

# Building Bridges

Residents of Kent Nursing Home and Children from CHLD Inc., Draper Avenue, Warwick, RI. Building Bridges, Joan Leonard, Program Director, Alliance.

## When it's time to think 'nursing home'

By HERBERT P. WEISS

"Until there is a health crisis, families don't often think about nursing home care until it's too late," stated Roberta Hawkins, executive director of the Alliance for Better Nursing Home Care, a statewide consumer watchdog group that lobbies on behalf of 10,000 Rhode Island nursing home residents. "If it's possible, plan ahead," Hawkins suggested.

"Your state health department provides a comprehensive list of nursing homes to review. Along with this list you need to know if the facility is reputable," stated Hawkins.

According to Hawkins, word of mouth or personal recommendations from friends, neighbors, hospital discharge planners, clergy and physicians about a nursing home's care are key bits of information to determine if the nursing home is well run. "The Alliance also offers a free phone help line to assist in matching the particular needs of a person with a specific facility," she added.

### Gathering Information: the Nuts and Bolts

With more than 20 years of experience under her belt in assisting families find the right nursing home for their loved ones, Hawkins tells Beacon Communications simple tips for selecting a facility.

Upgraded services for residents requiring intensive medical care, special rehabilitation therapies, dietary requirements, along with religious and culture needs should also be taken into account before selecting a facility.

Location should not always be the deciding factor in selecting a nursing home. Carefully

choose a facility that meets your loved one's specific medical, personality and social needs. In many cases, this critical decision is made only for convenience of family members or visitors. If an elderly spouse can not drive, make sure that the selected facility is on a bus line. Keeping a married couple close together is very important for their well-being.

Always have the older person, in need of nursing home care, actively participate in choosing a facility even if they can't physically visit. Family members can also provide this person with brochures and admission materials.

Don't choose a facility on the basis of a beautiful physical exterior, fancy rugs, or glittering chandeliers. When visiting a nursing home, observe how staff interact with residents and each other — look for laughter, a pleasant environment, and a strong activities programs.

Ask yourself, is the facility's environment cheerful in appearance and clean? Do residents look well groomed, clean, and are their clothes neat in appearance? Are the bedrooms warm looking and do they re-

flect the residents' individuality? Or do they all look the same, like "hotel rooms." Find out if residents are allowed to bring in personal belongings such as chairs, tables, lamps or even a television set.

For those persons who always loved nature and being outdoors, find out if the nursing home has an outside area for sitting or walking. Determine if this area is accessible to a wheelchair bound person who might want to roll outside to listen to the birds. This simple amenity is very important.

When touring, determine if a facility has a dining room for eating meals and space to allow residents to socialize with each other and participate in activities. Is there a real working activities room? A resident who has always been involved in crafts and enjoys participating in group activities will want to select a facility with a well-run activities program.

Also, be aware of how the nursing home smells. Sometimes you may smell strong odors of deodorants. This might be covering up unpleasant odors. Listen for sounds of buzzers, rung by residents in need of help, and observe how quickly staff responds.

When walking the halls, say "hello" to the staff you meet. Do the staff pleasantly respond to you? If not, consider that they may not respond well to your loved one. Walk in and talk with residents gathered in a community room. In conversation, find out how long they have lived at the facility. Ask, if they like the facility and are they respected as individuals by staff.

If you see residents in restraints lying or sleeping in a chair or wheelchair, this may be a warning. The facility may not have enough staff to allow the resident to lay down in bed for a nap in the afternoon.

During meal times, ask residents if they like their meals and is the food served hot. Full plates of food being taken away by dietary staff may indicate a problem.

### Specialized Care for Special Needs

Hospital discharge planners can provide valuable information about specialized care offered by nursing homes in your community, stated Susan K. Whipple, administrator of Cedar Crest Centre, a 153 bed

### Organizational Resources

Here a listing of RI groups and state agencies that can provide valuable information about "the how-tos" of choosing a nursing home.

- **Alliance for Better Nursing Home Care.** Roberta Hawkins, 401/785-3340.
- **RI Department of Elderly Affairs.** DEA Director Barbara Rayner, 401/277-2130.
- **RI Department of Health.** Wayne Farrington, 401/222-2566
- **RI Health Care Association.** Al Santos, 401/732-9333.
- **RI Association of Homes and Services for the Aging.** Sheila Sousa, 401/453-0040.

skilled nursing home in Cranston. When seeking out a facility, Whipple recommended people tour different facilities to compare and contrast, talk to rehabilitation staff, and personally talk to residents to gauge the quality of specialized and rehabilitation services offered.

"A coordinated rehabilitation therapy program offered on site can reduce the disruption of residents having to be transported outside the facility to follow-up physician office visits," Whipple stated. To enhance the care provided to short-term orthopedic patients, Cedar Crest Nursing Centre has recently affiliated with a local orthopedic physicians group to provide orthopedic services (e.g., post-op hip fracture follow-up, shoulder slings, cast cuttings) and rehabilitation on site in the facility's brand new therapy room. This service is designed to promote the highest level of independent functioning of our residents, she added.

Keep the needs of cognitively impaired persons in mind when visiting a nursing home, recommended Mary Poirier, program coordinator of St. Elizabeth Home's 41-bed Alzheimer's unit. Today, a growing number of facilities, including her facility, operate special care units for taking care of Alzheimer residents. Special environmental designs in these facilities include outdoor protected areas to keep wandering residents safe.

When visiting a special care unit, answer these questions, Poirier recommended. Are staff patient with the cognitively impaired residents, acknowledging their distress, more importantly, reassuring them? Do activities recognize the different needs of a resident (e.g., body, mind and soul)? "Does the Alzheimer unit's programming keep residents busy the entire day? Is the unit's interior home-like and safe for those who wander? Finally, do staff actively solicit family support and involvement in care?"

"Don't only rely on word-of-mouth recommendations when selecting a nursing home, recommended Carol Sloan, administrator of Kent Nursing and Rehabilitation Center, a 153 bed skilled nursing home in Warwick. "Compare nursing homes and shop around before selecting one," she added.

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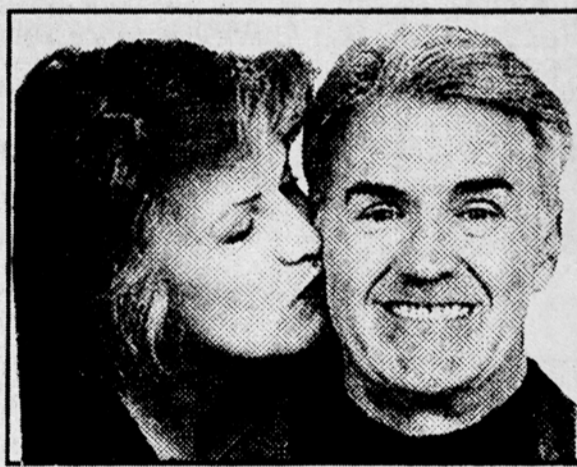
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