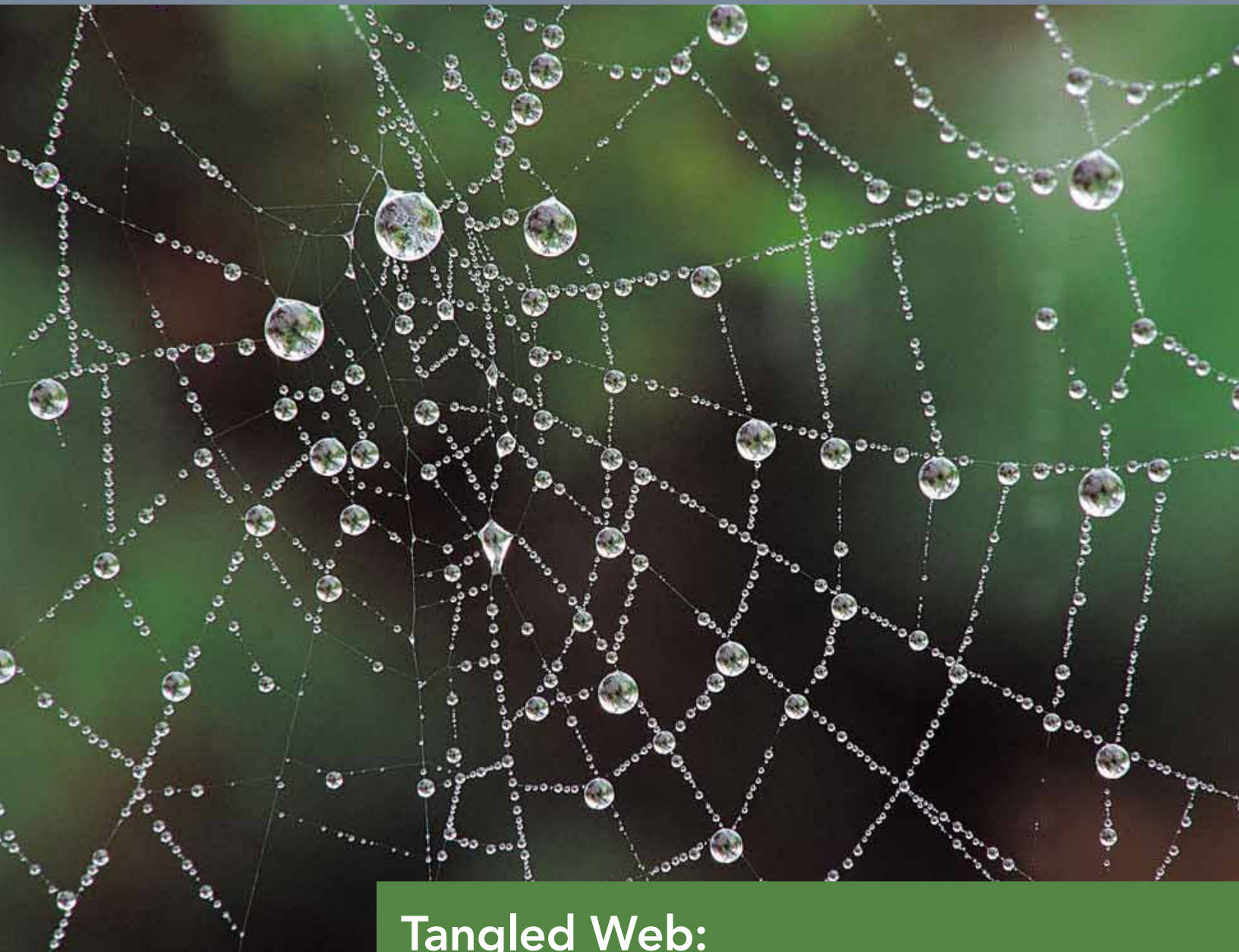




CALIFORNIA HEALTHCARE FOUNDATION



Tangled Web: Sorting Out Long Term Care Information Options

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About the Foundation

The **California HealthCare Foundation** works as a catalyst to fulfill the promise of better health care for all Californians. We support ideas and innovations that improve quality, increase efficiency, and lower the costs of care. For more information, visit www.chcf.org.

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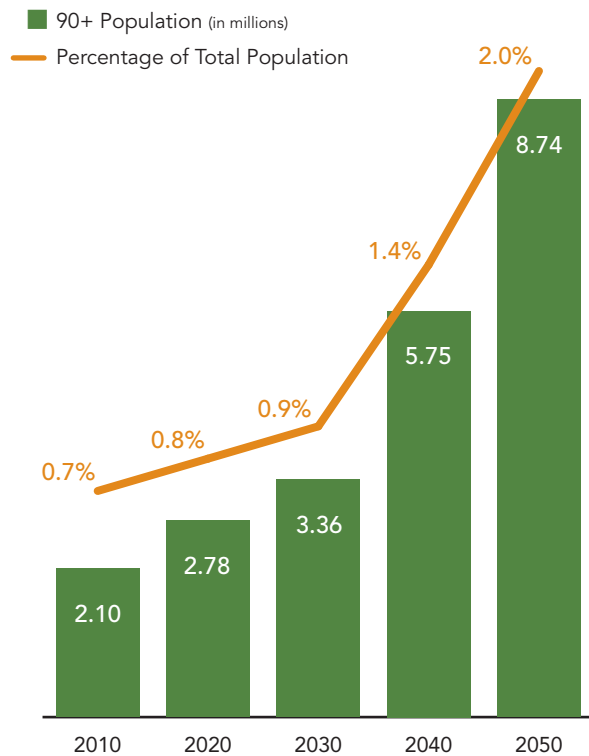
Introduction

Our nation is aging rapidly. Between 2012 and 2060, the number of people in the US over 65 is projected to double — from 43 million to 92 million.¹ Gains in life expectancy have meant that the oldest segment of the population (those over age 90) is growing rapidly (see Figure 1).²

With age often comes a need for assistance with the personal tasks of everyday life. The vast majority of those over 90 report having problems with mobility or cognition, or difficulty dressing or bathing.³

As millions of US residents face decisions about long term care, many will turn to the Internet as a source of information to help them understand options and make decisions for themselves and for their loved ones.

Figure 1. US Population Projections, Age 90 and Older, 2010 to 2050



Note: The projections originate with a base population from the 2000 census and are not based on data from the 2010 census.

Source: US Census Bureau, 2008.

This report summarizes a review of consumer-focused websites that provide information about long term care facilities and services in the US. This research was conducted on behalf of the California HealthCare Foundation, which sponsors a website guide to long term care in California (www.calqualitycare.org) that was not included in this report. This review looks at how these sites share information with consumers, how business models influence the information available on some sites, and how the content found on similar sites can vary.

Decisions about long term care involve highly personal family interactions based on conversations and first-hand experiences gained by visiting facilities. The role of long term care websites is to help inform family members about their long term care options and help narrow them down to those that best meet their needs. In fact, it was the frustration experienced by individuals in finding a long term care facility for a loved one that led to the development of several of the reviewed sites. The ability to maintain and convey accurate and complete information about facilities and care providers remains a challenge for all long term care sites.

Online Behavior of Family Caregivers

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than one-third (36%) of US adults provided care to other adults with significant health problems in 2012 — up from 27% in 2010. Eight percent of adults in the US provided care for children with health challenges. Caregivers represented one of the largest consumers of online health information. Of all caregivers, 86% had Internet access, and 84% of those with access had gone online to research health topics.⁴

Caregivers were more likely than other Internet users to look for comparative information about health professionals and facilities, according to the survey. Of all US caregivers, 22% had consulted online rankings or reviews of doctors or other providers, compared with 14% of other Internet users. Nineteen percent had consulted online rankings or reviews of hospitals or other medical facilities, compared with 10% of other Internet users.⁵

Background

Researchers identified a sample of 51 websites, most of which provide consumer-oriented information about long term care options such as assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and in-home care. Most contain information that allows family members to compare facilities or professional caregivers. This includes descriptive and background information, quality of care measurements, staffing descriptions, regulatory information, and satisfaction ratings and reviews.

Sites were primarily drawn from the database of the Informed Patient Institute (IPI), a nonprofit organization that provides consumer information about care quality and patient safety. In 2007, IPI staff searched state and national websites to identify publicly available nursing home, hospital, and doctor report cards. The resulting IPI database has been continually expanded and updated. Additional sites for this report were identified through a review of the popular senior housing literature, suggestions from California HealthCare Foundation staff, and Internet research. (A complete list of reviewed sites is available in the Appendix.)

Overview

Thirty-one of the 51 sites reviewed for this report are sponsored by for-profit companies, 11 are government sites (10 state, 1 federal), and 9 are nonprofit. Most sites provide information about long term care options nationwide, though sites offering state-specific information from Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and South Carolina were also reviewed.

Most of the for-profit sites reviewed have been in business since 2004, with a few dating to the mid- to late-1990s. Some are divisions of larger companies (generally data and technology companies), and two are affiliated with publicly traded companies: SeniorLiving.net is owned by Real Page (a provider of on-demand services to apartment communities), and CareScout is owned by Genworth (a financial security company). Four companies (Aidin, Careport Health, Golden Reviews, and OpenPlacement) are start-ups, with three of these recently emerging from health technology accelerators.

Most of the for-profit companies are based in California and Massachusetts, with several others based in

Washington State and New York. Other companies are located in Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Virginia, and Washington, DC. Several of the sites reviewed had information geared for users in other countries including Canada, England, France, Germany, and the Netherlands; the content on these sites is available in languages other than English.

Personal Stories

Several commercial sites include a personal story about the founder's experience looking for long term care as an impetus for starting the company.

Aidin

"My family was shocked that it took 17 phone calls, five faxes, and three extra days in the hospital to find post-acute care for my uncle. We were incredibly grateful to the case managers and social workers that helped us through this process and shocked by how much work a single discharge required. So we built Aidin."

CareLinx

"I developed CareLinx to solve many of the problems my family struggled with when trying to find quality affordable care for my sister with multiple sclerosis and uncle with ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease]. Our goal is to make quality care more affordable and accessible for everyone."

Caring.com

"While caring for his mom during her losing battle with lung cancer, Andy realized there wasn't a comprehensive website that helped people figure out how to handle in-home care, choose products to help with daily living, and make the right financial and legal decisions. Caring.com was founded to meet those needs, and to make a difficult journey a little bit easier."

Curaspan Health Group

"At 89 years old, Edna May Dodd still enjoyed living independently in her Florida home. Then a fall left her hospitalized with a broken hip. The husband of Edna May's granddaughter was convinced that there had to be a better way [to find good long term care for Edna], and that technology could help. Soon afterward, Tom Ferry founded a company to fill the void that his family discovered as Edna May transitioned between health care providers."

Types of Long Term Care Sites

The long term care websites and companies reviewed for this report generally fall into one of three categories:

- ▶ **Searchable databases** are designed for consumers, caregivers, and family members to search for long term care facilities using chosen parameters and to review information about those facilities that meet their needs. Thirty-two searchable database sites (63% of all sites) were reviewed.
- ▶ **Senior housing referral sites** connect users to an advisor who reviews caregivers' long term care needs and refers them to appropriate housing options. These sites often also include a searchable database. This report includes 12 (23% of all sites) senior housing referral sites.
- ▶ **Third-party sites** are set up by companies that primarily work through third parties, such as hospital discharge planners, employers, or consumer or membership groups like AARP, to provide information to consumers and families. There were seven (14% of all sites) third-party sites reviewed.

Searchable Databases

Searchable online databases allow consumers to find long term care facilities that meet specific needs. On these sites, at minimum, users enter information about what type of facility they are looking for and a location. A results page lists options in the specified area.

In some cases, users can further customize their search. For example, a site may allow a caregiver to narrow their query by funding source (for example, Medicaid, Medicare, or private payer) or by the type of specialized care needed (for example, ventilator or Alzheimer's services).

There are several types of consumer-oriented searchable databases that include information about long term care options:

- ▶ **General services.** Three sites reviewed, Angie's List, FindTheBest, and Yelp, provide information on a wide range of goods and services — including health care. These sites provide patient and family member reviews of assisted living facilities, home health care agencies, and nursing homes.

- ▶ **Health care.** Several of the searchable database sites focus on a wide range of health providers and include long term care providers among them. Sites such as CareLike, CiteHealth, FloridaHealthFinder.gov, UCompareHealthCare, US News & World Report – Best Nursing Homes, and WhereToFindCare.com provide information on doctors, hospitals, long term care facilities, and other health care providers.
- ▶ **In-home services.** Some searchable databases focus specifically on in-home services. For example, Care.com provides information on childcare and pet care in addition to eldercare services such as home health care. CareLinx focuses exclusively on in-home aides.
- ▶ **Long term care.** A number of searchable databases focus solely on long term care facilities. These sites tend to be sponsored by state governments and have a nursing home search function. One for-profit site reviewed, Silver Lining, only provides information about assisted living facilities. Long term care accrediting organizations (for example, the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities) and trade associations (for example, LeadingAge) also have websites that fall into this category.

Free Databases

Most, though not all, consumer-oriented searchable databases are free to users. The federal site, Nursing Home Compare, and all of the state and nonprofit sites reviewed are free. A variety of business models allow for-profit companies to offer free access to their databases.

Advertising

Several of the sites reviewed have advertising on their home page and/or on the results pages following a search. Companies often devote a section of their websites to how to purchase ad space and the benefits of partnering with the site. For example, a headline in the advertising section of one site reads: "Reach millions of baby boomers" and shares success stories of pharmaceutical companies, senior nutrition companies, and senior in-home care companies that have had positive results after advertising on the site.

Many websites use Google AdChoices, an advertising program sponsored by Google that allows a website to

make ad space available for companies to feature goods and services relevant to the site's content. Advertisers bid to have their ad featured in a particular ad space in a real-time auction. The highest payer's ad will appear on the site for a period of time.

Examples of Google AdChoices on the reviewed sites include ads for retirement home chains, senior citizen housing, dementia facilities, job openings, long term insurance quotes, nursing training programs, senior dating services, senior estate planning services, and Medicare supplemental plans.

Preferred Placement Advertising

Some database sites provide minimal contact information — just name and location — for senior housing providers in their search results. The companies that run these sites encourage housing providers to “claim their site” by providing additional contact information and a description of services offered. This practice helps the site host expand the information in their database and keep it updated.

Some sites will showcase facilities in different ways for a fee. For example, for \$249 per year, SeniorDecision.com will give a facility prominent placement on their results page — above the free listings — and a link to the facility's website. For \$499 per year, the placement and link will be at the very top of the results page. Another company, Carelike.com, charges \$43 each month (\$516 per year) for a featured listing. Most other companies reviewed did not list their fees, but encouraged interested facilities to contact the company for information about advertising or other marketing opportunities.

Users of these sites may not be aware that facilities may be listed more prominently on the site because they are paying a premium. It is a concern that ad placement might lead users to believe that a featured facility is a better facility.

Other types of free or fee-based services that sites make available to partner organizations include:

- ▶ Real-time notification of new reviews about a facility
- ▶ Online referral, or lead generation forms, from potentially interested families
- ▶ Ability to post responses to reviews

- ▶ Option to remedy conflict and work directly with families to resolve issues before a negative review is posted
- ▶ Auto-insertion of service description into relevant side-by-side comparisons
- ▶ Video sharing
- ▶ Job listings in an employment section, recruitment tool for senior care aides
- ▶ Link to website
- ▶ Development of a professionally written, 300-word promotional article
- ▶ Advertisement of events and promotions

Online Store

One company, CarePathways, sells long term care products, such as bathroom safety items, walkers, and supplies for people with diabetes on their website. The site also includes a searchable database of facilities and advisor services.

Data Licensing

In addition to offering consumers direct access to a searchable long term care facility database, some companies license their databases to other groups. For example, FindTheBest syndicates their content across a wide array of companies. CareLike licenses their database to organizations such as national patient advocacy groups, hospital systems, health plans, and care managers, who use it to help their clients find care and services.

Membership Fees

Two search sites that primarily provide information about in-home caregivers and offer some information about long term care facilities charge users to access their information:

- ▶ **Care.com** charges \$39 per month, \$79 for three months, or \$149 per year for access to its database of assisted living facilities, in-home care providers, childcare providers, and pet care services.
- ▶ **CareLinx** allows users to post job announcements and caregivers to apply for jobs. Once users find an appropriate caregiver, they can upgrade their account by paying \$5, which gives them access to background checks and references. If they hire a caregiver through CareLinx, they pay a 15% service

fee on each invoice. The company accepts credit cards to pay caregivers on behalf of a family and does online shift scheduling, invoicing, and payment of required taxes.

The consumer review site Angie's List also charges a membership fee. Fees vary depending on location and the breadth of information available. For example, joining Angie's List in Annapolis, Maryland, costs \$39 per year; membership in Berkeley, California, costs \$46 per year; and membership in rural Cumberland, Maryland, is currently free for one year while the company builds its list of reviews.

Senior Housing Referral

A number of the sites reviewed offer to connect users to an advisor who will provide personalized referral and matching assistance to consumers looking for a long term care facility. Sites such as A Place for Mom, Always Best Care, Choice Advisory Services, Golden Reviews, OurParents, SeniorHomes.com, and SeniorLiving.net invite users to call an 800 number and talk with a senior living advisor, care planner, or care advocate. These advisors help family members and patients understand their long term care needs, identify housing options based on those needs, and facilitate the match between the resident and the facility — including visiting facilities with family members and helping residents move in.

A few of the senior referral agency sites reviewed provide background information about their advisors. SeniorLiving.net and Choice Advisory Services post advisors' pictures on their sites. SeniorLiving.net includes a brief description of their advisors' backgrounds. Some SeniorLiving.net advisors have personal experience helping family members with caregiving decisions. Some have professional health care or long term care experience. Most have local experience helping families find long term care resources.

On some referral sites, users can also access information about long term care facilities through a searchable database. Often, however, information such as cost is not available unless the user sends an email, talks with an advisor, or becomes a member.

Many senior housing referral sites promote the fact that they are free to users. Most sites are national in scope, though some focus on certain geographic areas. One company, Always Best Care, serves local communities through more than 180 franchises across the United States and Canada.

Examining Business Models

Facilities pay to be included in these senior housing referral sites. While many of these sites do not make their business models clear to the user, some sites offer an explanation of how they are paid:

- ▶ About Us section of **A Place for Mom**:
"A Place for Mom is paid by the participating communities and providers in our national network, therefore our service is offered at no charge to families."
- ▶ FAQs section of **ElderCarelink**:
"If I don't pay for this service, who does? ElderCarelink receives its fees from participating providers, allowing us to provide you with a high quality matching service that is available at no cost to you."
- ▶ Terms of Service section of **OurParents**:
"Fees: OurParents.com services are offered to families and individuals free of charge. OurParents.com receives compensation from members of the OurParents.com Care Network that pay a referral fee when a resident moves into a participating facility."

One of the most comprehensive disclosures reviewed is on the website of a local senior housing referral agency in the state of Washington. After a 2010 investigative report on senior care placement companies published by *The Seattle Times*, the Washington State Legislature passed the Elder and Vulnerable Adult Placement Referral Act of 2011.⁶ The law requires disclosure about fees to each client prior to making a housing referral. As a result, the disclosure statement made by Seattle-based company Choice Advisory Services notes:

"The Agency receives a referral fee (a calculation is based on a percentage of the fees paid by the older adult from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th month of residency/service) from the Provider selected by the Client. The Agency maintains a policy of charging the Provider only when the

Provider is receiving direct compensation for housing and/or care from private funds or from long-term care insurance-based funds. The Agency accepts no fees from the Provider if any part of the monthly cost of housing is paid to the Provider by Medicaid/COPES or Medicare.”

Advisors: Payment and Responsibilities

Limited information is available on how advisors are compensated; few websites provide a comprehensive overview of what role advisors play and how they are paid.

Some insight into advisors’ responsibilities can be gleaned from the job descriptions on several sites. For example, one site’s job listings for senior living advisors state that “senior care industry experience is preferred, sales experience (or the ability to sell) is essential.” The job description discusses key aspects of the position:

- ▶ Advisors are accountable for topline revenue goals based upon fees generated via move-ins at partner communities in a defined market.
- ▶ Advisors are responsible for converting leads into partner move-ins.
- ▶ Advisors should focus on referring and moving families into appropriate partner communities by understanding a family’s unique needs and demonstrating an intimate knowledge of partners within the community.

On another company’s website, a job description notes that care advisors are expected to build partner relationships with community senior housing facilities to help add them to the company’s referral network. The site also notes that care advisors are expected to generate five to seven moves per month after an initial three-month ramp-up period.

Senior Referral Industry Associations

Researchers found two senior housing and referral organization associations, which may have been created in response to the legal issues and press interest in the industry. In recognition of the lack of regulation of senior housing and referral agencies in Oregon, members of the Oregon Senior Referral Agency Association (OSRAA)

commit to a code of ethics addressing agency structure, policies and procedures, the background and experience of advisors, and a commitment to the industry and community.⁷ The Professional Association of Senior Referral Specialists (PASRS) in Arizona was founded to establish minimum standards of business ethics in the state’s senior referral industry. PASRS members endorse a best practices agreement that includes full disclosure of compensation for referral and placement services prior to initiation of service.⁸

The Role of Third Parties

Several companies reach consumers, caregivers, and family members through third parties such as hospital discharge planners, employers, or large membership organizations like AARP. While the main audiences for these online systems are discharge professionals, hospitals, and long term care facilities, some of the company sites gear their content to patients and their family members as active participants in making the final decision about long term care.

Discharge Planning

Some of the newest websites reviewed are targeting these intermediaries by helping with post-acute placement of hospital patients via e-discharge systems.

Several of these companies note that Medicare’s focus on preventing hospital readmissions is a motivating factor for hospitals to use their services to improve the discharge experience. One site claims that use of its services may help improve scores on the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey and reduce the length of stay for patients.

The companies that work closely with hospital discharge planners — Aidin, Careport Health, Curaspan Health Group, Ensocare, Healthcare Discharge Planning Resources, and OpenPlacement — note that they provide an automated and more efficient alternative to the current discharge planning system. A video on one site shows a harried nurse thumbing through the Yellow Pages to identify facilities for a soon-to-be discharged patient.

As an alternative to that scenario, these companies help discharge planners by automating the following tasks:

- ▶ Managing and communicating with a network of post-acute care providers, such as nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities, about the availability of beds and needed services
- ▶ Organizing and presenting information about long term care options to patients — including collecting and presenting patient and family reviews of facilities
- ▶ Facilitating the development and review of post-discharge care plans
- ▶ Generating reports about discharge outcomes

One company also facilitates transportation between hospitals and long term care facilities.

The facilities and service providers highlighted by these sites may be influenced by the business model used by that site. Some sites are financially dependent on business relationships with long term care providers in the area. These sites will include a service provider in their listings based on payment, not on the quality of that provider's services. Users may not be aware of this distinction.

For example, OpenPlacement notes that it "is absolutely free to use for patients and their family. For discharge professionals at hospitals and SNFs (skilled nursing facilities) looking to find care providers for their patients, OpenPlacement is free as well. Care providers pay a monthly subscription to show information about their community and/or services as well as a referral fee."

Healthcare Discharge Planning Resources provides its services for free to hospital discharge planners, while long term care facilities and other agencies pay an annual fee of \$365.

Other companies provide their software services to hospitals for a fee. Aidin and Ensocare, for example, sell their discharge transition software to hospital clients. Post-acute care facilities such as nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities can participate in their system for free.

Affiliations

CareScout, an affiliate of the publicly traded insurance company Genworth, provides an example of how third-party affiliations work. AARP, employers, long term care providers, long term care insurers, and liability underwriters reach consumers and their family members with information about long term care services. Their approach with each partner differs slightly:

AARP. The Care Provider Tool and Search for Care Providers options on AARP's Caregiving Resource Center site are powered by Genworth.⁹ When AARP members click on those tool links, they leave the AARP site and arrive at a co-branded site: Caregiving Help and Advice from Genworth. Once there, in addition to using the database, users can make a selection under Advisor Services. For \$295, users can opt for the Service Finder with Phone Advisor — a care advocate will perform a phone assessment of the user's long term care needs, create a suggested care plan based on the assessment results, collect information to help locate providers, contact those providers to determine availability, and negotiate services on the user's behalf. For \$665, a nurse will perform all of these services in person, in the user's home.

Employers. Employers offering an eldercare benefit service can provide their employees with access and discounted rates to home care, assisted living, and other long term care facilities and services through CareScout's national network. CareScout also helps match employees with appropriate services and provides access to senior care information.

Providers. CareScout encourages long term care facilities to complete an extensive Smart Match survey to become listed in the CareScout database for free. This database is made available to AARP's millions of members. In addition, through their Field Scout program, Genworth contracts with home care agencies to send registered nurses from their staff to do in-home assessments.

Long term insurers. CareScout connects long term care insurance policy holders to appropriate providers at reduced rates. This service also includes access to the network of nurses who conduct assessments of policyholders who have submitted long term care insurance

claims to determine eligibility, develop care plans, and provide ongoing care coordination.

Liability underwriters. Underwriters use the CareScout databases and ratings to conduct risk-based due diligence on providers. Through a variety of online tools and services, underwriters can gather a comprehensive risk profile of facilities.

Website Contents

Nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and home health care agencies are the three most common categories of long term care facilities and services available on the reviewed sites. Almost all of the public sites contain information on nursing homes. Fewer sites have information on assisted living facilities.

For-profit sites often include a broader range of information than their nonprofit counterparts. In addition, many for-profit sites have links to other community resources, including Area Agencies on Aging, nursing home ombudsman programs, and other state and national aging organizations.

A few sites contain information specifically for veterans or military families. Always Best Care, for example, has a Veteran’s Assistance Program that can connect users with law firms and other organizations, and paralegals, that assist veterans in obtaining Veterans Administration (VA) benefits. Always Best Care partners with the Center for Elder Veteran Rights, a law firm that is accredited by the VA to provide consultation regarding benefit claims. Another site, Lifetime Solutions, discusses benefits that might be due veterans and urges those who might qualify to contact site representatives. Care.com offers military families discounted services and an online military families support group.

Search Results

The number of search request results differed dramatically among for-profit sites. Researchers chose 10 sites with a nationwide database of assisted living facilities and nursing homes. A search for assisted living facilities in the same zip codes resulted in no results on one site and 978 on another. A similar search was conducted for nursing homes. One site returned no results, and another returned 391 results.

The number of facilities included in a site’s database depends on the company’s business model. Some sites only include those facilities that pay a fee; others include all of the facilities found in federal oversight databases. Users may not be aware that a particular site has fewer facilities in its database than another unless they use multiple sites for their search.

Table 1. Examples of Services Featured on Long Term Care Websites

Adult Day Care
Board and Care (also called residential care, care homes, and micro-communities)
Clinical Trials
Community Health Centers
Diabetes Educators
Dialysis Facilities
Doctors
Durable Medical Equipment/Supplies
Elder Law Attorneys
Geriatric Care Managers
Home Modification Vendors
Homemaker Aides
Hospice
Hospitals
In-Home Care
Independent Living Facilities
Medicare Plans
Mental Health Providers
Nursing Home Administrators
Outpatient/Ambulatory Surgery Centers
Pet Care
Pharmacies
Private Duty Nursing
Rehabilitation Centers
Respite Care
Senior Apartments/Communities
Senior Move Managers
Senior Residence Remodelers
Stroke Specialty Centers
Transportation Providers
Urgent Care Centers
Wound Care Centers

Information About Facilities

When searching for nursing homes and assisted living facilities, researchers found that the reviewed sites consistently provide similar information, including a facility description, overview of clinical quality information, regulatory information, staffing, resident and family satisfaction, and cost.

Facility Descriptions

Almost all of the sites include descriptive information about facilities, including location, contact information, and available services (e.g., dementia/memory services, transportation, meals, social activities). In many cases, the sites feature facility photos. Most sites include maps or directions to the facility. Some include information about the community in which the facility is located, such as the weather, number of physicians per capita, and cost of living. The South Carolina Office on Aging's website offers users access to a nursing facility bed locator — a continually updated listing of private pay, Medicare rehabilitation, and Medicaid nursing home beds by county in the state.

Clinical Quality and Regulatory Information

Many of the nursing home sites reviewed use the clinical quality information from Medicare's Nursing Home Compare site as part of their search results — particularly the five-star system that rates homes in the areas of health inspections, staff, and quality measurement and also provides an overall rating. For example:

- ▶ OurParents allows users to sort search results by Medicare star rating.
- ▶ Caring.com and US News & World Report – Best Nursing Homes include the Medicare star ratings in all four areas: health, quality, staff, and overall.
- ▶ CiteHealth presents the Medicare quality data in colorful bar graphs.
- ▶ The Utah Quality Improvement Organization, Health Insight, offers a different approach to the Medicare data. It provides national rankings for all nursing homes by state, and quarterly results and charts so users can see performance trends over time. National rankings of home health agencies and hospitals based on Medicare data are also available on the site.

Regulatory information can also be found on some sites. For example, in addition to Medicare quality measures, the New York State Nursing Home Profile includes information from inspection reports, complaints, and enforcement actions. The New Jersey State Search for Long-Term Care Facilities includes similar information for nursing homes and assisted living facilities — and also notes whether a facility has met advisory standards that go beyond the minimum state requirements.

ProPublica, a nonprofit journalism organization, uses Medicare data in a tool that lets users search by state for nursing home deficiency reports. Search results show the number and severity of deficiencies and include a link to the government survey form.

Because the regulation of assisted living and some other long term care facilities (outside of nursing homes) is handled at the state level, there is no national source of information about these facilities that is comparable to the Medicare nursing home data. Information about facility inspections and complaints, therefore, is generally not available on long term care sites, with the exception of some state sites. The North Carolina Division of Health Service Regulation, for example, uses a star rating system for assisted living facilities based on inspection information.

Satisfaction Ratings and Reviews

Several of the for-profit long term care sites allow residents, family members, and visitors to rate facilities. Typically, the online tool will ask the user to rate a facility on a scale from one (poor) to five (excellent) stars and also offers a box in which the user can write a review.

Some sites invite consumers to give a detailed rating of the following:

- ▶ Cleanliness
- ▶ Facilities and grounds
- ▶ Food
- ▶ Quality of care
- ▶ Social activities
- ▶ Staff
- ▶ Overall experience

Very few facilities on these sites, however, actually have user ratings or reviews. A search for assisted living and nursing homes around zip codes in three parts of the country — Berkeley, California; metropolitan Chicago, Illinois; and Annapolis, Maryland — turned up eight or fewer consumer ratings or reviews for either type of setting in any of the locations. Many facilities had one or no user ratings. Even the sites best known for consumer ratings, such as Angie’s List (search limited to Maryland) and Yelp, had few, if any, facility ratings and reviews.

One company, Silver Lining, differentiates its service by sending representatives to visit every listed senior housing community in person multiple times. In addition to a rating, Silver Lining creates a list of pros and cons for each of the facilities reviewed. The start-up company is currently focused on a small geographic area of central and northern New Jersey, and the Connecticut cities of Hartford, Stamford, and New Haven. Another site, Golden Reviews, sends “transparency advocates” into local communities to encourage people to post reviews.

On state-sponsored websites in Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio (also includes an assisted living satisfaction survey), and Rhode Island, users can access nursing home satisfaction ratings from broad-based, state-administered surveys of nursing home residents or their family members. Website users can view facility ratings on topics such as the perception of the quality of medical care provided by the nursing home, respect for privacy, quality of staff care, and overall satisfaction.

Accreditation and Awards

Some sites indicate whether long term care facilities have received awards or have met third-party accreditation standards.

Three of the sites reviewed are sponsored by accreditation organizations that have set up search engines on their websites that allow users to find out if a facility is accredited. In some cases, users can view how that facility ranked on a set of quality measures. The Joint Commission’s Quality Check search engine allows users to locate Joint Commission–accredited health care organizations, including nursing homes and home care facilities. A facility’s quality report indicates whether it has met a set of specific patient safety goals.

The Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities and the Community Health Accreditation Program certify a wide range of long term care facilities, including those that offer the following services: assisted living, continuing care, dementia care, home health care, hospice, and rehabilitation care. A search function on these sites shows which facilities are accredited by location.

On their site, the National Association of Home Care and Hospice’s Agency Locator feature includes more than 28,000 home care and hospice providers. The search results page uses stars to indicate whether a hospice or home care agency is Medicare-certified, state-licensed, and accredited.

The American Health Care Association, together with the National Center for Assisted Living, sponsors an awards program for its long term care members based on the criteria and values of the Baldrige Performance Excellence program, a national public-private initiative to promote performance excellence. The program issues three progressive awards: bronze, silver, and gold. More than 360 awardees for 2013 are listed on the American Health Care Association site. These quality awards are also listed on the Joint Commission’s Quality Check reports.

Another nonprofit membership association, LeadingAge, includes a Find a Community function on its site. This database of Leading Age’s nonprofit members includes assisted living facilities, continuing care communities, and adult day service providers, among other resources. Included in the search results is an icon noting whether the facility has signed a Quality First Covenant, indicating a commitment to ongoing quality improvement, transparency and accountability, consumer and family rights, workforce excellence, community involvement, and ethical practices.

Proprietary Customized Rating Systems

Some of the companies reviewed have developed rating systems and icons to rank performance of long term care facilities. Some use Medicare data but also include patient satisfaction reviews and other data. Examples of these sites include:

- ▶ Caregiverlist provides the Medicare star rating but also uses a Caregiverlist Rating that includes a bed sore rating, a certified nursing assistant staff score, activities of daily living rating, and affordability ranking.

- ▶ FindTheBest has a Smart Rating that combines performance measures with Medicare’s inspection, quality of care, and nursing staff ratings.
- ▶ CareScout claims to have created the first nursing home rating and ranking system, in 1996. The report covers current and historical ratings, a fire safety rating, quality of care trends, resident profiles, and a bed availability indicator. A report on a single nursing home is available for \$95. In collaboration with AARP, CareScout offers a Care Provider Locator that includes an objectivity seal icon on the results page that notes: “...our research results are based on objective information, not affiliations.”
- ▶ The Minnesota Nursing Home Report Card uses stars to indicate performance across a range of factors, including staff retention, use of temporary staff, state inspection results, and resident quality of life. The tool also allows users to pick which measures are most important to them and highlights those measures in the results.
- ▶ Caring.com has a program for assisted living and Alzheimer’s care communities called Caring Stars. To receive the designation and associated icon, a facility must receive three or more reviews during a year, one of which must be a five-star rating; receive an overall average rating across all reviews on their listing of at least four stars; and have no unresolved negative reviews.
- ▶ Golden Reviews awards a golden seal icon to facilities that receive an overall rating of 4.25 stars or more from residents and family members.
- ▶ Silver Living’s Silver Rating system of assisted living facilities includes state inspection reports, resident interviews, disclosure of complaint reports, and an assessment of financial strength. The outcome is a one- to five-star rating which appears in the site’s search results.

Cost

Some public and private long term care sites include information about the cost of care in nursing homes or assisted living facilities. For example, Maryland’s state site provides the minimum daily rates for assisted living facilities, and Florida’s site shows daily charges for nursing homes. The Minnesota Nursing Home Report Card provides facility daily rates adjusted for case-mix — so there may be as many as 50 rates for some facilities.

Some for-profit sites also include daily or monthly rates, while others only give that information for featured facilities that appear first on the results list. Another site offers average prices for care providers in a state, then allows the user to click a link to send an email for pricing information. Several sites provide other cost-related information including what types of payment are accepted by the facility, such as long term care insurance, private pay, VA benefits, Medicare, or Medicaid.

Information About In-Home Care Providers

Some companies provide detailed information about the individual in-home care providers who can be hired through their site.

For example, Care.com shares the work experience, certification, and photos of in-home caregivers featured on their site. In addition, Care.com uses a set of icons to indicate whether the caregiver listed has had their phone number and email verified, and whether the caregiver has had either a preliminary background check (verification of Social Security number, check of national criminal and state sex offender database) or a preferred background check (preliminary background check plus review of federal and county courthouse records, driving record, and other public databases). The site’s Safety Center offers tips on hiring in-home caregivers.

For each caregiver in their system, CareLinX lists the types of services offered, education level and credentials, a personal statement, years of experience, languages spoken, and hourly rate. The site uses a check mark to indicate that the caregiver has been screened and has undergone a detailed background check, has had their licenses verified, and has provided references. Finally, individuals who have hired a caregiver can assign a star rating or write a review of that caregiver.

Educational Content

The reviewed sites contain a variety of informational content for consumers, family members, and caregivers including:

- ▶ **Newsletters.** Users can sign up online to receive regular electronic newsletters on topics related to long term care.

- ▶ **Educational resources.** Some sites include articles about choosing a long term care facility, checklists, and glossaries. These resources are generally focused on a particular type of long term care service — for example, assisted living or adult day care — though some have information on specific conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease or diabetes.
- ▶ **Ask an expert.** Caring.com allows users to pose questions to its experts about caregiving, financial, legal, or end-of-life issues. Caregiverlist’s Ask the Expert section allows users to get answers to questions about assisted living, reverse mortgages, estate planning, and long term care insurance. Angie’s List features an Angie’s List Answers section that allows users to ask and receive answers to health-related questions — including those about assisted living and eldercare.
- ▶ **Blogs.** Many sites sponsor blogs that cover a range of topics related to long term care.

User Engagement

The long term care sites reviewed offer very different search experiences and other user navigation and engagement features.

Membership

Many sites encourage users to become a member for a fee. In some cases, the user is required to join before getting more detailed information about a facility. In other cases, becoming a member allows the user to receive ongoing information about long term care facilities.

Online Access to In-Person Help

Some sites offer users the opportunity to speak with an advisor over the Internet. For example, A Place for Mom’s Chat Now button connects the user to a Live Help feature once a name is provided. The CareLinx site contains a Need Help icon that will allow the user to talk with a staff person over the Internet.

Use of Video

Many sites also use videos to explain how the site works. For example, FloridaHealthFinder.gov, which has a section on nursing homes, includes a video providing an

overview of the different features of the site. In addition to a video discussing their services, Silver Living also has posted video tours of some of the assisted living facilities in their database. US News & World Report – Best Nursing Homes includes a video that gives step-by-step instructions on how to choose a nursing home.

Social Media and Mobile Applications

Almost all sites use social media to further engage their users. Most sites include a link to their Facebook page, and some promote their pages and presence on LinkedIn, YouTube, Vimeo, Google+, Pinterest, and Twitter.

Only a few sites indicate that they have mobile applications. Care.com offers a smartphone application to its premium members, which allows users to search for in-home caregivers, to call or send a message to a caregiver, and to view and reply to messages. Yelp and Angie’s List also have smartphone applications. Sunlight Health, a project of the Sunlight Foundation and the Knight Foundation, has built a mobile application around Medicare’s nursing home, home health, dialysis, and hospital data.

Languages

Few of the sites reviewed are available in languages other than English. One exception is Florida’s Nursing Home Guide, which is available in Spanish.

Considerations

A review of websites designed to help consumers understand their long term care options revealed wide variation in the breadth of information displayed, business models, and user experience.

Breadth and depth of information across sites differs.

In general, the for-profit sites reviewed offer a broader range of information about types of long term care facilities, professionals, and services than the nonprofit and government sites. Compared with the other sites, the for-profit sites offer a wider range of long term care options — from in-home care to nursing home facilities — which is often accompanied by educational information about each option.

However, the depth of information about the long term care facilities offered on the for-profit sites is often shallow — particularly compared to the public sites. For nursing homes, only a few for-profit sites incorporate quality and regulatory information from federal and state government sites. In general, compared to the nonprofit and government sites, the for-profit sites are more dependent on resident and family member ratings and reviews, which have yet to reach a robust number in any of the sites reviewed. Standardized performance information about the quality of long term care providers other than nursing homes is lacking across all of the sites reviewed.

Better user experience on commercial sites. While the public state sites offer a great depth of information, they are often less visually appealing and less user friendly, in terms of design, use of images, and use of strategies to engage users, than nonpublic sites. Using these state sites often involves more click-throughs and web pages to get to the desired information compared to using nonpublic sites. In many cases, the state long term care sites are part of a larger government site, and therefore may need to comply with the look, feel, and functionality of their host site.

Data may not be accurate or current. There is also some question about the accuracy of the information on all of the sites, as continually updating information about health facilities and professionals and their services and costs is a difficult task. The approach used by the for-profit sites that asks facilities to “claim your site” may help encourage facilities to provide accurate information and keep it up-to-date. Many sites, however, include a number of unclaimed sites that have only a bare minimum of information.

It is also not clear how current the Medicare data are on many of the nonpublic sites. Few of the for-profit sites clearly state the time period covered, or how often the information is updated. One site notes that its nursing home information is from 2006 to 2007.

The number of facilities returned using the search function on a sample of sites ranged dramatically. A key factor in a site’s usefulness is the number of options given to users. The large variation in the number of results returned by search engines raises questions about the comprehensiveness and usefulness of the underlying databases employed by these sites.

Ranking systems and user reviews of facilities may not be unbiased ratings of quality. Many sites also use star-based rating systems to convey the relative performance of long term care facilities. These systems are consumer friendly and quickly convey how well one facility is doing compared to another. An added outcome of these rating systems is that they can encourage facilities to improve in those areas where they do not measure up to their peers.

Generally, sites offer an explanation of their ranking methodology. Some sites use Medicare’s rating system. Other sites, however, develop rating systems based on very few observations about a facility — for example, one site ranks facilities if they have just three reviews in one year.

Many of the reviewed for-profit sites use personal consumer reviews about long term care facilities. Already accustomed to online reviews about an array of products and services, consumers may welcome and even expect this type of qualitative information about a long term care facility — particularly as more residents and family members contribute reviews.

Conflict of interest issues arise when advisors promote care providers based on factors other than a patient’s needs. The free service on some for-profit sites of working with an advisor to help make care decisions may appeal to users. Many of these sites provide an 800 number or a preformatted email to make it easy for the user to connect to an advisor. It was beyond the scope of this project to test these advisor services, so it is not known what type of information is disclosed. There is, however, a potential conflict of interest in working with advisors who may not provide information about all of the facilities in a particular area or who steer families to sites that may not best fit their needs. This potential conflict of interest may not be apparent to consumers or to their family members when they are working with a discharge planner.

Endnotes

1. US Census Bureau, "US Census Bureau Projections Show a Slower Growing, Older, More Diverse Nation a Half Century From Now" (December 12, 2012), accessed May 21, 2013, www.census.gov.
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5. Ibid.
6. Michael Berens, "Senior-Care Placement Companies Scramble to Cash In," *The Seattle Times* (December 11, 2010), accessed May 30, 2013, www.seattletimes.com.
7. Oregon Senior Referral Agency Association, Code of Ethics, www.osraa.com.
8. Professional Association of Senior Referral Specialists, www.pasars.us.
9. AARP Caregiving Resource Center, www.aarp.org.

Appendix: Consumer-Oriented Long Term Care Websites

ORGANIZATION/URL	PROFIT STATUS	TYPE OF SITE	DOES THE SITE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:				
			Assisted Living Info	In-Home Care Info	Nursing Facility Info	Consumer Reviews	Family Advisors
A Place for Mom www.aplaceformom.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y	Y		Y
Aidin www.myaidin.com	For-profit	Third Party		Y	Y		
Always Best Care www.alwaysbestcare.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y			Y
American Health Care Association AHCA/ National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL) National Quality Award Program www.ahcancal.org	Nonprofit	Searchable Database	Y		Y		
Angie's List www.angieslist.com	For-profit	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Care.com www.care.com	For-profit	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Caregiverlist www.caregiverlist.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y	Y		Y
CareLike www.carelike.com	For-profit	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y		
CareLinx www.carelinx.com	For-profit	Searchable Database		Y		Y	Y
CarePathways www.carepathways.com	For-profit	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y		
Careport Health www.careporthealth.com	For-profit	Third Party		Y	Y		
CareScout www.carescout.com	For-profit	Third Party	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Caring.com www.caring.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Choice Advisory Services www.choiceadvisory.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y	Y		Y
CiteHealth www.citehealth.com	For-profit	Searchable Database		Y	Y	Y	
Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities International www.carf.org	Nonprofit	Searchable Database	Y				
Community Health Accreditation Program www.chapinc.org	Nonprofit	Searchable Database		Y			
Curaspan Health Group connect.curaspan.com	For-profit	Third Party		Y	Y		
ElderCarelink www.eldercarelink.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y	Y		

ORGANIZATION/URL	PROFIT STATUS	TYPE OF SITE	DOES THE SITE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:				
			Assisted Living Info	In-Home Care Info	Nursing Facility Info	Consumer Reviews	Family Advisors
Ensocare (formerly Total Living Choices) corp.tlchoices.com	For-profit	Third Party		Y	Y		
FindTheBest www.findthebest.com	For-profit	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Florida Agency for Health Care Administration www.floridahealthfinder.gov	Public	Searchable Database			Y		
Golden Reviews www.goldenreviews.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
HealthInsight – National Rankings for Nursing Homes www.healthinsight.org	Nonprofit	Searchable Database		Y	Y		
Healthcare Discharge Planning Resources www.hdprs.com	For-profit	Third Party	Y	Y	Y		
The Joint Commission – Quality Check www.qualitycheck.org	Nonprofit	Searchable Database		Y	Y		
LeadingAge www.leadingage.org	Nonprofit	Searchable Database	Y		Y		
Lifetime Solutions www.lifetimesolutions.org	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y			Y
Maryland Health Care Commission – Consumer Guide to Long Term Care mhcc.maryland.gov/consumerinfo/longtermcare	Public	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y	Y*	
Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services – Nursing Home Reports www.mass.gov/eohhs	Public	Searchable Database			Y	Y*	
Medicare.gov www.medicare.gov	Public	Searchable Database		Y	Y		
Minnesota Nursing Home Report Card nhreportcard.dhs.mn.gov	Public	Searchable Database			Y	Y*	
National Association for Home Care & Hospice www.nahcagencylocator.com	Nonprofit	Searchable Database		Y			
New Jersey Department of Health – Search for Long-Term Care Facilities web.doh.state.nj.us	Public	Searchable Database	Y		Y		
New York State Nursing Home Profile nursinghomes.nyhealth.gov	Public	Searchable Database			Y		
North Carolina Division of Health Service Regulation – Adult Care Licensure Section www.ncdhhs.gov/dhsr/acls	Public	Searchable Database	Y				
Ohio Long-Term Care Consumer Guide ltc.ohio.gov	Public	Searchable Database	Y		Y	Y*	

*Satisfaction survey.

ORGANIZATION/URL	PROFIT STATUS	TYPE OF SITE	DOES THE SITE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:				
			Assisted Living Info	In-Home Care Info	Nursing Facility Info	Consumer Reviews	Family Advisors
OpenPlacement www.openplacement.com	For-profit	Third Party	Y	Y	Y		
OurParents www.ourparents.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
ProPublica – Nursing Home Inspect projects.propublica.org	Nonprofit	Searchable Database			Y		
Rhode Island Department of Health – Quality Information About Nursing Homes www.health.ri.gov	Public	Searchable Database			Y	Y*	
seniorDECISION www.seniordecision.com	For-profit	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y	Y	
SeniorHomes.com www.seniorhomes.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
SeniorLiving.net www.seniorliving.net	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y	Y	Y		Y
Silver Living www.silverliving.com	For-profit	Senior Referral	Y			Y	Y
South Carolina Health & Human Services – Nursing Facility Bed Locator www.nfbl.sc.gov	Public	Searchable Database			Y		
Sunlight Health www.sunlightfoundation.com	Nonprofit	Searchable Database		Y	Y		
UCompareHealthCare www.ucomparehealthcare.com	For-profit	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y		
US News & World Report – Best Nursing Homes health.usnews.com/best-nursing-homes	For-profit	Searchable Database			Y		
WhereToFindCare.com www.wheretofindcare.com	For-profit	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Yelp www.yelp.com	For-profit	Searchable Database	Y	Y	Y	Y	

*Satisfaction survey.

Source: Informed Patient Institute database.