

Tips on Working with a Care Community

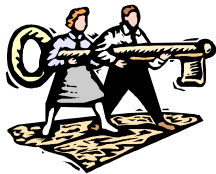
Now that your family member has moved into a senior community, your entire family has completed an important transition and your role has changed. Your caregiving team now includes the caregivers, administrators and other staff of the community you have chosen. Your new role is to coordinate and monitor the care that your family member receives in his/her new home.

You may be feeling relief once the move is completed. The challenges of physical caregiving are behind you. You feel more confident with professional caregivers to provide assistance and regular check-ins to make sure all is well with your family member. You and your family member are looking forward to the social opportunities that a new community offers.

You may also feel a little lost. What is your role now that your family member has moved? Some families experience a sense of failure that they could no longer help their relative stay at home. Both you and your family member may have complicated feelings about his/her move to a care community. It can be a huge adjustment for the entire family.

This guide is intended to help you build a productive relationship with the staff and administration to insure your family member receives the best care possible.

Keys to Quality Care



Key #1 Build strong relationships

Get to know the administrator, nursing director, social worker and activities people in your parent's senior community. Get to know his/her regular caregivers. Make a point of stopping by the administrator's and nursing director's offices when you visit to say hi. Share positive feedback whenever possible.

Sincerely offer praise when warranted. Take the time to notice things that are being done well and any extra touches your family member receives. This helps both you and the staff focus on the positives. Be generous with your "pleases" and "thank yous" to everyone who cares for your family member.



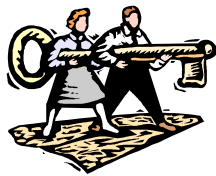
Key #2 Visit regularly

There is no better way to support your family member especially during the transition to his/her new home than to visit. No matter how carefully you vet a community prior to your family member moving in, there is more to be learned during your visits.

By visiting regularly and at different times of the week and day, you get a better understanding of the rhythms of the community. When is it bustling and when is it quiet? Review the calendar of community events so that you can plan your visits and calls at varying times throughout the day. Varying your visits can also tell you what staffing is like in the evenings or on weekends.

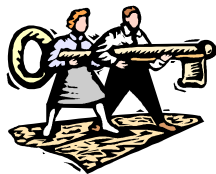
Frequent visits also give you the opportunity to get to know your family member's caregivers and to deepen your connection with the administrator and nursing director. It sends the message that your family member is important to you and your family. If you are not able to visit regularly, consider hiring a geriatric care manager (GCM) to check in with your family member, act as his/her advocate and report back to you frequently.

Participate in family days, holiday parties and other family activities at the care community whenever possible. Your participation sends a strong message to the community's staff that your family member is loved.



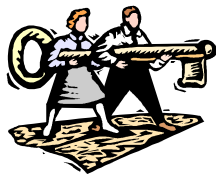
Key #3
Help caregivers and other care community staff see your family member as a whole person

Share stories and anecdotes about your family member that provide insights into his/her personality and life history. This helps put your relative into a context that is larger than their current circumstances. Consider creating a photo album or bio of your family member to share with the staff. If there is a memory box outside your relative's room, provide things to put inside it. Celebrate some of his/her significant life experiences.



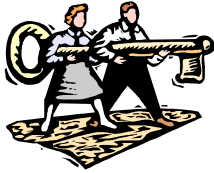
Key #4
Be an active participant in care plan meetings

At regular intervals, care plan meetings will be held to discuss your family member's well being. By attending these meetings you can discuss his/her health concerns, abilities and disabilities. It's an opportunity for you to share both praise and areas of improvement in the care your family member receives. Offer balanced feedback, not all good, not all bad. It's good to bring another person with you to listen and take notes about what is discussed. You will want to make note of any action items that the meeting generates and due dates for those items.



Key #5
Keep a written record of your family member's care and well being

Create a log to track your observations about your family member's health and care. When you do have a complaint, you can refer to your log for the facts. Also use your log to record positive events that you want to communicate to the care community's administrator.



Key #6

Follow up after doctor appointments to make sure the doctor's recommendations are implemented

A doctor's visit may result in a change of medication or the prescribing of a treatment to be carried out by caregivers or the nursing staff at your family member's community. The doctor's office should fax any orders directly to the community. To prevent any miscommunications, follow up with the nursing director or nurse on duty to make sure that all the doctor's' new orders have been received and implemented such as making sure that the old drug has been discontinued and the new drug is being given.

When you have a complaint:

Even under the best of circumstances, you or your family member may have an issue that needs to be resolved regarding his/her care. When considering what things to address, it's important to prioritize issues that are related to physical and mental health, safety and dignity above other concerns.

You may find that it's difficult for your family member to be his/her own advocate at times. Wanting to feel accepted and liked by the caregivers or concern about hard feelings may keep the senior from complaining to anyone but you. Even a formerly forthright and assertive person may rely on you to resolve issues with his/her care community.

What to do when your family member complains to you

- Listen carefully and with an open mind to what he/she has to say. Stay as calm as you can. Complaints can make you feel guilty, angry or disappointed in the care your family member is receiving.
- Gather as many facts as you can from your family member. When did or does the problem happen? How often has it happened? Who was involved?
- Ask your family member if he/she wants you to complain on his/her behalf to the administrator. Does he/she want to be present during the meeting?

What to do before you schedule a meeting to discuss a complaint

- Script out what you want to say. Feelings can run high during meetings about complaints, scripting will help you stay on track.
- Gather any facts that you have to support your concerns.
- Decide what you feel is an appropriate solution to the problem while remaining open to what the administrator has to say and to possible compromise solutions.
- Bring a friend or family member with you to take notes. Most likely more than one representative of the care community will be present and you will feel more secure with a supporter in the room with you.
- If multiple family members will be attending the meeting, make sure that all of you agree to present a united front on the issue and appoint one of you to be the family spokesperson.

What to do during and after the meeting

- Clearly and calmly share your concern following your script.
- Have the note taker keep track of any steps that will be taken to resolve the concern and deadlines about when the problem will be solved.

- Set reasonable deadlines for action to be taken.
- Follow up on the deadline to make sure that the problem has been addressed.
- Report back to your family member so he/she knows what happened at the meeting if he/she did not participate.

If you are having difficulty getting problems resolved, consider asking the local county's Long Term Care Ombudsman for assistance by calling 1-800-231-4024 in California.

If at any time you discover an immediate danger to your loved one, call 911.

Common Senior Housing Myths

Many elders and their families make the decision to move to a senior community during a time of stress. There are common misconceptions that many people have about living in a senior community. These senior housing "myths" can lead to unrealistic expectations and dissatisfaction.

Myth: This community will be your family member's home for the rest of his/her life.

Reality: Each type of care community is licensed to care for individuals who need a certain level of care. If your family member's care exceeds what the community is licensed to provide, your family member will be asked to move. The community is obligated under California state law to help you find another appropriate living situation.

Myth: Nice decor and/or high monthly fees equal good care.

Reality: Proper supervision and training of caregivers and adequate staffing levels for the abilities of the residents result in good care. Cleanliness, a caring attitude and well supervised staff are more important than decor.

Myth: The community can guarantee that your family member participates in activities.

Reality: Caregivers encourage residents to participate in activities but cannot compel your family member to participate if he/she refuses.

Myth: Assisted living communities are staffed by trained medical personnel.

Reality: Caregivers who provide 95% of all assistance to your family member are not trained medical personnel but rather receive caregiving training from the community that employs them.

Myth: Living in a care community can prevent falls.

Reality: Falls are a serious health issue for seniors and can occur in any setting. The community may prevent some falls if your family member receives help while bathing and unlike a private home, most care communities have grab bars, hand rails, non-trip surfaces and no stairs.

When you need to be the advocate: dementia or other conditions that limit communication

Your presence is more important than ever when your family member cannot be his/her own advocate. Here are some suggestions when your family member is incapacitated in some way.

- Regularly participate in meals to see how individuals who require help with eating are taken care of by the caregivers. Make sure that foods are well seasoned and served at an appropriate temperature. Your family member or other residents should not appear to be rushed at meal time. They should be encouraged to eat and drink.

- Make sure that your family member has regular access to water and other beverages and is frequently encouraged to have something to drink. Many elders, especially those with cognitive impairment, must be encouraged to drink fluids because they lose the sensation of thirst or cannot communicate their needs.
- Check your family member's skin for wounds or sores. If he/she cannot speak for themselves and has trouble moving without assistance he/she are at risk for developing pressure sores (also called bed sores). Regularly checking or having the nurse do a skin check assures that any problems can be addressed promptly.
- Be aware that your family member's clothing may wear out faster in the community setting due to more frequent washing and use of stronger detergents than at home. Check clothing regularly for wear and tear. Clothing should be labeled and inventoried. Clothing may sometimes be misplaced and need to be located by the staff. You may want to keep special occasion clothing at home and bring it in for your family member to wear before an event and take it home for cleaning.
- The Alzheimer's Association provides free training to caregivers who work in senior communities. Encourage your family member's community to bring in this valuable free training if they are not already doing so to help the caregivers better understand the needs of residents with dementia.

Need help implementing the suggestions in this article? Looking for more tips on how to take great care of your family member?



Janice Wallace, The Eldercare Coach is your personal guide to solving eldercare issues. More information about eldercare coaching can be found at www.caringforcaregivers.com and www.understanding-dementia.com. Janice can also be reached at 415-661-3271 or janice@understanding-dementia.com.