?
- Are you required to purchase medication from a particular pharmacy?
- What are the packaging requirements of medications and non-prescription drugs and herbs?
- Who distributes medications and in what manner?
- How are medications logged in and accepted?
- Is the staff able to give an injection? What does the health care staff do to accommodate people with memory impairments?
- How frequently do visiting nurses or physicians come to the building?
- To what extent are medical services available and how are these services provided?
- How is incontinence managed? What level of support is provided with bladder and bowel incontinence?

Services:

- Can the community provide you with a clear list of what services are available and/or included?
- What is the staffing pattern from 10PM to 7AM?
- What meals are included in the base monthly rent?
- What type of service is offered in the dining room? Are people served by wait staff?
- How many entrée items are available at each meal?
- What are the times that meals are offered?
- Can residents arrange to have a meal tray brought to their room? In what instances? Is this an added cost?
- How often is housekeeping provided, is it included, and is bed linen laundered?
- Are there safety checks other than an emergency pull system - such as checking on people once a day or verifying that residents are at meals?
- What transportation services are available?
- Is cable TV included in the monthly rent?
- Is there a guest room available?
- How many staff members work in the activity departments?
- On what day are planned activities scheduled?
- What activities are offered on Saturdays and Sundays?
- Are exercise classes offered?
- In regards to bathing / showering - what is the typical frequency of providing assistance on a weekly basis?

Policies:

- Are there certain areas where wheelchairs or walkers are not permitted?
- Are residents allowed to smoke?
- Where does staff smoke?
- What happens to trash?
- Does the community recycle?
- Are pets allowed?
- Are pets allowed to visit?
- By what percentage have rate increased over the past three years?
- Is alcohol allowed in the dining room?

Resident apartments or resident living spaces:

- How do the windows open?
- Does the thermostat function properly?
- What type of heating / cooling is available?
- What is the size of the refrigerator available?
- What type of emergency response system is available?
- Are the bathrooms properly equipped for an elderly person?
- Is there adequate storage in the bathroom?
- Where is the telephone jack(s) located?
- What changes/alterations may be made to the apartment?
- Is there a walk-in shower, roll-in shower or tub/shower combination?

Contractual Agreement:

- Are there financial requirements for admission?
- Are you given a complete description of what health care services are available and services that are not provided?
- What system does the community use for determining level of care? Do they assign point values, is it a level of care or is each service charged separately?
- What is the range of charges for care services paid by other residents?
- Are you given a clear understanding of the reasons for which a community may give you a vacate notice?
- What is the process used by the community to assess the resident's need for services and how often are these needs readdressed?
- When and how may the contract be terminated and by whom?
- Is there a process for gathering permission to provide additional services?
- Does the community accept Medicaid and what is the process for applying?
- What is the appeal process if a resident disagrees with a choice made by Administration?

What is the community's policy on a current resident who now needs to apply for Medicaid assistance?