



Web referral firm helps sort out housing choices

By Jane Adler

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Information overload is an unfortunate byproduct of the Information Age. The onslaught of information can be downright overwhelming -- and that's especially true when you're trying to select a new living arrangement for an elderly parent.




There's a near-endless assortment of assisted-living homes and seniors-only apartments -- each just different enough to make the job of sorting through the alternatives wish you could hit the right one like a dowser magically finding underground water with a Y-shaped stick.

Nowhere are the hazards of information overload more apparent than on the Internet, host to many Web sites that offer lists of nursing homes, apartments and other living arrangements for the elderly. It's not that hard to come up with a collection of possible places in, say, Arizona, for mom to live. But which is best?

A relatively new Web-based company hopes to simplify the process. "A Place for Mom" is an Internet-based elder-care referral network that attempts to sift through the wealth of data and offer people a handful of places that make sense for them. "We believe in giving people limited information," said Pamala Temple, chief executive and president at A Place For Mom Inc., Seattle.

The personal touch makes A Place for Mom (they work with dads too) different from other Web listing services. Individuals fill out a short assessment of the elderly person's situation on the Web site (www.aplaceformom.com). This includes information about health as well as financial status. Or you can call a toll-free number (866-466-6323). The calls are answered by a center in California that routes the request to a family adviser. The adviser provides free recommendations to people who have called, or requested information via the Web. Individuals can view listings and search for properties on their own too.

The company makes money by charging properties and elder-care services for a listing on the Web site. Temple admits the advisers generally direct people to those places listed on the site. "That doesn't mean our list is short," Temple said. "We have a lot of partners."

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The Web site has about 5,500 sponsors, but maintains a database of about 60,000 properties. Subsidized buildings with low rents are not included. People seeking affordable housing for seniors are referred to a social service agency.

"We try not to be a listing service," said Temple, who started the company about three years ago with her husband, John Temple, a former employee of Microsoft Corp. "We are all about personal professional consultation. The Web is just a way for clients to find us."

The company employs 25 family advisers across the country, three of them in the Chicago area. Not every state is covered, but Temple expects to have 50 advisers by the end of the year.

The advisers recommend places and set up tours of properties. They also offer advice on what to look for in a building as well as referrals to social service agencies or other organizations. "We usually stick with families until they make a decision," said Temple, who has worked in the senior housing industry for the last 15 years.

There's nothing really new about what the company's advisers do. Social service agencies offer the same kind of help, though there's typically an hourly charge for the service. Geriatric care managers and elder specialists also help seniors find new living arrangements.

About half of the family advisers have experience in the senior housing industry, Temple said. But each of the advisers receives training on how to work with families. Advisers are trained about Alzheimer's disease, a big priority for the service, Temple said.

There are a few things the service doesn't do. A Place for Mom does not rate retirement communities. The family adviser will not recommend one place over another. The advisers do not conduct in-home assessments. Social service agencies say that without this step it's difficult to make a solid recommendation. They say an objective third party is needed to make a judgment about whether mom or dad can still live alone, or what kind of housing makes sense.

A Place for Mom handles about 3,500 inquiries a month from people who either call, or fill out the assessment form on the Web site. The Web site itself gets about 1,500 visitors a day, according to Temple.

About 95 percent of the inquiries are from adult children seeking help for an elderly parent, she said. Twenty percent of those involve long-distance situations where the adult child doesn't live near the parent. Only a small number of inquiries come from seniors themselves and most of those are from people looking for an apartment.

"No one likes to think of these situations in advance," Temple said. "People don't know where to turn. We try to help them through this."