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Assisted Living Resources on the Web

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ON - LINE

Assisted Living Resources on the Web

*The Internet offers a
wealth of sites with legal,
industry, and consumer
information on assisted
living.*

By Robin C. Schard

According to the National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL), more than one million people reside in assisted living situations.¹ There is no single definition for assisted living—in fact there are many, many different definitions—but the main component seems to be group housing with access to a level of personal and health-related assistance matching the individual resident's needs. When it comes to doing research, however, there are basically just three types of information researchers will need about assisted living: legal information, industry information, and consumer information. Consumer information, including the types of services provided and the location and cost of services, is important to those trying to select assisted living that most suits their needs or the needs of a loved one. Industry information, such as information on accreditation, new trends in services, and sample agreements, will be important to those working for or with the organizations involved in providing assisted liv-

ing facilities. Of course, legal information is vital to both those availing themselves of assisted living services and those providing the service. Legal information includes statutes and regulations concerning assisted living residences. The Internet is a great starting point for all three types of information.

Legal Information

I suspect that because legal information has been so well organized over the years it easily lends itself to organization even in newer formats like the Web. Web-accessible legal information on assisted living proves this theory. There are basically three Web sites that supply enough legal information to get anyone started in this type of research. The first site is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Disability, Aging and Long Term Care Policy (<http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/daltcp/home.htm>). Under the topic of Residential Care Settings, there is a link to the full text of a report titled

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State Assisted Living Policy: 1998. This report, authored by Robert L. Mollica, provides a detailed description of state regulation of assisted living facilities. For each state, the report provides citations to statutes and administrative code sections, as well as a summary of state treatment of these residences. Following a general discussion of assisted living, each state section includes the state's definition of assisted living, requirements, staffing, training, financing, and more. The citations to the statutes and administrative codes alone are very helpful. Although the researcher will have to update the information provided in this report, it is still an invaluable resource for legal information. The Web site for the Office of Disability, Aging and Long Term Care Policy also has other useful information on assisted living. For example, there are several full-text reports available from the recently completed *National Study of Assisted Living for the Frail Elderly*.

The National Academy for State Health Policy (<http://www.nashp.org/>) publishes another site containing legal information. The Long-Term and Chronic Care Resource Center portion of the site provides two helpful tables. The first is the "Summary of State Assisted Living and Board and Care Activity." This table indicates which states have existing regulations on assisted living, which states are revising their regulations, and other related information. The second table is "Assisted Living Policy at a

Glance: Status of State Activities," which marks the status of each state's assisted living regulations and Medicaid coverage. The page is disappointing because it does not provide the actual citations to state laws or regulations, but both tables are more recent than the 1998 *State Assisted Living Policy* report referred to above.

Another Web site that provides descriptive legal information but no citations is NCAL's State Regulatory Review, 2000. This page (<http://www.ncal.org/about/statsum.htm>) provides more information than the National Academy's page in the state-by-state summary of assisted living regulations, and it includes contact information for the regulatory agency in each state.

Industry Information

Assisted living, as an industry, is still in the developmental stage. This is not to say that it is a new industry. According to NCAL, there are 28,000 assisted living facilities in the United States,² but, as an industry, it is struggling to distinguish itself from the more traditional board and care services. States are making the distinction through the licensing process imposed on these types of residential settings. Organizations outside the government are also developing standards for accreditation of assisted living residences. The three groups involved, the government, the industry, and consumers, are all trying to decide what the standards and principles should be for assisted living situations.

Trade Associations

There are primarily two industry-sponsored organizations that are attempting to outline an ideology for assisted living. NCAL (<http://www.ncal.org>), part of the American Health Care Association, claims to be the largest association representing long-term care providers. The Assisted Living News section of the Web page includes the full text of about two year's worth of *Assisted Living News*, as well as selected articles from *Provider*. Both publications provide industry-related information on such topics as mergers, market updates, and newly released studies. *NCAL Gazette* gives a weekly summary of regulatory and other governmental actions. NCAL's Web site also includes upcoming conferences and educational opportunities, as well as a list of available publications from the American Health Care Association.

Although it does not claim to be the largest, the Assisted Living Federation of America (ALFA) (<http://www.alfa.org>) also provides industry-related information on its Web page. One nice trade-related feature is the Model Resident Admission Agreement. ALFA's site includes educational opportunities in the ALFA University section, employment opportunities within the Assisted Living Career Center, and a list of local organizations in the ALFA State Affiliates portion of the page. ALFA's Web site also supplies some basic information on assisted living, a list of publications, and consumer information described below.

Accreditation

In addition to state licensing requirements, there is an independent agency that accredits assisted living facilities. The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), established in 1951, evaluates approximately 18,000 health care organizations annually, including hospitals, networks, long term-care, and ambulatory services.³ JCAHO's Web page (<http://www.jcaho.org>) contains the *Assisted Living Draft Standards*, which are currently under review. The draft standards encompass such varied aspects as consumer protection, resident services, management, and prevention of infection. The site also includes basic information on the benefits of accreditation. Within the Long Term Care section, JCAHO presents specific information on the benefits of accreditation for this type of health care organization and a detailed description of the process, from beginning accreditation procedures to how to fill out required documentation to accreditation decisions. Although it contains a wealth of information, this page is not well organized. The best way to begin is with the site directory, so the researcher can get an overview of all the material included.

Consumer Information

The real challenge with assisted living situations has to be in choosing a residence that fulfills the needs of the person considering such a move. The consumer has to consider not only the amount of independence and privacy allowed by an assisted living facility, but also the types

of personal assistance the resident needs currently and might need in the years to come. So, while legal and industry information is useful, consumer information or information that aids in this choice is critical. Of course, the Internet is a great place to locate consumer information, and anyone looking for information on assisted living options will not be disappointed.

Of all the consumer-related Web sites that I reviewed, ALFA's page provided the clearest and best-organized information. All of the consumer information is logically placed in the For Consumers or Consumer Information & Resources section. The first material a consumer should peruse is the "Consumer Checklist." The checklist provides a list of over 50 questions to consider when evaluating an assisted living facility, including general atmosphere, physical features of the community and the units, cost, financing, and health care. It presents the person making the decision with a way to start thinking about these residences and what services assisted living should supply. Also, ALFA has an Assisted Living Consumer Information Statement. The Consumer Information Statement is a form for the consumers to fill out for each residence outlining the most basic services and costs for the facility. Finally, ALFA has created an Online Directory of Assisted Living Providers that allows the user to search for assisted living facilities by location.

Assisted Living Info (<http://www.assistedlivinginfo.com/>) also permits a user to

search for assisted living facilities by geographic location. Once the user selects the appropriate city and state, the Generate List button produces a list of all possible places. Assisted Living Info provides general, financial, and selection tips in other areas of the Web page.

If the researcher wants to know not only where assisted living residences may be found but also how good they are, a good place to start is the JCAHO Web page. Quality Check lets the user see if a health care organization is accredited by the JCAHO and how it was rated during the last accreditation.

NCAL also presents consumer information on its Web site. For example, there is *A Consumer Guide to Assisted Living and Residential Care Facilities*, which includes basic information on assisted living choices and a list of considerations when reviewing individual facilities, as well as information on long-term care insurance. Although this Web page does not provide a listing of facilities, it does have contact information for state affiliates of the American Health Care Association.

Another excellent site for consumer information is the Consumer Consortium on Assisted Living (<http://www.ccal.org>). In the Resources section, the researcher will find the "Checklist for Choosing an Assisted Living Facility." The checklist supplies a long list of questions to consider when selecting an assisted living residence.

Other sites of interest:

- American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (<http://www.aahsa.org>), check out the Consumer Tip called *Choosing an Assisted Living Facility* for helpful hints on making the right choice.
- Aging Parents and Adult Children Together (A/PACT) (<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/services/apact>) is sponsored by the Federal Trade Commission and provides several helpful articles, particularly *Alternative Living Arrangements*.
- Administration on Aging Web Sites on Aging (<http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/agingsites>) includes a long list of other Web sites on assisted living.
- Assisted Living Online (<http://www.assistedliving>

online.com) lists assisted living centers by region and state.

- Citizens for Long Term Care (<http://www.citizenforltc.org>), organized to focus attention on long-term care delivery and financing, provides information on the policy aspects of assisted living.

The only material that I expected but did not find on the Internet was information on why and when a consumer would select the assisted living option. There was no comparison between it and other choices, such as independent living, retirement communities, in-home care, or any of the many other possibilities. Beside this minor flaw, the assisted living information I did find on the Internet will be helpful to the researcher no matter what

aspect of assisted living he or she is exploring.

Endnotes

1. See *National Center for Assisted Living Vital Statistics* (visited Mar. 20, 2000) <<http://www.ncal.org/about/vital.htm>>; but see Catherine Hawes *et al.*, *A National Study of Assisted Living for the Frail and Elderly* (last modified April 26, 1999) <<http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/daltcp/reports/facreses.htm>> (stating that by the beginning of 1998 there were only 558,400 assisted living residents).
2. See *National Center for Assisted Living Vital Statistics* (last visited Mar. 20, 2000) <<http://www.ncal.org/about/vital.htm>>.
3. ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ASSOCIATIONS 1486 (34th ed. 1999).

Web sites mentioned in this column:

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| • Administration on Aging Web Sites on Aging | http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov/agingsites |
| • Aging Parents and Adult Children Together | http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/online/pubs/services/apact |
| • American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging | http://www.aahsa.org |
| • Assisted Living Federation of America | http://www.alfa.org |
| • Assisted Living Info | http://www.assistedlivinginfo.com/ |
| • Assisted Living Online | http://www.assistedlivingonline.com |
| • Citizens for Long Term Care | http://www.citizensforltc.org |
| • Consumer Consortium on Assisted Living | http://www.ccal.org |
| • Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations | http://www.jcaho.org |
| • National Academy for State Health Policy | http://www.nashp.org/ |
| • National Center for Assisted Living | http://www.ncal.org |
| • Office of Disability, Aging and Long Term Care Policy | http://aspe.os.dhhs.gov/daltcp/home.htm |