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Senior Living's Lone Ranger: Placement Specialist Spurns Facility Commissions, Stays Independent to Serve Families

Anyone who has faced the overwhelming task of picking the right senior alternative living option knows the feelings all too well: stressed, confused and overwhelmed.

Swooping in to their rescue are placement professionals who match seniors with an independent, assisted-living or nursing home community.

What makes these professionals so appealing is this seeming bonus: they seek no fee from families.

Their efforts come at a price, though: the facility pays agents a finder's fee commission linked to their housing costs, typically amounting to a half-month or a full month's rent.

The monthly housing cost for independent living starts at about \$1,400, the average for assisted is \$4,500, and the average for nursing homes is \$6,000. So placement fees frequently climb into the thousands of dollars—and that cost is invariably built into the bottom-line expense borne by residents and their families.

The arrangement, a practice that dates back to 2000, raises questions about agents' objectivity: If you were in their shoes, wouldn't you be tempted to steer clients to facilities that offer more lucrative commissions over those that pay a lower, or even no, finder's fee?

Andrea Donovan thinks she would. So since the June 2006 founding of her company, Andrea Donovan Senior Living Advisors, this energetic senior-placement specialist has charted a lonely course.

Unlike anyone else in her field, Donovan, of Riverside, accepts no money from any facility when she guides seniors in their decisions to live there.

A former director of admissions and marketing at a continuing care retirement community, Donovan has held her ground, even as some facility executives have offered to compensate her as much as 10 times the flat fee she receives from clients.

“I don’t think it’s right to steer somebody to a place that’s paying me,” said Donovan. “If I were trying to place one of my parents, I’d want to get help from someone who didn’t even have the appearance of a conflict of interest.”

Donovan believes she is the only one locally with a policy of independent advising. “I know of at least five referral sources in the Chicago area who are compensated by the communities, including one national company,” said Donovan.

She pointed out that, to their credit, some of her peers refer seniors to facilities that do not pay commissions. But they are the exception, said Donovan.

Donovan has toured more than 170 independent, assisted-living and nursing home locations throughout northern Illinois.

Her evaluations encompass cost, method of payment, level of available care, location, staffing, and other quality-of-life factors such as food and housekeeping. After interviewing families to learn their needs and wants, Donovan relies on that data to advise them on the most fitting options, coordinates tours of facilities, and even accompanies them on those tours when requested.

Fran White of Naperville praised Donovan for her role in finding an independent living apartment for White’s parents after her father suffered a stroke.

“Andrea’s service is so right for today’s families,” said White. “We had already done an exhaustive search on our own, but Andrea showed us more options we hadn’t uncovered, was able to guide us on the real features available at each location, and found a supportive community that exceeded our expectations.”

A champion tap dancer, Donovan is a tap, ballet and jazz academy instructor to about 80 children at Peggy Rose Dance Academy in Berwyn.

“Seniors and children are my life,” she said.

To fulfill both of her professional roles, Donovan draws upon patience, persistence and a love for helping others. But, figuratively speaking, there is one marked difference: when guiding families during what is often a crisis-filled time in their lives, she does not resort to any fancy footwork.

“It’s hard for me to tap dance when I’m in a room full of family members of a senior,” Donovan explains. “You really have to be straightforward with what you’re telling people in a crisis situation. Maintaining my independence guarantees my clients that serving them and their loved one is my one and only priority.”

About Andrea Donovan

From 1999 to 2004, Andrea Donovan was director of admissions and marketing of a St. Andrew Life Center in Niles, a continuing care retirement community that included independent, assisted-living and nursing care. During her tenure, the Illinois Department of Public Health did not issue any deficiency citations—a rare distinction in any given year, let alone a five-year period.

She holds a BA in sociology/communications from St. Mary’s College of Notre Dame, and an MBA from Loyola University.

For more information, or to learn how to obtain a free consultation, contact Donovan at 708-442-7174. Her website is www.adsla.biz .