

The State of the States: How Easy is It for Consumers to Learn About Assisted Living in the U.S.?

WHAT IS ASSISTED LIVING?

Assisted living (AL) has been the most popular option in the U.S. long-term care market for the last 10 years¹. More than 800,000 residents live in over 30,000 ALs communities in the U.S.². AL's vary by size (e.g. number of beds), profit status, and services offered and are less expensive than nursing homes.

WHO RESIDES IN ASSISTED LIVING?

AL's provide housing, meals, and help with daily care in settings that are more home-like, unlike nursing homes³. But as more people have tried to avoid nursing homes, about 70% have some form of confusion,⁴ nearly 50% need help dressing and 20% need help walking⁵.

HOW ARE ASSISTED LIVING FACILITIES REGULATED?

Older adults need for some help with self-care tasks has driven the growth and development of ALs, with minimal government involvement¹. Each state creates and enforces AL regulations, while nursing homes are regulated at both the state and federal level. AL's don't change Medicare and don't have to follow federal rules.

HOW EASY IS IT FOR CONSUMERS TO LEARN ABOUT ASSISTED LIVING IN THE U.S.?

This study reviews state and the District of Columbia websites to determine the AL information that was most publicly available and its usability. 3 researchers at The University of South Florida (see About the Authors for more

information) analyzed website information from 08/1/2018-3/20/2019. Key findings from 5 sections are described below, with Table 1 displaying percentage of states having the information on their websites.

Table 1 Usability and Consumer Information	
1. Usability	n (%)
Facilities searchable	45 (88%)
2 locations	20 (39%)
Last update known	15 (29%)
2. Readability	Mean (SD)
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	13.72 (3.25)
3. Payment and Services	n (%)
Payment accepted	14 (28%)
Cost	2 (4%)
Activities	2 (4%)
4. Quality Information	n (%)
Routine surveys available	33 (65%)
Complaints posted	22 (43%)
Life safety surveys	8 (16%)
5. AL Community Information	n (%)
# of beds	49 (96%)
License status	28 (55%)
Specialty license	16 (31%)

USABILITY- HOW FUNCTIONAL ARE THE WEBSITES?

Most AL's (88%) were searchable on the state websites by name or address. 39% of states had information stored in 2 location on the website, which may lead to situations where consumers become unaware of the availability of some quality information, such as routine facility surveys, and instead just see information like the address and phone number. 29% of states listed the date of last update of their AL information. With no timestamp available, consumers may feel left in the dark as to the accuracy of the displayed information.

READABILITY- IS IT EASY TO READ THE INFORMATION?

To assess readability, the "How to File a Complaint" section was chosen, due to its availability on state websites, as well as its importance to consumers. The average reading level was 13.72, meaning that the writing was at a college-level reading level. Therefore, the average state website for key resources may be too difficult to read for many consumers.

PAYMENT AND SERVICES- WHAT ABOUT AL COSTS?

The type(s) of payment(s) accepted by AL facilities was available for 28% of states, with costs being only reported by 2 states.

QUALITY INFORMATION- ARE SURVEYS AND COMPLAINTS AVAILABLE?

All states inspect AL's based on state rules but vary on their timing of inspections. Once a year, and every other year are common. Approximately 2/3rds (65%) of states made recent routine surveys available. 43% of states made complaint information available, and only 16% featured life safety surveys (e.g. examining fire sprinkler systems).

AL COMMUNITY INFORMATION

Almost all states (96%) provided the number of beds for facilities. More than half (55%) of states offered the license status of facilities. Meaning that slightly-less than half did not report which facilities were active, closed, or suspended. About 1/3 (31%) of states indicated if facilities had specialty licenses, such as providing memory care for those with dementia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consumers have more information available to them, and consumer choice is helping to drive care and service quality. Without data consumers cannot make informed choices and may choose communities where their needs cannot be met, and their health and safety may be compromised.

Recommendation 1

Promote best practices of offering key information in consumer's decision-making process.

- a. Most states do not provide payment and cost information, nor the types of services offered

Recommendation 2

For AL's collecting Medicaid dollars for AL residents, consider rules for AL's to provide states with information needed for their websites

Recommendation 3

Highlight states that are transparent in AL consumer information and offer user-friendly websites.

- a. Listing any specialty licenses is important, as AL communities are becoming increasingly disabled, and residents may need specialized care
- b. Lowering reading level to the 8th grade reading level, or below, to help ensure consumers can read the information
- c. Consumers should know when the last time the website information was updated

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About the Authors

A research team of 3 individuals at The University of South Florida (USF) School of Aging Studies performed the analysis of state websites. Dr. Kathryn Hyer is a professor and the Director of the Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging and a national expert in the organization, staffing, training, policies, and financing of long-term care in varied settings along the continuum of long-term care. Dr. Lindsay Peterson is a faculty member focused on the decision-making and communication concerning older adults' preferences for end-of-life care. She also has several years of experience as a reporter and editor for a local news publication. Mitch Roberts is a Ph.D student with experiencing examining the impact of Florida assisted living regulations on quality measures.

References

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