

A CLOSER LOOK

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# Impressions count

*Trudy Lieberman, director of the Center for Consumer Health Choices at Consumers Union, describes what she learned on her visits to 50 assisted-living facilities in 12 states, while writing Consumer Reports Complete Guide to Health Services for Seniors (Three Rivers Press, 2000).*

When I set out to investigate assisted-living facilities, I was blazing a trail; little information to guide consumers existed. Glossy brochures featuring smiling people socializing with one another seemed to promise the ideal place to spend one's last years. But did the facilities actually live up to that ideal? It was hard to say. There is no federal database that tells about the quality of care delivered in them as there is for nursing homes, and states offer little concrete guidance. And, as I soon learned, assisted-living contracts present multiple traps for unwary families.

In the absence of good information, I set out to see firsthand what life is like inside these facilities. My overall conclusion: While people move to assisted-living facilities to obtain help with daily activities in a safe environment, too many facilities are more interested in selling real estate than in selling quality care. You will have to make many visits to facilities in order to find one that seems right.

And while people go to assisted-living facilities for social stimulation as well as for care, I seldom saw residents walking about and interacting with one another or the staff. At a Denver facility, the activity room looked unused. T-shirts and paint trays were neatly arrayed as if they were props for a play. At a Georgia facility, the activity room was empty of people but well stocked with perfectly filled-in coloring books. This is not what you want to see.

Nor do you want to find unhappy people simply resigned to living in a facility because their children selected it for them. Some residents I met conveyed a sense of unhappiness about their lot. "This is not what I intended, but I do the best I can," said Emily, whom I met in Virginia.

Like other long-term-care facilities, the quality of care depends on the commitment of the management, and you want to see positive, warm, friendly interactions that signal the managers and the staff care that your relative will be treated well.

What I observed at some facilities told me I could not go wrong placing a loved one there. At a Section 202 facility in Colorado where residents contributed a dollar or two to maintain an indoor garden, a resident named Jean came up to me. "The thing I like best here is the management," she said. "After I was here two months, I asked for a 50-year lease." In turn, the facility director said: "My philosophy is, this is their home. We do all we can to make it work."

At a cozy, warm facility in an old Philadelphia mansion run by an order of nuns, residents were encouraged to read and sew and engage in all the activities that they once enjoyed. But it was the care that went into meal preparation that caught my eye and said that this was a good option for Mom or Dad. Each place at the table was set with a dish of lemon



**At some assisted-living facilities, cabinets and furnishings are not adapted to the needs of elderly residents.**

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Jell-O and a small green salad with dark green lettuce and cherry tomatoes. On the stove a big pot of spaghetti sauce bubbled away, and bread was warming in the oven. The sights and smells of that lunch are still with me.

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