



NEED

In a 2016 Innovations in Aging report, Colorado Springs Mayor John Suthers wrote, “We have ... confirmed that it is extremely important to the residents of Colorado Springs that they remain independent in their own homes as they age.” In this, Colorado Springs residents have plenty of company. According to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), 87 percent of Americans who are 65-plus want to age in place.

What we don’t have is accessible housing that will make this possible.

How many local homes can you think of that contain a no-step entry, living space all on one floor, switches and outlets at easily reachable heights, wide hallways and doors, and lever-style door handles and faucets? Chances are, not many — if any. According to Harvard University’s Joint Center for Housing Studies, only about one percent of U.S. homes in 2014 contained these five accessibility features.

These features, and others like them, are included under the umbrella of “universal design” (UD), a way of structuring a living environment so that it’s usable not only by seniors, but by all people. That includes people who live with disabilities, a demographic making up 12 percent of the El Paso County population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

If you’re not part of this demographic today, you very well may be someday. Americans are living to an average age of 79, and as we age, chronic health conditions often affect our senses and/or our mobility. In fact, Census data show that nearly 40 percent of those 65-plus report having some kind of disability.

Universal design — also called inclusive design, barrier-free design, or design-for-all — accommodates residents who live with these issues. But it also helps people without disabilities welcome aging visitors or take in loved ones with disabilities. It allows people to return home faster when recovering from acute medical conditions. And it makes home life easier for young families.

In short, universal design is not just sensitive design, but sensible design. And there needs to be more of it.

THE BACKGROUND

Since its birth in the 1950s, no list of specifications or standards has defined universal design. Instead, seven core principles have.

Equitable use: The design does not disadvantage or stigmatize any group of users.

Flexibility in use: The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.

Simple, intuitive use: Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.

Perceptible information: The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.

Tolerance for error: The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.

Low physical effort: The design can be used efficiently and comfortably, and with a minimum of fatigue.

Size and space for approach and use: Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use, regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility.

(For more, visit theindependencecenter.org/universal-design-in-architecture.)

It's easy to see why those with mobility disabilities aren't alone in appreciating UD. In home architecture, the same 36-inch doorways that accommodate wheelchairs also allow for easy intake of furniture. In home finishing, a lever door handle helps someone with arthritis, but also someone carrying groceries. Anti-scald faucets, grab bars, and varying countertop heights assist small children.

Unfortunately, features like these are not industry standard, and according to Marla Novak of the Colorado Springs Housing and Building Association, production home builders rarely are asked to incorporate them into new builds. Larry Gilland of Colorado Springs-based LGA Studios adds that without consumer demand, those home builders aren't likely to introduce such features themselves, since they generally seek to keep costs down across hundreds of homes.

Meanwhile, at the federal level, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not mandate a base level of accessibility in

single-family homes. And local lawmakers are unlikely to prioritize housing accessibility while housing affordability remains critical. **So, it is up to consumers to push universal design.**

THE CALL TO ACTION

There are several ways to advance UD concepts and/or home accessibility locally.

Get educated and share what you learn. Follow the organizations below, each of which generates newsletters and shareable content on social media.

- The Institute for Human-Centered Design (humancentereddesign.org) advances "the role of design in expanding opportunity and enhancing experience for people of all ages, abilities, and cultures." Its website houses a resource library, news clips, and more.
- The Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access at the University at Buffalo (IDeA Center, idea.ap.buffalo.edu) leads research and public education efforts around UD.
- The AARP (aarp.org) posts resources related to home accessibility. In particular, its HomeFit Guide goes room by room to highlight accessibility ideas.

When building or buying, prioritize UD features. While other design movements remain better known, UD principles are gaining traction, especially in custom home building. So if you're in position to build a house, find a builder who knows universal design. Short of that, tell your building team that accessibility is important to you.

Gilland notes that home builders many times feel that ADA Standards apply to all new construction. But while these

regulations are common in commercial buildings, they generally do not apply to most single-family homes. The Fair Housing Act Design Manual, California's New Home Universal Design Option Checklist, and the aforementioned AARP HomeFit Guide all outline many simple universal design principles that can be achieved with relatively modest effort and expense.

As for buying an existing home, search nar.realtor for Realtors with "At Home with Diversity" certification. These Realtors have learned basic competencies for working with diverse clients, including those with disabilities. Local RE/MAX Properties Realtor Tyra Sandoval advocates going one step further and asking Realtor candidates how they might research housing with accessibility features.

It's possible within local MLS listings to search for homes with accessible bathrooms and kitchens, hand rails, ramps, and elevators — but Sandoval notes that not all listing agents check those boxes appropriately. Your Realtor should be willing to call ahead to ask about the specs of any home that catches your interest. "Honestly," she says, "it shouldn't be that much more difficult than looking for a house with a view. You just have to find someone with the compassion to spend that little bit of extra time to find the right property."

If you're not looking for a new home, add accessibility features to your existing home. Novak says that most HBA-member remodelers (and some builders) hold a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) designation, having completed a three-day course that addresses accessibility design, construction, and marketing. When updating, you can seek remodelers with a CAPS designation or call the HBA for recommendations.

While making an existing home fully UD

can be costly, adding certain accessibility features doesn't have to be. Jason McCullough of Brothers Redevelopment says a professional may charge \$300 to \$350 to replace a conventional 14-inch toilet with a 17-inch, ADA-compliant version. Installing grab bars properly can be done for \$100 to \$150. Many people can install single-handle faucets or lever door handles on their own.

For those of limited means, financial help is available. Novak notes that the HBA provides some accessibility modifications through its "HBA Cares" philanthropic arm. On a larger scale, Brothers administers a federally funded program locally.

Qualifying applicants must earn less than 50 percent of the area's median income; for a household of two in 2018, that meant a \$31,100 limit. (A loan option exists for those who earn slightly more and live outside of city limits in El Paso County.) Modifications to any one property can amount to \$24,999 in value, and can include roll- or step-in shower conversions, door widening, and/or carpet-to-solid-surface upgrades for wheelchair mobility.

In Colorado Springs, a total of \$500,000 for modifications is available annually, with homeowners and renters eligible. In the county, \$75,000 is available to homeowners. Modifications are made on a first-qualified, first-served basis. Those interested may contact Brothers at (719) 666-7181.

We can't make our housing stock more accessible overnight. But by broaching the topic with remodelers, Realtors, builders, and others, we can improve our own individual situations while moving our community in the right direction. When it comes to accessibility, what Novak says of prospective home building clients is also true of the rest of us: "It's important to know they can ask."

WHO

DOES THE IC HELP?

For people with disabilities who want more independence, The Independence Center (The IC) can walk with them on their journey to achieve their goals.

We serve people with disabilities in El Paso, Cheyenne, Kit Carson, Lincoln, Park and Teller counties. Services vary from county to county.

WHAT

TYPES OF DISABILITIES?



ABOUT

THE IC

Started in 1987, The Independence Center is a local nonprofit organization that provides traditional and self-directed home health care, independent living, and veterans' and advocacy services for people with disabilities. These services range from providing peer support, skills classes, and employment assistance to individual and systems advocacy. In addition, The IC runs a Certified Nurse Aide training program to equip the area with qualified CNAs.

The IC has over 300 employees today, with over 51% of their Center for Independent Living staff and board having a disability.



HOME HEALTH CARE

The IC offers home health care that is skilled and unskilled, self directed or physician-directed, for all ages, and with the caregiver of your choice or an employee of The IC.

CNA TRAINING

The Independence Center's CNA Training Program offers day and evening classes to become a qualified Certified Nurse Aide.

People with disabilities
building community
THE INDEPENDENCE CENTER