

## **Making the Choice for Assisted Living**

By Nancy D. Borst

Martha Sundgren knew her living situation needed to change when her daughter had to come to her Denver condominium several times in a matter of weeks to help out. “At the time it became apparent I needed to be somewhere,” said Sundgren, who now lives in assisted living at Kidron Bethel Village in Newton.

Making the choice to move to assisted living is never easy and it affects the entire family. Sundgren knew she had to do something to ease her own stress and the stress on her loved ones. “I feel like this is where I need to be,” she said. “My family doesn’t have to worry about where I am – they are so happy.”

Change is hard for seniors but it is also hard for their adult children, many of whom refuse to see their parents as anything other than the vital, strong people who raised them. Some are in denial and overlook signs of decline in their parents.

Sundgren recognized those signs in herself and says there is great value in making the all-important decision about where to live for herself. “Don’t wait too long,” she cautioned other seniors. “It’s so important to be able to make these decisions for ourselves and do it at a time when you have time to really experience this phase of your life, before somebody has to carry you in hand and foot.”

“I think people feel economically that they want to stay where they are and try to manage but they don’t realize that by doing that, they are shortening their lives because they’re not getting the assistance they need.”

The stress on her family was palpable, as was the lifting of that stress with Sundgren’s move. “It’s peace of mind for me and for the family. They’re not stressed out about it. My kids are in that ‘sandwich’ generation,” she said.

When it comes to your parents’ living situation, start the conversation sooner rather than later. Safety should always be paramount, rather than letting emotion rule. It’s okay to recognize that your parents always made sure you were safe, and now it’s time for you to do that for them.

Here are some questions to ask yourself to help decide if assisted living is the right choice for your loved ones. Is your parent telling you he is eating yet food is spoiling in the refrigerator? Is your parent hiding evidence of falls, such as bruises? When you really look at your parent, do you see an independent person or a person who needs some level of extra help?

Her mother’s falls convinced Alvera Sandberg a change was needed. She and her husband had done their homework before moving her mother to assisted living at Asbury Park in Newton. “We didn’t come into it blind. Some people are,” she said. “As my mother was getting older, we had gone around and talked to several places.”

Sandberg said she has watched friends' parents get "dumped," usually after a hospitalization when a doctor determines the parent can no longer live independently. In other words, they have had to find new living arrangements at the drop of a hat and that rarely goes well.

"Do not wait until you have to make a decision tomorrow. Do your homework, get your name on a waiting list, get power of attorney," she said. "It's not that you're taking something away from them, but have it if you need it."

Sandberg also helped her aunt, Ila Marie Lee, become a resident at Asbury Park. She wants other adult children to know that choosing assisted living does not signal the end of a meaningful life. On the contrary, her aunt's experience has been just the opposite. In assisted living, Lee is happy and surrounded by friends and neighbors in a common community.

"In my aunt's case, she has just blossomed," she said. "I don't want them to see it as an end of the road decision because for my aunt, it's just opened up everything for her."

Today's baby boomers are tomorrow's users of assisted living and other retirement community options and their wishes will drive the future of such care. That's worth noting as you research whether assisted living is the right choice.

Look for well-designed communities that are accessible and include such things as handrails and other safety features. Visit and observe how staff and residents interact. Take a tour and ask questions, including financial ones. Assisted living is not covered by Medicare but Kansas mandates that long-term care insurance policies pay for assisted living care.

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. With proper research and a positive attitude, you can find a residence that feels like home and gives you and your loved ones peace of mind.

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](mailto:wwwmail@aging.ks.gov) or see more on the department's website: [www.agingkansas.org](http://www.agingkansas.org).