

**Long-Term Care Financial Planning Education: Inventory of Representative
Online Resources from a Consumer Perspective**

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June 2008

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge Julia Evans Starr and William Eddy from the Connecticut Commission on Aging, Dr. Julie Robison and Noreen Shugrue from the University of Connecticut Health Center's Center on Aging, and Dr. Leslie Curry from the Yale School of Public Health for providing the opportunity to prepare this report and for their support and assistance throughout the project.

Executive Summary

Many Americans are misinformed about the cost and financing of long-term care and do not know where to turn to find clear, reliable, and comprehensive information. This report presents findings from a systematic, consumer-centered review of four online information sources according to four criteria: (1) credibility, trustworthiness and potential bias, (2) comprehensiveness or the scope of funding options discussed, (3) ease of use, and (4) special features and limitations. The following websites were selected to represent government, private sector, advocacy and grassroots information sources: Medicare.gov, LTC.com, AARP.org, and an individual consultant's webpage dedicated to long-term care financing. The sources were highly variable in the scope, quality and format of information provided.

This consumer-oriented review highlights the importance of ease of navigation and accessibility, the advantage of including unique interactive tools to render the information presented more personalized for each consumer, and the benefit of adding direct consumer perspectives to national information repositories. As a crucial first step, improving accessibility and navigation would allow consumers to readily identify pertinent information. Interactive tools such as cost calculators, provided with background information to help the consumer determine the basis of the calculated estimates and the significance of the results on their planning decisions, could generate information more applicable to consumer needs. The inclusion of personal reflections would achieve a similar purpose, complementing empirical data with consumer experiences that highlight the diversity of long-term care needs, services, costs, and financing options. In order to better understand American consumers' information needs, a next step could be to investigate consumer behavior to determine what information is most useful to them and how they employ various educational resources in their planning decisions.

Long-Term Care Financial Planning Education: Systematic Review of Representative Online Resources from a Consumer Perspective

The impact of the demographic changes on the need for long-term care (LTC) in the United States can no longer be denied: as the baby-boomer generation ages, more seniors are likely to be disabled or to suffer from chronic illnesses that require some degree of LTC to assist them with functional needs (i.e. ADLs and IADLs). The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services estimates that currently, about 9 million Americans over the age of 65 will require LTC annually. This figure is expected to grow to 12 million by 2020. Because LTC includes a wide range of medical and non-medical services and assists a highly diverse population (with varying ages, needs, cultural and ethnic background, income level, among numerous other characteristics that may influence preferences over types of services and ability to pay for LTC), accurately assessing the need for LTC on a societal level in order to craft effective, efficient, and equitable policies represents a sizeable challenge. Indeed, LTC is provided in a continuum of settings and by a variety of caregivers. Some individuals receive care in a nursing home while others utilize an assisted living facility or other home and community-based services. Both paid and informal (usually unpaid, often relatives) caregivers contribute to care across nearly all settings. While scholars and policymakers may find the complexity of LTC structure daunting, individual consumers of LTC and those who wish to become prepared for the risk of requiring such services in the future face an even greater hurdle when attempting to plan for long-term care: recent studies have found that *the vast majority of people are neither aware of the costs for LTC nor financially prepared for expenditures and many who wish to be prepared do not know where to find clear, comprehensive, and unbiased information* (Robison et al., 2007). The purpose of

this paper is to provide a systematic review of representative sources of information available to the public on the Internet and to characterize these resources from the point of view of a consumer interested in the financial planning for future LTC. These findings may be informative in the creation of policies overseeing the design of a publicly accessible online information repository about LTC financial planning options.

The Reality of Paying for Long-Term Care: a Wake-Up Call for Suitable Preparation

Why should individuals plan how to finance LTC services? First, the risk for long-term care is uncertain for many: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services predicts that individuals over the age of 65 have a 40% chance of entering a nursing home and 10% of them will reside there 5 years or more. Furthermore, paying for long-term care services represents a tremendous hurdle for those individuals who will require assistance. An AARP Public Policy Institute research report finds that a semi-private room in a nursing home costs an average of \$66,795 per year while the average private-pay private room costs \$75,190 per year in 2006 (Houser, 2007). Expenses in the state of Connecticut considerably surpass national averages: the AARP reports that a private room in Connecticut in 2007 cost about an average of \$164,980 per year, while assisted living required \$50,574 per year on average. Although Medicaid provides funds for 65% of nursing home residents, this government program is means-tested and beneficiaries must meet a certain threshold of poverty before they become eligible. Confronted with such exorbitant costs, many individuals requiring LTC are thus forced to “spend down,” or utilize their assets until they are low enough to qualify them for Medicaid. In addition, individuals may wish to be informed of LTC options other than nursing homes or skilled nursing facilities, such as home and community based services that will keep them closer to their current

living environment. Only certain Medicaid beneficiaries have access to HCBS options under Medicaid waivers targeting specific populations. Therefore, *planning ahead allows a greater degree of financial autonomy and control over one's resources and lifestyle options at the end of life*. Sound financial preparation may allow individuals to avoid the depletion of assets to qualify for Medicaid benefits and to bequest remaining resources to their heirs, or simply to choose the setting in which they prefer to have LTC services provided.

While the risks and costs of LTC are significant, a recent national survey study conducted by the AARP polling 1800 Americans 42 years and older reveals an alarming gap between the real and publicly perceived economic implications of obtaining LTC services (AARP, 2006). The survey finds numerous misconceptions regarding both the costs of LTC and available sources of funding. Although many of the survey respondents claim to be familiar with LTC, only 8% of the respondents assessed the average costs of nursing homes correctly within $\pm 20\%$ (the majority of estimates outside this range are underestimates), with 17% of the respondents admitting not knowing. The respondents were similarly unaware of real costs of a range of LTC services including home health aide and assisted living. Moreover, *many individuals incorrectly presume that their existing health care insurance or a government-sponsored financing program such as Medicare will cover their long-term care costs*. The AARP study finds that 59% of survey participants “believe Medicare covers nursing home stays for three months or more for age-related or other chronic conditions.” In reality, Medicare funds rehabilitation after an acute health event: the program pays for skilled nursing facility only after three days of hospitalization, requires a co-payment after 20 days, and the benefit disappears altogether after 100 days. Additionally, while private LTC insurance take-up is known to be relatively low (estimated to be 9% of adults 55 and older in 2002), 29% of the AARP survey respondents

believe they are insured through “work, a private policy, or by some other means,” suggesting that *many individuals who believe to be financially prepared for LTC costs may not be*. Indeed, it appears that most Americans are not properly informed about the costs of LTC and funding sources in the event they would need such services and this problem must be addressed in effective LTC policies.

Addressing the Information Gap: What’s Out There?

A 2006 Brown University report taking a multi-faceted look at the main challenges facing the future of long-term care in America explicitly points out that “there are two information problems: a prevailing lack of understanding about the importance of financing and personal preparation for the risk of long-term care, and a dearth of information about how to access needed services regardless of the ability to pay” (Miller and Mor, 2006). Given the rising costs of health care and the trend in demographics, the need for reliable and accessible LTC financial planning public educational tools is more urgent than ever. Properly informing potential LTC consumers would benefit consumers themselves, but also their families and friends who often represent informal sources of care, government agencies such as the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), and private players such as LTC insurance providers. This paper will thus attempt to illuminate the first information problem identified by Miller and Mor, and compile and characterize possible candidates for online resources that can assist in financial preparation for LTC.

In the following inventory, representative online sources of information on LTC financial planning will be evaluated from the point of view of an internet-proficient consumer, who is uncertain of LTC risks, according to several criteria: (1) credibility, trustworthiness and potential

bias, (2) comprehensiveness or the scope of funding options discussed, (3) ease of use, and (4) special features and limitations. Credibility and trustworthiness can be derived from knowing the affiliations of the authors, the methods used to gather information, and freedom from bias, underlying conflicts of interests, or competing incentives. Comprehensive resources attempting to educate individuals about the whole spectrum of financial options should discuss opportunities such as personal savings to fund out-of-pocket expenditures, reverse home mortgages, sale of assets or homes, private long-term care insurance, and public programs such as Medicaid. The online resources will also be evaluated for clarity and ease of navigation. Although these factors are highly subjective and personal, the appearance and ease of use of a source of information are primordial in attracting consumers to view the resource and in accurately conveying the information and its significance. Studies have found that the way in which data is reported “dramatically [changes] consumers’ perceptions of the importance of the information” (Mor, 2005), so this criterion seems relevant in the present study. Finally, any unique and innovative features, along with limitations of these online resources will be assessed bearing in mind the ultimate goal of creating and supporting an effective vehicle for the dissemination of information about LTC financial planning. The online sources of information will come from the public domain, the private sector, from a non-profit advocacy group, and from an individual.

Information from the Public Domain: Medicare.gov¹

Since CMS pays for a large proportion of LTC expenditures, it can play a major role in shaping both quality and access concerning LTC services. Thus, it has a stake in appropriately informing consumers such that resources can be allocated efficiently and can support individual preferences as much as possible. Indeed, information about “paying for long-term care” can be found through Medicare.gov. *Consumers can find an overview table listing financing options*

¹ See Appendix B on how to navigate the website to find the information discussed in this section.

such as “family support and caregiving,” “personal savings,” “long-term care insurance,” “life settlement,” “reverse mortgages,” “veterans benefits,” “Medicare,” “Medicaid,” and a few others. The table tells whether each option is restricted to covering LTC expenditures, whether the financial arrangement allows the accumulation of assets and its rate if applicable, and whether there are eligibility requirements. Moreover, one can determine at a glance whether the remaining funds can be bequeathed, how likely the option will cover all LTC needs, and the payment method through which one can take part in each option. The table thus allows a rapid comparison between the individual options: more criteria can be identified to broaden the scope of the comparison, but the most salient issues such as cost and eligibility are already covered. The website also classifies the different financial choices into “government programs,” “private insurance,” “home equity,” and “other options” including personal savings and trusts. Because funding options of both private and public nature are all discussed, this website represents a comprehensive financial planning education resource.

Overall, the information appears relatively unbiased since all categories receive comparable amounts of discussion. Because CMS strives to fund quality health care at the lowest cost, it is reasonable to ask whether this website would be biased in encouraging customers to seek options other than government-sponsored programs to divert costs elsewhere. The website, however, *provides a balanced perspective between potential advantages and shortcomings of private (and public) sources of funding*. In addition to the overview table, each option except for family support and caregiving is described in a separate link and evaluated for both opportunities and requirements/limitations. For instance, the description of long-term care insurance points to the opportunity for personal control over LTC coverage and types of services and the possibility of inheritance, but also warns the reader about the high costs especially when

insurance is purchased at a later age and the importance of finding an appropriate coverage option from a reliable company that will remain solvent for the future. Moreover, since the website is maintained by a government agency with a “.gov” URL, this source of information appears credible and trustworthy. The Medicare.gov resource thus seems trustworthy and free from apparent bias.

The website’s design allows for ease of navigation between the descriptions of the various financing options. Once the reader reaches the “Paying for Long-Term Care” page, clear tabs at the top permit the consumer to browse the different broad categories. Clicking on each tab unveils more specific options – the individual financing methods among each category – giving the menu an additional layer. The upper-most menu remains accessible when one reads the information below, allowing one to easily switch from one page to the any other page of interest. One useful feature of the website is a “Resources” tab that gives the reader a list of links outside Medicare.gov: these include direct counseling and assistance groups such as America’s Health Insurance Plans (AHIP) and the independent Long-Term Care Ombudsman Resource Center. Clicking on these links opens a new browser window (without losing the CMS resources in consultation at the moment) that informs the reader that the link is no longer affiliated with CMS. The website is thus clear in its layout, allows the consumer to easily retrieve previously encountered information using the layered-menu system, and encourages readers to find other information with a clear sense of who the source is such that they can bear in mind possible bias.

The Medicare.gov website includes one *unique interactive “Long-Term Care Planning Tool,”* which consists of a short questionnaire (fewer than 20 questions) for the consumer. The questionnaire probes one’s age, location, gender, ethnicity, physical and health conditions, behavioral status, ADLs and IADLs, level of income and assets, among other characteristics

likely to affect the need for LTC and the ability to finance those services. The answers that one provides are matched with those from other people with similar profiles obtained in past surveys and studies to generate a set of customized data on projected costs (when no current need exists), types of LTC services that will meet anticipated needs based on the current profile, and a list of suggested ways to finance those services. The last portion on financial options presents essentially the same information (some differences in order and wording) as one would find just browsing the Medicare.gov website without answering the questionnaire, including a short description of each option, cost information, and a list of advantages and drawbacks when applicable. Nevertheless, for a consumer who does not have pre-existing familiarity with the types of services or payment mechanisms that may be appropriate and who has no family or friends from whom to gather informal data, *the interactive questionnaire narrows down the myriad of options into a more defined set of possibilities for further inquiry*. Moreover, the consumer can assess his or her own situation without compromising privacy: anyone may access the questionnaire without having to provide personal information such as name, date of birth, telephone number, address, or email. Thus, this tool allows a certain degree of customization while preserving anonymity.

Information from the Private Sector: LTC.com²

While the Medicare.gov website provides some basic background information about obtaining private LTC insurance, it does not offer examples of coverage packages, quotes or direct cost estimations. Consumers may wish to turn to resources from the private market: these websites tend to be much more focused on private LTC insurance products. While many industry-based sources of information exist, LTC.com was selected for evaluation: this resource has been identified through a search engine with keywords “long term care insurance,” chosen

² See Appendix B on how to navigate the website to find the information discussed in this section.

based on the “.com” URL pointing to its commercial affiliation and because the site is not specific to any insurance company, which gives the consumer a broader sense of the market options available. Several other sources of information stemming from the for-profit market are available and easily found through search engines.

LTC.com is affiliated with the National Health Administrators, which describes itself as “a corporate insurance agency specializing in long-term care insurance” and a “marketer specializing in the distribution of long-term care insurance to endorsing associations” (National Health Administrators, 2007). LTC.com is the agency’s educational arm that promotes itself as “long term care insurance specialists.” While the website provides a wide range of LTC related information, this paper will focus on what it offers concerning LTC financial planning education. First, the website allows the consumer to obtain general information about LTC financing: in the education center of the website, one can learn that health insurance, disability insurance, and government programs such as Medicare do not usually cover LTC services. The three financing options presented are “Cash, Medicaid, and Insurance.” The discussion about out-of-pocket payments appears incomplete and biased: the description of the cash option is very short and does not include any specifics about savings, assets, or reverse mortgages, but instead attempts to dissuade the consumer from the option by only presenting the disadvantages such as the risk of not being able to leave an inheritance. The description of the Medicaid option is also biased: while the website raises important questions about access and quality issues facing Medicaid beneficiaries, it does so in a subjective manner: the resource states that “the facilities that accept Medicaid patients are generally not as nice as private-pay nursing homes” (LTC.com). There is also no mention of other federal programs such as veterans’ benefits or the Federal Long-Term Care Insurance Program (FLTCIP) for federal employees and their qualified relatives. In

contrast, information about LTC insurance plans, such as the types of services covered and tax considerations, can be found extensively on LTC.com. *The website also provides a list of compelling reasons why one should consider purchasing LTCI, but no list of limitations.*

Therefore, the educational material presented in *this web resource demonstrates a significant bias toward LTC insurance* as the best solution for LTC financial planning. Furthermore, the website is not comprehensive: it does not discuss most potential sources of funding outlined above. Since companies promoting long-term care insurance wish to increase take-up of their products, they have no incentive to educate consumers about other financial planning options such as relying on Medicaid, or turning towards personal savings and reverse mortgages. Nevertheless, even if this resource appears biased, the LTC insurance information it presents appears credible and trustworthy: LTC.com is a member of the Better Business Bureau, as indicated by the logo displayed on the homepage.

The LTC.com website is easy to read and navigate: the education center link is clearly displayed at the top of the page, the topics are subsequently broken down into specific questions such as “what does LTCI cover” and “what to look for in a good policy,” allowing consumers to quickly identify salient questions and to find rapid and targeted answers. In addition, consumers can obtain a free rate comparison and buyer’s guide, but doing so requires one’s name, address, and phone number. Although the company assures that personal information will not be divulged to a third party without consent, some individuals who wish to obtain a financial assessment of their LTC needs may not want to be identified. It also appears that the information cannot be obtained immediately, but comes from a mailing. Nevertheless, LTC.com provides a hotline phone number to answer questions in a more timely manner. Thus, simple browsing of the website does not provide any type of customized education, but *LTC.com does offer possibilities*

for more customized LTCI rate information through entry of personal information and receipt of a personalized mailing or through speaking to a counselor on the phone. Neither option, however, can be pursued in anonymity, which is a limitation of this source of information. Overall, LTC.com is easy to navigate, contains a wealth of information biased toward LTCI, but lacks sufficient discussion of other means of financing LTC services, and requires consumers to reveal personal information in order to obtain more customized answers.

Information from Non-Profit Organizations: AARP.org³

In addition to government resources and websites affiliated with for-profit corporations, non-profit groups representing the interests of specific populations may offer educational tools for consumers. Many older Americans turn to the AARP for information relating to life after retirement: the AARP describes itself as “a nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization for people age 50 and over” (AARP.org). This resource includes a “guide to long-term care” that contains various aspects of LTC planning such as advice on housing options and information about costs of services. The website presents a succinct yet informative overview of sources of funding for LTC services without favoring certain options over others: under “Who Pays?” the consumer can read about public programs (Medicare, Medicaid, state programs, Veteran’s Affairs), and private options (voluntary and faith-based organizations, LTCI, personal savings and assets, reverse mortgages, continuing care retirement communities, life insurance, annuities and trusts). Thus, this portion of *AARP.org provides a comprehensive and balanced description of financial planning opportunities for consumers seeking LTC*. Because of the AARP’s wide membership and history, and the lack of apparent bias in the language used to present the financing options, this source of information appears trustworthy. *The website also provides additional information concerning the more complex financial options such as LTC insurance*

³ See Appendix B on how to navigate the website to find the information discussed in this section.

and reverse mortgages to increase consumer awareness and to help potential purchasers determine whether those choices are appropriate.

The website contains *two interesting interactive features relating to LTC financial planning: a “long-term care cost calculator” and a “reverse mortgage calculator.”* The first tool, the LTC cost calculator, accounts for expenditures relating to living arrangement (e.g. nursing home, assisted living facility, or home health aid). The clear statements of the sources of cost information lends credibility to the tool: the estimates were generated based on “average costs for the markets surveyed in the MetLife Survey of Nursing Homes and Home Care Costs (September, 2006) and the MetLife Market Survey of Assisted Living Costs (October, 2006).” HHA rates come from agencies themselves. The consumer simply chooses among three housing options, assisted living, nursing home, or home health aide, indicate his or her state of residence, and the length of service needed (per year for AL and nursing home, and per hour for HHA) to obtain the desired cost estimate. Although this tool is easy to use, necessitates little personal information, and provides rapid and informative results, it has limitations since the cost estimate does not encompass other LTC expenditures such as the cost of renovating a home to accommodate mobility needs and does not take into account other home and community-based alternatives.

As the consumer gathers more information about reverse mortgages, he or she may wish to determine how much funds would be available to them through that option. The AARP reverse mortgage calculator can provide such estimates: it requires information about the owners’ month and year of birth, the monetary value of the property, and the ZIP code, but no other personal information. The tool produces loan estimates instantaneously: it provides the consumer the approximate amount of cash he or she would obtained through two national reverse

mortgage programs, and includes background information and caveats to convey the complexity of such financial planning option to the consumer. This tool is simple to use, produces rapid results, and does not compromise the user's anonymity. *However, the results are general estimates and the consumer would need more information about many other factors before determining whether reverse mortgage is a sound option to finance LTC needs. This reverse mortgage calculator can potentially be useful in conjunction with other types of educational tools that provide information about how the numbers may impact the consumers' receipt of care.*

Because the AARP seeks to inform Americans over 50 about a continuum of issues related to aging, retirement, health care, and other topics of interest, it lacks focus when it comes to promoting LTC resources. The reader may be distracted by the numerous advertisements around the website or the sometimes overwhelming amount of other educational material ranging from advice on retirement financial planning to ideas for travel and leisure. Furthermore, all the resources pertaining to LTC are not found in one place: one finds general information about payers for LTC in a guide that cannot be easily accessed from the main AARP.org webpage (but can be found through a search engine), and additional tools, such as the reverse mortgage calculator, are found by navigating several pages away from the long-term care guide. Thus, the successful consumer seeking LTC financial planning information on the AARP website should be a savvy user who already has an idea about what type of information he or she needs or is able to connect and synthesize information from various portion of the website. For instance, the reverse mortgage calculator alone may be useful for a consumer who is already familiar with the financing option and is wondering about the amount of resources she could derive from it, but

may not be informative at all to a consumer who is unaware of reverse mortgages and may even be a source of confusion or frustration.

Information from an Individual Certified LTC Consultant: Duane Lipham⁴

Faced with the daunting task of locating and navigating through numerous sources of information, many individuals prefer to refer to a person they know and trust, such as an acquaintance or family member who has had relevant past experiences or exposures to LTC services, to obtain information and resources about LTC financial planning. When such connection is lacking, however, some consumers may prefer to consult *an individual specialist with whom they can relate and interact*, rather than an impersonal corporate resource or a large organization that cannot provide such personalized relationship. Since the World Wide Web encourages the free sharing of information, some knowledgeable individuals have offered their personal expertise online in the form of a blog recording personal experiences and reflections or in a self-maintained website. Duane Lipham, a certified long term care consultant from Arizona, is the author of such an online resource: he has created a “Long Term Care Consumer Guide,” which consists of a LTC review *blog* and an informational website focusing on LTC and Medicare. Lipham’s credentials as a certified consultant and his claimed experiences with LTC give him credibility, but a close inspection of his website shows a clear bias toward LTCI. Indeed, he does not discuss the scope of funding opportunities in a comprehensive manner, and the content of the website focuses primarily on information relating to LTCI. In his blog, Lipham writes about a variety of LTC-related topics such as “tips for choosing a nursing home” and “what are adult day care centers,” but a significant portion of his reflections are about LTC insurance. *His LTC website also showcases LTCI more heavily than other financing options.* In his discussion of sources of funding for LTC, he outlines 4 options: Medicaid, Medicare,

⁴ See Appendix B on how to navigate the website to find the information discussed in this section.

private insurance, and personal resources, but only discusses the private insurance option at length. Although he provides many descriptive resources pertaining to the Medicare program, this program is not an option to fund LTC services. In addition, he does not mention possibilities such as reverse mortgages and Veterans' benefits, which might be appropriate for some consumers. Overall, Lipham's online guide appears credible, but the consumer should be aware of his clear bias toward the private insurance industry. Although he claims to offer advice because of his personal experiences with LTC, he also has financial incentives to promote LTCI.

One special feature on Lipham's website is the *option to request personalized LTCI quotes and Medicare supplement quotes, but the consumer must send him personal details such as name, address, birth date, and health status to obtain specific quotes*. No estimate or range is provided. While this option may be appropriate for some consumers who are at later stages of financial planning (e.g. consumers who have already probed all available options and have opted to hire a consultant to assist them with procuring an insurance product), it limits others who may not wish to divulge personal information to another individual before knowing more about their needs and preferences. The layout of the information on the website is user-friendly: the menus are clear within each broad category such as "long term care" and "Medicare," but the overall design may be confusing to consumers because links lead to new tabs rather than staying embedded within the same window. As a result, users reading about one topic may lose perspective about other resources the website offers.

Highlights and Critical Analysis

The four sources of information on LTC financial planning outlined here represent a small sample of the wide range of resources available on the World Wide Web, but comprise many features that are found elsewhere. Common features include general descriptions of

financing options, interactive tools of varying usefulness that provide estimates of expenditure over time such as a “long term care calculator,” and the ability to request personalized consultation with experts and/or LTCI quotes. Among the four analyzed resources, Medicare.gov presents LTC financing information in the most credible, comprehensive, unbiased, and user-friendly manner. The AARP resource, although it is trustworthy, informative, and includes interesting interactive features, was harder to navigate because LTC information was more scattered and the sheer amount of information pertaining to issues other than LTC can become a source of distraction. The Medicare.gov resource, however, lacks specific information about LTCI for instance, that websites sponsored by private industry can provide. Both LTC.com and Duane Lipham’s personal blog are heavily biased toward LTCI, but consumers who are willing to reveal personal information can obtain customized information such as individual insurance quotes. ***The results of this systematic review suggest that a successful educational tool should at least include unbiased and complete information about all financing options, but should also incorporate interactive features and more information that is applicable on an individual basis.***

Several observations emerge from the analysis of this initial inventory of educational resources and may be incorporated in the process of designing a comprehensive, unbiased, accessible, and informative LTC financial planning educational tool. First, ***although interactive tools have the potential to engage the consumer and to provide customized information tailored to the individual, they cannot be provided without extensive background resources detailing the origin of the data used to generate the results and explaining the significance of the results for the various types of consumers.*** Indeed, individuals seeking LTC differ in income level, personal assets, family circumstances and access to informal care, functional needs,

preferences, cultural and religious background, among many other distinguishing features. Given all these differences, it would be very challenging to design an interactive tool that does not require consumers to reveal personal information, and yet provides targeted answers.

Nevertheless, *well-crafted questionnaires grounded on empirical data gathered from users with similar characteristics (such as the one provided on Medicare.gov) can focus the information for consumers without compromising their privacy*. On the other hand, an interactive tool that exists in an information vacuum gives the user a false sense of knowledge and preparedness. An example of an unsuccessful interactive tool is the Long Term Care Calculator provided by mindyourfinances.com, a website “offered by the InCharge® Education Foundation, Inc., as a resource to enhance the financial wellness of the American public” (Mind Your Finances, 2008). Although this calculator provides the definitions of the variables it utilizes (estimated daily cost, years of care, inflation rate, funds currently available), this tool is oversimplified and is not accompanied by additional information about LTC services, costs across types of services, and private and public sources of funding. The only valuable information one can extract from this tool is a sense of the astronomical costs of LTC, which can be all the more daunting without additional information about how to fund anticipated needs. Studies about consumer perception have suggested that “comprehension of information is a limiting factor in its usefulness,” so no tool or resources should exist on its own without sufficient supporting information (Cleary and Edgman-Levitan, 1997).

A second observation concerns the accessibility of educational resources: *even well-organized and comprehensive information may not reach consumers*. Some of the resources discussed in this inventory (Lipham’s personal blog, LTC.com, AARP’s guide to long term care) were found through search engines (e.g. Google.com) and may not be readily found by all

consumers. What solutions exist to help the public identify sources of information about LTC? Cleary and Edgman-Levitan point out that “effective dissemination and use of information may depend on accepted channels of communication and opinion leaders.” Thus, even though institutional resources (e.g. from a large non-profit organization or a government agency) may seem impersonal, *the groups sponsoring them can use their reputation to attract consumers.* Feldman and colleagues (2001) report that “organizations such as the AARP Public Policy Institute, that establish a clear identity, or ‘brand,’ by demonstrating a commitment to effective [information] brokering over the long haul, ... are a recognizable and reliable source of information for certain identifiable subject areas.” Thus, nationally recognized organizations or government agencies could serve as identifiable information brokers for individuals seeking LTC financial planning advice. While the erroneous public belief that Medicare covers LTC needs for its beneficiaries must be corrected with appropriate educational tools, this misconception can actually be exploited to that end. Because many believe Medicare covers LTC, these individuals might be more likely to consult the Medicare.gov website for information related to LTC services. The website could host a comprehensive array of easily accessible information about LTC financial planning and point people in the right direction. Institutional resources can therefore serve as starting points and provide a broad foundation of knowledge about LTC.

Thirdly, Lipham’s long-term care consumer guide, a clearly biased resource, is able to derive some credibility from his claim of LTC knowledge through personal experiences: this suggests that formal resources may lack a much needed human dimension that could enhance information dissemination. “One of the most common findings from consumer research is that people want information from people “like them,” but current resources from Medicare.gov for instance may appear remote and impersonal to the average consumer (Cleary and Edgman-

Levitan, 1997). *Government agency-sponsored websites could consider adding consumer perspectives – personal reflections about LTC financial planning experiences – to their online resources.* Narratives and thoughts about one’s encounters with LTC and ways of financing such services could be grouped in a discussion forum or excerpts could be included in a sub-section of the website dedicated to LTC. *These personal reflections would be biased and subjective, as they are expected to be, and they would complement empirical data with individual experiences to reflect the diversity of LTC needs, services, costs, and financing options.*

Where To Go From Here?

Planning for LTC services can be an overwhelming task filled with uncertainties about risks, services, and costs. Appropriate sources of information could relieve some anxiety and guide consumers in their planning. This paper presents findings from a systematic review of online resources representing four different types of stakeholders: a certified long-term care consultant, a non-profit organization, the private insurance industry, and a government agency. Each website’s special features were highlighted and each resource was evaluated based on the criteria of credibility, bias, comprehensiveness of funding options discussed, and ease of use from a potential consumer’s perspective. The observations stemming from this inventory of educational resources may contribute to the design process of an online reference for people seeking information about LTC financial planning on a state or local level. On the federal level, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has recently launched the “National Clearinghouse for Long-Term Care Information” website as a part of a national awareness campaign on LTC planning. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008)

Nevertheless, despite the heightened focus on information dissemination, “we do not know who

uses this information and whether, or how, it informs or influences consumer decision-making” (Mor, 2005). How can we assess impact on consumers and utilize these findings to create effective educational tools? The Yale University School of Public Health and the University of Connecticut Health Center have produced a Focused Report on LTC Financial Planning based on interviews and focus groups with Connecticut residents: this report includes “insights into concerns, motivations, preferences, and expectations of Connecticut residents regarding paying for long-term care” (Curry et al., 2008). This type of study, based on direct public involvement, would complement empirical research on consumer behavior. Soliciting consumer feedback on their needs and use of available sources of information may be the next step to improve the quality of educational resources and to refine them according to consumer needs and preferences.

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Appendix A: Summary Table of Evaluated Web Resources

Sources of Information	Public Domain: Medicare.gov	Private Sector: LTC.com	Non-Profit: AARP.org	Duane Lipham's Long Term Care Consumer Guide: Itcconsumerguide.com
	Does this resource appear credible and trustworthy?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Does this resource present any apparent bias toward some financing options?	No	Yes, in particular toward long-term care insurance.	No	Yes, in particular toward long-term care insurance.
Does this resource discuss a comprehensive range of financing options?	Yes	No, lacks details about savings, assets, reverse mortgages, and other similar options.	Yes	No, lack information about using personal resources and Medicaid.
Considering its overall layout and navigation capabilities, is this resource relatively easy to use?	Yes	Yes	Somewhat problematic, needs improvement on consolidating LTC-related information into one central page.	Somewhat problematic, needs improvement on making all the choices available while browsing and on keeping it all in the same window.
What are some special features, if any, and what are their limitations?	An overview table presents a wide range of financing options for the reader to consider collectively; an interactive Long-Term	Consumers can obtain a free rate comparison and buyer's guide in the mail, but only after submitting some personal information.	An interactive long-term care cost calculator and a reverse mortgage calculator are available, but these tools are simplified and the	The consumer may request personalized LTCI quotes and Medicare supplement quotes, but must provide personal information.

	<p>Care Planning Tool helps narrow down financing options based on consumers' responses to a brief questionnaire (which does not require the individual to submit information to a third party or to reveal his or her identity), but does not produce outcomes completely tailored to that individual.</p>		<p>consumer is expected to know how to interpret the results to make these tools useful. No personal information is required.</p>	
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Appendix B: Accessing the Representative Sources of Information

Medicare.gov

Once on Medicare.gov, bring the mouse over “Long-Term Care” in the menu to the left and choose “Paying for Long-Term Care” to access the description of the LTC financing options. Clicking on the “Overview” tab brings up the summary table. The Long-Term Care Planning Tool is found from the main website by bringing the mouse over “Long-Term Care” in the menu to the left and choosing “Long-Term Care Planning Tool.”

LTC.com

Simply access ltc.com and click on “Education Center” in the top menu. Once there, choose “Who Pays for LTC” from the list to the left for the site’s listing of various LTC financing options (incomplete). Detailed information on long-term care insurance is also found in the Education Center. To obtain a LTCI rate comparison and a Buyer’s Guide, the consumer finds the form to fill out under “Free Rate Comparison” in the top menu.

AARP.org

General long-term care information can be found from AARP.org → Health (top menu) → Long-Term Care (top sub-menu), but more appropriate resources about financing can be accessed through its Guide to Long-Term Care, difficult to find through its main website but easily reached by searching “AARP guide to long-term care” at Google.com and clicking on the first search result. Once there, clicking on the “What Does Long-term Care Cost? Who Pays?” link brings the consumer to a listing of LTC financing options. The reverse mortgage calculator can be found in the “tools” box to the left of the “money” page (accessed from the top menu). The long-term care cost calculator can be located from the main website AARP.org → Family (top menu) → Caregiving → scroll down and look inside the tools box on the left under the “State Average Caregiving Costs” heading.

Duane Lipham’s Long Term Care Consumer Guide: ltconsumerguide.com

The main website links to general information and his blog about LTC. Click on “My Long Term Care Website” to find his descriptions of financing options under “Long-Term Care Information” from the top menu. Consumers can find the form to request LTCI quotes under “Long-Term Care Quote” from the top menu.