

# Develop A Game Plan



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## *How To Find The Perfect Senior Living Community For Your Loved One. Develop A Game Plan.*

As an insider who has been part of the senior living industry work force for the past 12 years and a caring adult child of aging parents who has walked in your shoes, here are my tips to help you find the perfect senior living community for your loved one.

**Step 1 - Anticipate.** Although no adult child looks forward to the day when they will be forced to consider alternatives for their elderly parent, you must ask yourself whether your parent or grandparent requires an alternative living arrangement. Hints: There is a variety of literature discussing potential indicators. Too many families wait until there is a crisis before considering different options. Difficult decisions then have to be made on a short time table and in the midst of emotional and physical turmoil.

**Step 2 - Where Do I Start.** You must decide whether a senior living residence is preferable to home health care or moving your family member into your home. Hints: Home health care costs are prohibitive for many and allowing your family member to live with you raises numerous personal issues. Senior living is a preferred avenue for many reasons including the care, services and amenities one receives, socialization, sense of security and it makes financial sense.

**Step 3 - Do Your Homework.** There are a variety of senior living options: independent living, assisted living, memory care, nursing homes and continuing care retirement communities. Educate yourself to ensure that you make the right choice for your family member. Hints: The South Carolina Assisted Living Federation of America (SCALFA) website provides a summary of each option. The percentage of elderly living in nursing homes has drastically declined since modern, less-expensive, residential approaches such as independent and assisted living, which were virtually non-existent 25 years ago, have become the preferred and fastest growing long-term care option.

**Step 4 - Location, Location, Location.** Identify the appropriate geographic area. Hints: While some family members select location based upon where their parent or grandparent previously resided and is most familiar, many feel that the community's proximity to family should be the controlling factor to ensure regular visitation. Others base their decision upon the best care. All of these factors are important considerations.

**Step 5 - Make A List.** Create a comprehensive list of senior living residences in your selected geographic region. Hints: There are a variety of free national referral sources (i.e. A Place For Mom). I recommend that you contact local state agencies and review their websites (i.e. SCALFA; South Carolina Alzheimer's Association; South Carolina Access Aging and Disability Information; and South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control). Local informational sources (i.e. Chamber of Commerce and senior citizen centers such as Bluffton Senior Citizen Center or Island Recreation Association) are helpful. National agencies are also an available resource (i.e. Assisted Living

Federation of America [ALFA]; the U.S Medicare Office). Providers advertise in your local newspapers / magazines and the yellow pages. Further, you can consult with geriatric case managers (i.e. nurses, social workers or psychologists), physicians and home health care agencies. Lastly, community word of mouth through clergy, pharmacists, attorneys, accountants, financial planners, trust and estate administrators, residents / staff at senior living communities, social clubs and disability organizations are invaluable resources.

*Step 6 - There Is No Such Thing As A Dumb Question.* You should be prepared when visiting the property by preparing a list of questions. Hints: SCALFA and the U.S. Medicare Office's websites provide a checklist of questions to ask when visiting a senior living community. There are numerous articles on the Internet detailing the type of questions to ask. Use these sources to create your own list, and, while on tour, do not be afraid to ask yourself, the community and residents about the community's environment, physical features, services, amenities, care, staffing, financials, policies, activities, food, etc.

*Step 7 - Great Expectations.* Establish goals and expectations, and determine if the community's philosophy meets them. Hints: High standards of care, resident satisfaction, counterbalance between supervision and autonomy and quality of life are important. While it is difficult to define quality of life as one ages and how it may be achieved in a senior living community, favorable outcomes (as reported by ALFA) include: comfort and peace of mind, affordability and financial security, quality and value, high standards of care, optimized independence, socialization, experiences, adventures and nostalgia, individual recognition, intellectual stimulation and self-expression and fulfillment.

*Step 8 - Check It Out.* Visit and compare various communities since each one is unique. Typically, the marketing director will give you a tour of the community including common areas and a model unit. He or she will explain the services, amenities and programs, and provide you with an opportunity to ask questions. Hints: Be mindful that his or her job is to sell the community. In fact, he or she most likely gets paid a commission. After narrowing your list of preferred communities, you should tour them at least one more time at different hours of the day or night. It is important to involve your family member in the process by taking them to see the community or showing them pictures. They need to see that the dismal perception of a care facility as a cold unhappy place filled with poorly trained, grumpy orderlies is no longer the reality.

*Step 9 - Think Ahead.* It is not only appropriate to assess your family member's current needs, but whether the community can accommodate changes in his or her care over time. Hints: At Riverside at Belfair Retirement Community for example, although we are an independent living community encouraging autonomy, residents have the option of receiving personal care services and assistance with everyday activities through a home health agency, should the need later arise. Belfair Gardens will open this year to accommodate our residents in the event they require specialized care for Alzheimer's or other memory loss illnesses. It will sit on the same campus as Riverside making it easy for residents to remain connected to their spouses, friends and the Riverside Family. Confirm that the community you choose is able to provide flexible care for future needs.

*Step 10 - Decision Time.* You may quickly realize that there is no defined blueprint to help you in the process. It is one of the most difficult times in the life of a family, and there will be hard questions, strong personal beliefs, varying emotional, monetary and spiritual concerns, competing interests and tiffs. Hints: If you conduct research and have a plan, your family will reach the right decision.

### *About the Author*

Pauline Giron is the Community Relations Coordinator for Riverside at Belfair Retirement Community, an independent living community in Bluffton, SC. She originally comes from California where she spent many years working in Skilled Nursing as well as Assisted Living Communities. Pauline enjoys welcoming her families to her community and sharing all of the valuable information she has gained over the years. Being able to take part in the process of providing the best quality of life to her residents and their families is her number one goal. Pauline came to the Low Country a little more than 3 years ago to be a support system for her parents who were in the midst of navigating through all the different senior living options themselves.