

# Just the Facts, Ma'am:

## Realistic Expectations for Current and Future Residents

By Joel Goldman and Steve Wright

*Do you remember the last time a new movie was hyped as “the best ever... you’ll fall out of our seat laughing so hard?” Weren’t you disappointed when it turned out that, while it was a good and entertaining movie, it wasn’t that funny? The reason you feel disappointed is that you expected it to be something it wasn’t.*

Initial expectations shape our overall satisfaction. This is true for consumers looking for Assisted Living as well, and providers can go a long way in promoting realistic expectations. By working to help consumers understand what Assisted Living generally can and cannot provide and what your community in particular has to offer, you can foster satisfaction. This means proactively addressing consumer concerns, including safety, fees, and reasons a resident may have to relocate. We’ll examine these issues from both a marketing and legal perspective.

### Safety and Security

Perhaps the area of greatest concern for consumers and their families is resident safety and security. This is often the number one reason that people move into an Assisted Living community, and it is important to convey that you provide a safe environment. However, this does not mean that moving in will eliminate all risk. A statement such as “We provide an environment that ensures your safety, security and peace of mind,” is simply untrue. No one can ensure any of these.

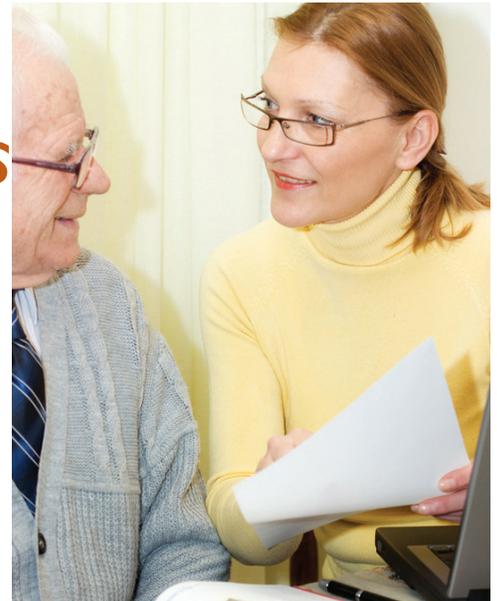
Instead, when making statements pertaining to safety and security, providers are encouraged to utilize the “Dagnet” approach, or “just the facts ma’am.” If providers stick to facts when talking about safety and security, they will provide consumers with accurate information and reduce their legal

exposure without compromising marketing. Instead of the example above, a provider might state, “We have emergency call systems available in every apartment and staff available 24 hours a day to respond. We have sign-in procedures for all visitors. Exterior doors are locked at night. All members of our staff undergo background checks.”

### Falls

In the area of safety and security, a more specific topic of concern is the issue of falls. If we talk about “fall prevention” programs, we create the impression that a resident won’t fall. This is an unrealistic expectation; even President Reagan, with arguably the best care money could buy, experienced a fall during his battle with Alzheimer’s. Assisted Living providers are advised to be candid and state, “We are not permitted to use restraints on residents, nor is the use of restraints consistent with our philosophy of care. We encourage residents to participate in physical activities to the extent of their capability. Therefore, falls and other injuries will occur from time to time.

When discussing an emergency call system, it is important to point out that if a resident can’t reach the pull cord or



activate a pendant alarm, a fall may not be discovered until the next meal check, unless the service plan calls for more frequent checks. The resident’s right to be as independent as possible means that there is a delicate balance between safety and independence.

### Fees

It is also important to create realistic expectations regarding fees. The law requires providers to disclose the average increase over the last three years. But what consumers really need to know and understand is what they should realistically expect given their specific condition and likely changing needs. Focusing only on average percentage monthly fee increases without paying equal attention to possible changes in care needs may leave residents and families surprised when faced with a higher than expected fee increase. This could lead them to resist a move to a higher level of care, resulting in a less than optimal environment for the resident and significant operational problems for the provider.

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Regarding the pricing system, consumers want to know what is included and what are considered add-ons. Are you clear in pricing and how assessments and price adjustments tie in? Transparency about fees, inclusions and exclusions is a key issue for our customers. Marketers must present clear information.

### Reasons a Resident May Need to Relocate

Just as our residents and their families dislike surprises in fees, their dissatisfaction is only magnified if they are hit with a sudden announcement that a resident has to relocate—either within the community to a higher level of care or to another setting all together. The marketer must educate families from the beginning about relocation and assessment tools that determine that decision. Care needs, dangerous behavior, or other specifics need to be spelled out in the residency agreement and carefully reviewed during the move-in process. Additionally, rather than waiting for results from an assessment, let the family know about issues and situations early and often, thereby

reducing surprises and promoting realistic expectations.

### Why You Want to Educate Your Consumers

Some Assisted Living providers may think “but the community down the street isn’t telling consumers this, and they will look like a better deal.” In reality, the savvy marketer can provide consumers with this needed information and encourage them to ask other providers, “Given Mom’s declining health and possible Alzheimer’s, what would be realistic to expect in terms of care fees over the next few years? If she ends up needing to move to memory care, what would the fees look like?” Consumers are using checklists when looking around. Be the leader in your community and help consumers compare by answering these questions:

1. How does the community bill for services?
2. Who determines levels of care?
3. What services are provided and are they included in a base rate, or are there additional fees?

4. Under what conditions is a resident asked to leave?
5. What would be realistic for us to expect in terms of increases in fees during Mom’s stay here?

If you educate consumers, they will ask other providers the same questions when they shop around. Providers who are clear and accurate will set a standard for others to follow and foster a level of trust before the resident moves in.

Assisted Living leaders are encouraged to make the creation of realistic expectations part of their organizational culture. Ethical standards are not arbitrarily set by the marketing director, but must come from senior management and be part of company culture. Realistic expectations will serve residents, individual providers and all Assisted Living professionals well. ■

*Joel Goldman is a partner at Hanson Bridgett, founding board member of CALA and nationally known expert on Assisted Living. Steve Wright is president of Wright Mature Market Services and has over 20 years marketing and consulting in senior housing.*

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888.426.6758

[www.SandiFloresConsulting.com](http://www.SandiFloresConsulting.com)

[SFlores@SandiFloresConsulting.com](mailto:SFlores@SandiFloresConsulting.com)