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DCSD

Debt Counsel for Seniors & the Disabled

RATING INFORMATION ON NURSING HOMES NOW AVAILABLE

The Federal Government now identifies some of the most troubled nursing homes in its public database, part of a trend toward giving consumers easier access to a trove of nursing-home information online.

That trend could accelerate if Congress passes a bill introduced this year that would force more nursing-home data into the public domain. Meanwhile, privately maintained quality-rating sites, like one from Consumer Reports, are improving their offerings. Also, a number of Web sites focused on nursing homes in particular states are available, with some offering more in-depth information than the federal site.

The population of U.S. nursing-home residents, pegged at around 1.4 million in 2006, is expected to grow with the aging of the baby-boom generation. One study, released last year by the Urban Institute, projects that the tally could be 2.7 million by 2040.

The federal agency that oversees Medicare will add to its existing consumer site the identities of so-called Special Focus Facilities nursing homes that rank in the worst 5% to 10% for inspection results in a given state. These homes are selected for stepped-up scrutiny by regulators. The list, which was made public earlier but not integrated in the searchable database, typically includes around 130 facilities, out of approximately 16,000 nursing homes in the U.S.

Consumers also can turn to a number of other online resources, though many rely on the same underlying government data. Consumer groups and nursing-home officials warn, however, that nothing can substitute for visiting a nursing home in person.

The federal site, Nursing Home Compare, is the most complete national resource, consumer groups say. It primarily offers summarized information from inspections performed by state agencies, as well as data the nursing homes must compile and submit to regulators about residents about residents. The site, which is updated monthly, has made additions in the past few years, including information about facilities' sprinkler systems and whether the homes provide certain vaccinations.

Among the key measures to look at in the federal site are information on pain management, pressure sores and the use of physical restraints. Other variables may simply reflect the population of a nursing home, as much as the quality of its care. An example is the percentage of residents whose need for help with daily activities has increased.

Information on nursing homes is available from a variety of resources:

- **Medicare's database** medicare.gov Click on Compare Nursing Homes.
- **The federal data also are analyzed at** memberofthefamily.net healthgrades.com
- **Recommendations from Consumers Union** consumerreports.org Click on the Health tab, then scroll down to Special Reports.
- **Information about state onbudsmen** nursinghomeaction.org Click on State Ombudsmen.
- **California's site** calnhs.org
- **Minnesota's site** health.state.mn.us Scroll down to Facilities and Professions and click on Nursing Home Report Card.