

Prime**time**

A look at lifestyle news for those over 50

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The campus

TOUR REDUX



Home shopping with adult children

Online searches. Open houses. Campus tours. Meals in the dining room. Applications. Financial calculations.

If you're in the so-called sandwich generation, you've probably figured out that shopping for a senior living community for your parents is a lot like shopping for colleges for your kids.

Bonnie Davis, a senior living advisor at A Place for Mom, a national elder care referral service, agrees. She has helped many adult children find the best fit for their parents.

"In both situations the family is under a lot of stress because they want to make the right choice for somebody they love, and there are usually some time constraints," Davis says. "We consider the senior's medical and social needs, geographic parameters, budget."

Davis says that really knowing who the senior is as a person is the key to finding

the right fit. "These are social environments and if they can thrive socially, they can also thrive from a health perspective," she says.

In a major market like Los Angeles, where Davis specializes, there are many senior communities from which to choose. Just like preparing for college, it can be years from the first online search to moving day.

Many adult children say they started talking with their parents about moving years before a box was packed.

Troy Dentzer of Evanston, Ill. wanted to have a plan in place once her mother was ready to move.

"We were afraid that if an event happened, we would be running around like chickens with our heads cut off, and we would just have to sign up with a place, and we didn't want that," she says.

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Dentzer and her mother, who is in her 90s and preferred we did not use her name, attended open houses in their area. Then about a year later, they took some guided tours. They narrowed it down to two communities, which they visited several times, familiarizing themselves with the people and the activities.

"She wanted to stay near her sister, child and grandchild, and be near the street where her church and card club are," Dentzer says.

Ultimately, it was the social aspects — including an active bridge group and cultural outings to Chicago — that made The Highlands Assisted Living at King Home, a Presbyterian Homes community, the winner. "All that feeds the mind, body and spirit," Dentzer says.

Colleen Toriumi of Riverside, Ill., started looking five years before her mother, Rita Cunat, was ready to move.

"When she was 75 she was not ready, but when she was 80, she was ready," Toriumi says. Toriumi already had her eye on Plymouth Place, a continuing care retirement community in nearby La Grange, Ill.

"They sent her an invitation in the mail for an open house, which I attended with her," Toriumi says. "It really reminded me of a college presentation. After they gave the talk and served the luncheon, they did a tour for us, and she picked out an apartment. Then she got major cold feet and thought she should shop around, which we did. That is when I felt

I was doing the college tours again. My daughter was a sophomore in college at that time, so it was pretty fresh."

Cunat decided on Plymouth Place anyway. "It was a good move," she says. "They make you feel like you belong. I like to be spoiled and that is what you are when you live here."

For a successful senior living search, apply the same college-search principles:

Don't just go where your friends are going

"Sometimes there is big peer group pressure because everyone is going to a certain college that year, and it can be the same in senior communities," Davis says. "Bridge was very important to my mother. Her bridge group moved in to the place she ultimately moved into, and it was fine for her. But we still looked around."

Just like colleges, it's important to visit more than one community so you have a basis for comparison. If you don't use a referral service, Davis says to enlist the help of each community's ambassador or counselor to sit down with your family and carefully assess whether the place is right for your parents.

Try before you buy

Attend the open house. Meet the people. Eat the food. Some places even allow an overnight stay or a trial period.

Les Pauls of Evanston, Ill., started looking for communities with his sister and brother-in-law two years ago at age 83. They went to six places, and he moved into one for a while. But he didn't

like it and moved back into his co-op apartment. Now Pauls is set to move into Mather Place of Wilmette, an independent living community, in May.

For the former auto finance professional, the nature of the financial contract and the quality of life offered were paramount. Pauls wanted a place that did not require a hefty deposit. He also wanted to stay near his hometown and enjoy the things he was used to: his preferred cable TV channels, exercising, good food and a daily glass of wine.

"My daughter and I had dinner there, and the food was excellent," Pauls says. "The Mather will allow you to have wine at dinner. I drink wine every day for my health and it's working. They also have a small gymnasium. That is very important because I work out three times a week."

Crunch the numbers

Just like college, the move to senior living is a big financial shift. This is definitely a time where a family has to be honest and work as a team. Sometimes a third party can help clarify things, Davis says. "As an outsider, I can say things to the family that they can't or won't," she says. "I can ask the senior questions about budget that sometimes their children can't get a handle on."

Senior communities can have complicated cost structures. It is critical to ask exactly what is included at each level of care.

For example, Dentzer says that her mother will be paying more for each succeeding level of care because she entered the community at the assisted living level, rather than the independent living level. "She should have gone there a few years earlier, but she



Rita Cunat began looking for communities five years before she was ready to make the move. Her daughter helped her search.

here. People seem to be happy." Cunat echoed that sentiment about her new home, Plymouth Place.

"We had looked at other places and the people looked depressed," she says. "You walk in

here and people have big smiles. If someone looks sad, I decided it's my job to cheer them up." ■