

that's a minority. Some will do a fixed price. It's worth asking.

If you are placing your Dad, ask: **Do you have a Men's Club?** The male population at Assisted Living communities runs from only 10 to 30 percent. Those with a Men's Club have special activities for men and some have a clubroom for them with poker tables, billiards, and maybe even a slot machine.

Ask this about meals: **If my parent doesn't like what's on the menu that day, will the chef make something special?** Some communities only offer what's on the menu unless there is a special diet. Others have all-day menus with sandwiches and often a couple of entrees. Some will happily cook a special meal. Ask if you can try the food. Or, ask them to make you a sandwich. Seriously.

If Mom or Dad drinks alcohol, ask: **Is there a Happy Hour?** Liquor policies vary by state regulation and community choice. Some offer a glass of wine before or with dinner, and some even offer hard liquor (they can't usually charge for it and sometimes it is BYOB). Many allow liquor in the apartments unless there is a medical directive otherwise. Find out, or your Mom or Dad may look for the first taxi out of there at 5pm.

If religion is important to your parent, ask: **Do you have religious services or visit local churches?**

Finally, ask **How long have the key managers been here?** You want a community with stability. If the executive director, nurse, sales director, and activities director all have less

than a few months in their jobs, something might not be right. Look for several years for at least some of the key people.

You may not find the perfect community, but one or two should come close! After you visit about three communities, compare your notes and see which comes closest. Better yet, ask Carol or one of her team for help.

About Ask-Carol!

Ask-Carol! was founded in 2009 by Carol Shockley, who spent years as caregiver for her Mom, later placing her Mom (and her Mom's boyfriend) in Assisted Living.

Today, she and her staff of Certified Senior Advisors help families decide on the type of care their parents need, and if Assisted Living is appropriate, select the right one. Ask-Carol services to families are free.

Call 1-800-606-5801

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Carol's Guide to Visiting Assisted Living Communities

What no one else will tell you

By Carol Shockley



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Ask-Carol! has visited many Assisted Living communities to see and share first hand with our clients those best suited to each parent's needs. This experience has enabled us to develop a strategy to evaluate individual communities, and I'm sharing some of the key points below. After all, once you place your parent in an Assisted Living residence, you need to know that Mom or Dad will be well cared for.

This is critical: Don't take Mom or Dad on your first visit. You need to be able to talk with the residence staff privately.

So here it is, and it begins before you even walk in the door. Take this with you!

Walk up to the first resident that you see (there is usually at least one outside, even in cold weather) and ask: **Do you think my Mom (or Dad) would like it here?** One thing we know about seniors is they say what they think. Listen carefully. Then ask what they like and don't like.

Enter the lobby and look around. How many residents are asleep? A great residence has lots of activities and most residents should be participating, eating, reading, talking with friends, watching TV, or napping in their rooms.

Tell the receptionist that you have an appointment for a tour (which you do – never go in without one) and then immediately ask where the restroom is. That will give you an opportunity to snoop around a bit.

Check the restroom to see if it is clean and free from obnoxious odors and debris on the floor.

Find the daily activities schedule. It will be posted on a bulletin board near the lobby or dining room. Look for six to ten activities each day, including some trips, with at least one activity after dinner (such as a movie, bingo or singalong).

Head for the dining room and look at the menu. How many choices are there? Do they sound like something you would want to eat? If anyone is dining, ask how the food is today. Food is one of the biggest complaints that residents have and you will be able to tell from the looks on their faces what they think.

Return to the lobby for your appointment. The sales director will take you on a pre-programmed tour of the building. You will see what they want you to see. They will show you several rooms or apartments, most of which you will think are very small (that's OK – they are just for sleeping and some evening TV). The whole community is home.

Observe what is going on around you. When staff members walk by, do they say 'hi' or look down at the floor and scoot by? That tells you about the management and its relationship with the staff and residents. Happy employees want happy residents. Unhappy employees don't care. The sales director should introduce you to the nurse, activities director, and if possible the executive director during your visit.

Ask the nurse this question: Do you have a nurse on site 24/7? If they respond that they have a nurse on call at night or 'professional staff' on site at night that means 'no'. Unless Mom or Dad is in really great shape, you may

want a nurse there all the time. Many emergencies are at night.

Use your nose. An occasional odor is normal. Many of the residents are incontinent, but the community shouldn't smell like a latrine. Some use air fresheners or make popcorn when necessary. Others don't care.

Ask to see the theater. They all have them, but some barely qualify. If the TV is too small, it doesn't matter how good the movies are. Sit in the back row and you will know.

Watch for residents doing activities. There should be exercise classes, art projects, and other things going on just about all the time. Does the activities director seem to be having a good time?

After the tour, ask questions. You will be taken to a small office and given the sales pitch. *Don't sign anything on your first visit unless you have to move your parent in right away.* Interrupt whenever you like, with these questions:

What happens if Mom or Dad runs out of money? Many, depending on your State, will tell you about Medicaid. That's great, but Medicaid policies differ among communities. Ask how long their private pay period is (often two years) and whether they restrict the number of residents on Medicaid. If they do, you might reach the two years of private pay, but have to continue paying, or move your parent. In States without Medicaid, most communities will help you move Mom or Dad to a nursing home with Medicaid. Some communities will guarantee a Medicaid room after the private pay period, but