

## ENSURING QUALITY OF CARE FOR YOUR LOVED ONE: WHERE TO START?

**By Kathy Bradley**

You've had the difficult discussions with your loved one and family. You've done the research on different types of care and available care providers in your area. You've made the decision, selected the best alternative, and made the move into that next phase of long-term care. But now, how do you assure that your loved one receives quality care that meets their needs and honors their individuality?

The first opportunity to assure that your loved one's care is consistent, relevant, and meets your loved one's needs is through the development of the plan of care. All providers of long-term care services, whether in the home or in a care facility of any kind, are required to develop a care plan. This process starts with a comprehensive assessment of the functioning, abilities, needs, and preferences of the person they are serving. All these areas are essential to building a plan that leads to daily quality of life. Federal and state regulations for each type of care may vary in the specificity of the requirements, but the rule is that all aspects of the individual's life must be considered. [Federal nursing home regulations](#) provide a good list to serve as a benchmark for all types of care and include the following areas to be assessed:

- Customary routine
- Cognitive patterns
- Communication
- Vision
- Mood and behavior patterns
- Psychosocial well-being
- Physical functioning and structural problems
- Disease diagnoses and health conditions
- Dental and nutritional status
- Skin condition
- Activity pursuit
- Medications
- Special treatments and procedures

Professional and paraprofessional staff are responsible for conducting the assessment and developing the care plan based on the results; but the consumer and the family are integral members of the assessment and care plan teams. The information you and your loved one can contribute to this process is immensely valuable, and you are the best, if not the only, source for much of it. Sadly, providers too often minimize the involvement of their consumer and the family in this essential role. Strong advocacy may be required to assure that essential information about your loved one is included, and that your loved one's needs and preferences are central to the development of the plan of care.

For example: My mother immensely enjoyed visiting with friends, even after she was unable to converse with them. But her staff would not allow her to walk up the hall of her facility to meet her friends in the lobby for their habitual social gathering before lunch. Staff physically intervened to return her to her “assigned” wing of the facility, causing her to resist. They did not know my mother’s history, or how important this social activity was for her well-being. Only family could provide that information, and we had to insist strongly that this activity was essential for her “psychosocial well-being” (a required area of assessment – see list above). Only through our advocacy and insistence that we participate in the assessment and care planning process did we succeed in having this activity included in her care plan, with staff responsible for seeing that our mother was assisted to engage with her friends. My father chose to take this role when he could, but staff knew they were ultimately responsible if my father was not available.

This example also demonstrates another crucial element of the care plan: Staff are responsible for its implementation. Family members may agree to take on a supporting role, performing some tasks and assisting with others; but the provider has the ultimate responsibility for implementing the care plan.

A care plan that identifies and addresses the needs, preferences, and goals of the person receiving care is the first step and the foundation of ensuring appropriate and quality care for your loved one. The second step is following up to assure that the plan is actually being implemented as written, every day as scheduled, by everyone involved with your loved one’s care. You can monitor the documentation that is required, observe various activities throughout the times of day and days of the week as they are scheduled, and inquire of staff about your loved one’s participation. But challenges will inevitably present themselves, from many sources and with some frequency. Working in partnership with staff to seek solutions is the next essential component we will discuss. A quick reference to several steps in this process is available in a previous **Reverse** article, “Nine Steps to Empowered Adcocacy”. We will further discuss strategies for problem-solving in our next installment.