

What is Assisted Living?

By Nancy D. Borst

It was a relatively new concept 25 years ago but today, assisted living is the most preferred and fastest-growing long-term care option for seniors. There are more than 36,000 assisted living communities nationwide, serving more than one million seniors, according to the Assisted Living Federation of America.

But what is assisted living? The ALFA defines it as a long-term care option that combines housing, support services and health care, as needed. Assisted living is designed for individuals who require assistance with everyday activities, including but not limited to meals, management of medication and transportation. In short, assisted living brings the best of an independent home environment together with high-quality services unavailable at home.

That is the broad overview. The truth is that each assisted living community strives to offer a living experience unique to each individual. That is at the heart of the AL philosophy: personalized, person-centered care that is delivered with dignity, respect of privacy and an emphasis on encouraging each person's independence.

That is the approach of Newton's four not-for-profit senior living communities: Asbury Park, Presbyterian Manor, Kansas Christian Home and Kidron Bethel Village. Each mirrors the attributes that reflect high-quality assisted living.

The focus is on helping seniors retain as much independence as possible while undergirding them with the level of assistance that fits each individual. Some residents need only minimal care from professionally trained, caring staff. Whatever the need, 24-hour care is available to all.

Person-centered planning encourages residents to stretch their limits while recognizing that everyday tasks may not come as easily as they once did. Several levels of assisted living services are offered, with assistance adjusting up or down depending on the needs of each person.

Apartments have private handicap-accessible baths as well as a living area and, in some cases, a kitchenette. Three meals plus snacks are provided daily in a restaurant style with flexible menus.

Other common services include medication administration, housekeeping, laundry, paid utilities, transportation, and activities that fill social, recreational, spiritual and wellness needs. Activities range from yoga to art classes to craft groups to outings.

Asbury Park offers 48 assisted living apartments that range from studios to two-room suites. The Suderman Centre for Assisted Living at Kidron Bethel Village has 25 apartments and residents can choose from two one-bedroom apartment floor plans. Presbyterian Manor has 45 assisted living apartments, 25 of which are in Anderson Place, a memory support program. Kansas Christian Home has plans to add a 21-unit assisted living facility. It recently began offering assisted living-type services to its apartment residents.

There is no single blueprint for assisted living. The key is to explore several options and find the “fit” that combines independence and personal care in the right balance.

Martha Sundgren has been an assisted living resident at Kidron Bethel Village for five years. She moved there from her Denver home and is glad she did. “I think the main thing is that we have the 24/7 caregiving,” said the retired seamstress. “They’re here for us and they really do care. They make us feel like a family.”

Activities she enjoys include bingo, game times and exercise classes three times a week. The latter have been especially helpful since she underwent double knee replacement surgery. “We have activities not only for our bodies but also for our minds,” she said. “To be able to have these friendships and even their (other residents’) families is important. We don’t just shut ourselves up in our apartments and forget everybody.”

And she still pursues her passion for sewing, offering her expertise to her friends and neighbors. “I enjoy helping people here that need help with clothing. I’m the local seamstress,” she said. Her sewing machine and everything that is important in her life makes her apartment her own, she said.

Ila Marie Lee lives in assisted living at Asbury Park and says the regularity of meals and being with other people are two of its benefits. “You can do as much as you want to. When there are things you have to do, you get a certain amount of assistance when you can’t do it (alone),” she said. “I like it. Once in a while you hit a bump but that’s not bad.”

Lee came to Asbury Park from her home in Illinois and at first, was an independent resident in a cottage. Now, in assisted living, she is even closer to her friends and that’s a healthy environment. “I’m not as alone as I was even in the cottage,” she said. “If I’m left alone too much, I get to thinking too much about me and my ailments. I’m really thankful I’m here.”

The costs of assisted living vary depending on the size of the apartment and the amount of services wanted or needed. It is important to remember that assisted living is a value-enhanced, service-enriched living choice. But it also may be the most important investment you ever make.

The right choice for you and your family should focus on quality of life, standards of care and cost and value. Rest assured, because assisted living is regulated in every state. The Kansas Department on Aging offers more information, including suggested questions to ask before signing a contract. You can reach the KDOA at 1-800-432-3535 or by e-mail at wwwmail@aging.ks.gov or see more on the department’s website: www.agingkansas.org.