When is it time to leave home?

By Colleen Talkington, Lincoln LTC Social Services

Our homes are such a reflection of us. We build our lives around them, raising families, serving our communities – creating memories. If those four walls could speak!

However, as a parent ages, there may come a time when home is not the safest place for them to live. We all want to maintain our independence for as long as we can. However, there are some tell-tale signs that aging parents are in need of more care than we can provide at home…

- Unmanaged incontinence (inability to clean self when soiled).
- Memory loss that jeopardizes safety such as leaving stove on.
- Frequent falls. Unable to get up by self.
- Family exhausted.
- Signs of poor hygiene such as not changing clothes or body odor.
- Severe loneliness and a feeling of helplessness.

Even under the best circumstances, talking to a parent about moving to a Long Term Care or Assisted Living facility is difficult. How do you get the discussion started?

- **Do your homework**. Check out a few facilities and talk to the residents living there about the positives and negatives of their move. Know what each facility has to offer before talking with your parent.
- **Realize it will take many "little discussions"** on the subject before a parent will even consider leaving their home.
- **Point out benefits** such as safety, companionship, not having to cook, clean or do yard work. 24-hour nursing care is a big positive.
- **Offer options** so that they have input into the decision, such as "Would you like to be near your sister? Remain in this community? Be close to favorite activities? Would you like to keep your pet?" Let them help choose what best fits their needs and desires.
- **Enlist the help of the family doctor**. Parents often will listen to a "professional" opinion such as a doctor, lawyer or pastor before they will listen to what their family says.
- **Be patient, honest and understanding**. The emotional impact of such a decision can harm your relationship with your parent – especially if they feel the decision was made in haste or without their input.

Know that your facility research is key to helping your loved one make a decision to move. So what should you look for in an Assisted Living or Long Term Care facility? The first thing I would look at is cleanliness.

Check the resident rooms, shower rooms and toilet areas to see how staff keeps up with daily cleaning. Is bedding changed regularly? Are there odors that don't go away? These are things to take note of as a clean environment is a basic human need. If this is not being provided, it is probably not a positive place for your loved one.

The second thing to consider is how the facility feels. Does it feel right – warm, homelike, welcoming? What kind of activities are there to enrich your loved one's life? The best way to see what a skilled nursing facility is like is to visit it **without notice**. Observe the staff for their interaction with the residents and amongst themselves. Are they genuinely caring and interested in the people who live there or bossy and superficial? How do they talk about the residents after they are no longer in their presence? Listen carefully.

Finally, I highly recommend asking the facility for a copy of its most recent survey results. The State of Washington does a thorough investigation of each nursing home annually checking for problem areas. The results will tell of any problem areas there may be, and reflect the positives.

And it's those positives that will help you cross this bridge, whether you come to it today or a few years down the road. Good facilities are out there and you'll know when you've found the right one.

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