Choosing a Senior Living Community

By DiAnA Brannon

Considering a move to a senior living community? The Delaware Valley region offers many excellent options and choices. It’s important to educate yourself and take time to explore your options. Many factors come into play with this decision; and selecting the “best fit” senior living community requires planning. A good plan, whether formal or informal, should incorporate logical steps, a process.
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A PLANNED APPROACH
The remainder of this article is a suggested approach for choosing a senior living community.

- Thoroughly identify all senior living needs, evaluate these needs, and then prioritize them.
- Develop specific objectives for achieving each prioritized need.
- Develop and implement a strategy (the how to) for achieving objectives and satisfying your needs.

A checklist of senior living needs is an excellent place to start. Developing a comprehensive list ensures that all needs are identified. The following checklist, although not intended to be exhaustive, is a useful guideline.

TRENDS IN SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITIES
Understanding trends in senior living communities is a critical factor for consideration in the planning and selection process. How senior living communities stay abreast of changing lifestyle, technology, social, and environmental trends can make all the difference in the world for fulfilling a happy and satisfying retirement.

More recently, seniors entering communities are now looking for greater hospitality amenities. One highly desired amenity is the ability to select from a wide variety of dining options, both in terms of cuisine and dining venues. Heavy, traditional meals are giving way to an extensive variety of healthier, lighter tapas-style menus prepared with the freshest ingredients sourced locally. Large, central dining rooms are being replaced with smaller, theme-oriented indoor and outdoor dining spaces that incorporate a warmer, homelike ambiance. Inviting coffee and wine bars are a popular venue as are the enjoyment of meals on a garden patio or barbecue setting or in a bistro or pub.

More and more, senior living communities are fulfilling the need for lifelong learning and continuing education. Seniors are remaining more active and re-entering the workforce, embarking on new careers and volunteering their services to organizations. Access to educational resources and technology are a priority with such seniors. Many senior living communities are responding to this trend. For example, some

### SENIOR LIVING Needs Checklist

- A community located in a particular climate or region of the country
- Proximity to family members and friends
- A themed community, e.g. golf, tennis, campus setting, countryside, seaside, lakeside, mountain setting
- Healthy living – access to an array of fully-equipped fitness centers, personal trainers, workout programs, fitness classes, masseuses and spas, indoor and outdoor pools, and trails or parks for walking, jogging, and biking
- Continuing education programs – learning networks and educational programs aligned with local universities: classes, lectures, seminars
- Cultural programs – art, theater, music, opera, etc.
- Hospitality – concierge services, variety of dining options (fine, café, bistro, pub, alfresco, etc.), social coffee and wine bars, regularly scheduled entertainment, inviting and relaxing indoor and outdoor gathering and living spaces
- Service amenities – gardening, housekeeping, laundry, salons, spa, barber, gift shop, convenience store, bank, library, private and group transportation to local attractions and shopping centers, and organized outings and trips
- Social amenities, entertainment, and interaction – mixers/social hours, holiday parties, game rooms, special events and attractions, musical entertainment, cultural activities and events, theater, classes (art, cooking, lectures, etc.), social game activities (bridge, poker, billiards), wine clubs, and more
- Technology – Computers, applications, Internet and wireless technology to conveniently connect and communicate with community administrators/staff, neighbors, family, friends, employers, caregivers, and the world; and “smart housing” providing personalized and automated control of lighting, heating and cooling, natural light, and security
- Intergenerational amenities – computer games, high-tech game rooms and movie theaters, day camps, children’s daycare, children events and outings, pools, tennis courts, play gyms
- Ergonomic amenities – ergonomically designed rooms, spaces, chairs, sofas, tables, equipment
- Advanced senior care technology: comprehensive monitoring systems and personal emergency response systems
- Communities geared to a specific religious belief and experience
- A non-denominational community
- Worship and spiritual enrichment options – onsite, access to offsite services
- Communities with environments that actively satisfy social and emotional needs
- Communities that embrace the continued development of specific, lifelong hobbies: horticulture, woodworking, astronomy, music, art, etc.
- Maintenance-free living
- A community featuring individual, residential homes, and townhomes
- A community featuring condominiums and apartments
- A community incorporating a full range of living options: residential homes, townhomes, condominiums, and apartments
- Options/flexibility to customize residential homes, townhomes, condominiums, apartments
- Quality level of housing, structures, and facilities
- Quality level of maintenance
- Beautiful and spacious grounds, gardens, walks, and trails
- High levels of safety and security
- Friendly, neighborhood surroundings
- Pet-friendly environment
- A community featuring continuing care: independent living, assisted living, and nursing care in one general location as housing needs change
- Independent living communities with on-call medical staff and location near neighborhood hospitals and clinics
- Communities incorporating multiple levels/options for managing certain daily living activities: transportation to medical appointments and shopping centers, laundry, cleaning, cooking, bathing, dressing, medications, etc.
- Communities incorporating multiple levels/options of healthcare: medical care, skilled nursing care, rehabilitation, physical therapy, mobility support, memory support, on-duty/on-call physicians, etc.
- Accreditations/Ratings: Continuing Care Accreditation Commission (CCAC); Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF); Medicare Rating
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communities are connected to local universities for continuing education (classes, lectures, seminars, presentations) while others feature programs that are connected to learning networks that are nationwide or global in scope.

The design, layout, and construction of communities are changing. The institutional look and feel is giving way to a homelike environment. Some senior living communities are eliminating grand entrances and large central dining rooms in favor of smaller homelike gathering spaces and multiple dining options. Today’s communities are giving greater attention to “green” building design, construction, and sustainable living practices. Outdoor living spaces continue to grow in popularity: garden patios and walkways, secluded sitting areas, fire pits and fireplaces, pergolas, gazebos, covered porches, sunrooms, and seasonal rooms. And ergonomics is playing a much greater role in the design, furnishings, and functioning of communities.

Intergenerational connectivity is of growing importance with today’s and tomorrow’s seniors. Online connectivity is of prime importance so seniors can proactively and frequently stay connected with children, grandchildren, friends, and the world at large. Innovative communities are implementing amenities that encourage more opportunities for connections with kids and grandkids. These amenities include day camps for kids, high-tech game rooms, state-of-the-art movie theaters, kid-friendly pools, creative playgrounds and recreation areas, and children-friendly cuisine.

Communities are recognizing that the current generation of seniors entering communities are tech-savvy. Computers and wireless technologies in apartments and throughout common areas are becoming a staple so seniors are able to stay connected to community staff and administrators (intranet) and family, friends, and the outside world through the Internet. Advances in senior care technology are becoming much more prevalent. Many senior care applications continue to be developed and implemented for a range of devices: smartphones, tablets, laptops, and PCs. For example, comprehensive monitoring systems and personal emergency response systems are becoming a part of everyday life in communities. Seniors are also benefiting from
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technology incorporated into living areas to ease the activities of everyday life: wireless operation and control of audio and video systems, security, lighting, heating, cooling, ventilation, window shades and curtains, and retractable awnings.

TYPES OF SENIOR LIVING COMMUNITIES

The senior living planning and community selection process requires an understanding of the many types of senior living communities available for consideration. Not all senior living communities are created equal.

Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRC) feature independent living, assisted living, and nursing care in one general location so residents can remain in the same area as living, housing, and care needs change. Continuing care offers several levels of care ranging from the very basic to the all-inclusive. CCRCs are ideal when staying in the same location is a priority, long-term care is on the horizon, and spouses desire to remain very close to one another if one spouse needs higher levels of care.

Independent Living Communities are designed for individuals who are generally in good health and do not need professional assistance or supervision of everyday

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activities such as housekeeping, laundry, cleaning, eating, bathing, and dressing. Residents live in single units (in many cases customized residential homes, condominiums, or apartments), are responsible for their own daily schedules and care, come and go from the community freely, and have a large menu of amenities and activities to choose from that are enjoyed by community members: maintenance-free living services, fitness centers, pools, spas, golf, tennis, clubhouses, dining facilities, game rooms, recreational facilities, organized community events and activities, on-call 24/7 emergency medical services, and more. Independent Living Communities are ideal for seniors who want to minimize chores and maximize leisure time and pursue recreational, social, and cultural activities. Independent Living Communities range in scope from the luxurious, gracious living with all of the amenities and services imaginable to the basic, less luxurious communities with more limited amenities and services.
Assisted Living Communities are designed for people who are generally free of serious mobility, healthcare, or mental issues, but need some basic services or varying levels of supervised care. Residents may need help in managing certain everyday activities: laundry, housekeeping, preparing meals, taking medications, bathing, or dressing. Most residents reside in single units where staff members help with daily activities and respond to emergencies 24/7. Overall, seniors maintain an active lifestyle while family members have peace of mind knowing that assistance and care of their loved ones are in the hands of professionals. Many Assisted Living Communities feature an extensive array of amenities and services such as: a variety of dining options and venues; apartments fitted with the latest wireless technologies; fitness centers; pools and spas; recreational activities; continuing education and cultural programs; entertainment; social events and activities; high-tech movie theaters and game rooms; wonderful outdoor living spaces; private and group transportation to local attractions, shopping centers, organized outings and trips, and medical appointments; physical therapy; and short-term rehabilitation. Assisted Living Communities are ideal for seniors who need some basic levels of daily care; want to pursue recreational, social, and cultural activities; and need to eliminate the expense and stress of owning and maintaining a home. Communities range in scope from the luxurious, gracious living with extensive amenities and services to the basic, less luxurious communities with most of the services required, but limited amenities.

Nursing Home Communities provide care for seniors with chronic illnesses, limited mobility, and difficulty performing daily living activities. Nursing homes are staffed with doctors, nurses, and certified assistants. These professionals provide 24/7 medical care and a wide range of specialty medical services: pain management, physical therapy, speech therapy, rehabilitation, etc. Some homes incorporate special units for providing Alzheimer's care and other types of dementia. Many homes feature core medical equipment present in clinics and hospitals. Staffs are trained to manage emergencies and refer residents to nearby hospitals to handle acute conditions as needs arise.

DEVELOPING THE PLAN
The starting point is a thorough needs assessment: identifying all possible senior living needs, weighting the importance of each need, and ranking them. Although this action might seem very basic or trivial to some degree, it is not. Avoid a glossing-over-the-surface approach, strong personal biases, and a tendency to place higher weights on financial factors over many of the critically important, core senior living needs. And keep an open mind and have vision, the possibilities and opportunities are endless, and in many cases beyond current expectations. A recommendation: ignore financials in your needs assessment. You can add the financials at a much later time or stage. Financial factors will only get in the way and cloud your thinking and judgment when it comes to the critical as-
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assessment of important senior living needs and quality of life.

Next, establish clear objectives: take the prioritized list of needs and state an objective(s) for each need. For example, intergenerational amenities are a major priority. Objective: The senior living community we select must be on the forefront of intergenerational amenities. Another example, healthy cuisine and a variety of dining options are one of our top priorities. Objective: The senior living community we select must feature excellent cuisine and a variety of dining venues.

Once clear objectives are established, form the strategy: the “how” to. For example, how will we accomplish the seventeen (17) objectives we have established? The “how” is all about action steps, and “who” (spouse, family member, relative, friend, financial advisor, trustee, legal advisor, medical team, advocates, etc.) is responsible for each action element. Actions include (for example purposes and not intended to be an exhaustive list): increasing your awareness of senior living communities in the region; researching senior living communities; identifying likely candidate senior living communities; visiting and touring senior living communities; meeting senior living community administrators and staff; speaking with current residents.
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COSTS AND FUNDING

The cost of living in a senior living community is a function of amenities, services, location, and quality.

Private funds (income from employment and investments, etc., savings, Social Security benefits, and financial assistance from organizations and family members) pay the
Cost of living in Independent Living Communities and Assisted Living Communities. Essentially, public funds do not cover the costs of living in these communities. However, when it comes to nursing care, funding is through private funds, insurance with long-term care policies, Medicare, Medicaid, and assistance through a multitude of state and local programs and funds.

Each community features a certain plan or program. Some communities, for example, are a life care community and require a one-time entrance fee plus a monthly charge and will provide care for residents the rest of their life. Some communities, as another example, are a fee-for-service community and require a lease signing for life and residents pay for services that they specifically use. While other communities, for example, may require a property purchase and offer the purchase of discounted healthcare benefits and guarantee a certain percentage of life care.

Costs of senior living, funding options, and variety of programs offered, all underscore the importance of following a formal approach to planning for senior living.

CLOSING
The Delaware Valley region offers many wonderful options and choices for senior living. It’s important to educate yourself and take time to explore your options. Many factors come into play with this decision; and selecting the “best fit” senior living community requires planning. A good plan, whether formal or informal, should incorporate logical steps, a process. CCL