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SENIOR NEWS LINE

by Matilda Charles

Nursing Home Ratings Earn A Gold Star

Here's something that could come in handy, even though most of us hope we'll never need it: A star rating of nursing homes across the county.

By the end of the year, Nursing Home Compare will provide a rating system for Medicare-eligible nursing homes. With this handy visual chart, you'll be able to scroll down the page and quickly identify the best facilities. Nursing Home Compare already has an excellent system where inspection reports can be viewed at the Medicare site [www.medicare.gov], and the star system will add to it.

Another way to check a nursing home is CareScout [carescout.com]. For a fee, it will do a comparative analysis of nursing homes in your area. One facility report costs \$95, however, so it's not cheap.

Don't wait until the last minute to begin selecting a nursing home. Do a little homework now, in case it's ever needed. Some important things to consider are:

- Location, so family can visit easily

- Get references: Friends or relatives who've been in nursing homes are great sources of information.

- Take a tour yourself: Keep your eyes open, but don't focus on fancy decorating — that doesn't mean anything. Listen for the way staff talks to patients. Consult with management about any possible waiting list, and what would be required to enter the facility.

- Consult someone in the know, such as a social worker or a geriatric care manager. See www.caremanager.org as a place to start.

Non-Medicare nursing homes won't be listed by Nursing Home Compare, so you'll need to contact your state's survey agency. The Medicare Web site has a list of contacts by state and category.

Matilda Charles regrets that she cannot personally answer reader questions, but will incorporate them into her column whenever possible. Write to her in care of King Features Weekly Service, P.O. Box 536475, Orlando, FL 32853-6475, or send email to columnreply@gmail.com.

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