

## Aging in place: A house is just a tool for living

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by Eileen Beal

Eighty-three-year-old Julia J. Berkowitz (\* this is a pseudonym ) is a widow who lives alone in her large Cleveland Heights ranch. "She's determined to stay where she is," explained her niece Jean, "so we're modifying the house-with grab-bars in the bathroom, railings at the front door, a smoke alarm in the kitchen-to make it fit her needs."

According to a recent American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) survey, which said that "83% of those over the age of 50 want to age in place in their present home," Julia Berkowitz's "modified" home will soon be the norm.

### **Planning for the future...today**

Elderly people are getting in-home assessments-by social service organizations or occupational therapists-that zero in on "aging in place" problems and suggest solutions. "When you identify the barriers to living independently in a particular home...the battle is half won," explains Lynne Kearns, vice president for housing and campus development at Benjamin Rose Institute.

Few solutions require costly structural changes or modifications. Most, in fact, are quick and easy fixes. For instance, says Debbie Arntz-Hileman, a housing specialist with the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging, "Just taking up scatter rugs and putting brighter light bulbs in the bathroom or kitchen or hall helps people with mobility and vision problems."

Also, product availability has caught up with demand. "Products aren't just available, they are nicely made-not institutional looking like they used to be-and reasonably priced, too," says builder-contractor Christine Perkins, head of The Construction Team, Inc. in Chesterland, Ohio.

"Catalogs are good sources for things," she adds, "but so is the home safety section at your local hardware or do-it-yourself store."

### **Small changes = big payoffs**

In most cases, to get the accessibility, accommodation, and adaptability needed for aging in place, you need to open up existing space. "That allows people to move through the home using the shortest route and with the least expenditure of energy," says Kearns.

To create both the illusion and the reality of space, remove doors. Where they can't be removed-for security or privacy-replace their knobs with levered handles.

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Also, remove scatter rugs-"They are visual clutter and cause falls," explains Arntz-Hileman-and reconfigure room furnishings so furniture isn't a barrier to mobility and traffic flow. In high-use areas, replace low watt light bulbs with high watt ones.

The rooms that need the most work to make them accessible and accommodating-"Especially in older homes in older neighborhoods, which is where many people want to remain," says Arntz-Hileman-are the bathroom and the kitchen. Bathrooms gain space with over-the toilet shelves and by replacing the door with a curtain or reversing the door on its hinges so it swings outward. Adding a swing-in-swing-out-seat; grab bars; and a hand-held shower head makes bathing safer and easier.

To make the kitchen more user-friendly, says Valley View-based kitchen design specialist Scott Herceg, put the microwave oven at eye- and reach-level; replace cabinet hardware with U-shaped door and drawer pulls; and add lazy Susans in cupboards and refrigerators.

Will making a home accessible, accommodating and adaptable deter others from purchasing it when it comes time to sell?

No, says Perkins. "With the trend I see today," she says, "they are probably going to be a major selling point."

### **Sources and Resources for in-home "aging in place" assessments:**

Many hospital and/or nursing home therapy departments have occupational and physical therapists who do in-home assessments. Most local Offices on Aging have employees trained to go into a home to do an initial assessment. So do the following

(Note: all phone numbers checked with a call):

Catholic Charities Services (216) 631-3499 ext. 2112

Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center (216) 231-8787 (hearing/speech/communication only)

Cleveland Sight Center (216) 791-8118 (vision only)

Innovative Designs and Environments for an Aging Society (IDEAS) (440) 256-1880

Jewish Family Service Association (216) 378-3466

Meehan and Associates (216) 921-4372

Services for Independent Living (216) 731-1529

Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging (800) 626-7277 (free in-home assessment)

## **Books and pamphlets**

*Building for a Lifetime: The Design and Construction of Fully Accessible Homes*

Margaret Wylde, Adrian Barron-Robbins, Sam Clark

*The Comfort of Home: An Illustrated Step-by-Step Guide for Caregivers*

Maria M. Meyer, Paula Derr, RN

*Universal Kitchen and Bathroom Planning: Design That Adapts to People*

Mary Jo Peterson

"The Do-Able Renewable Home: Making Your Home Fit Your Needs," "Your Home, Your Choice," and "Universal Design and Home Modification"

All are available free from: American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), Fulfillment Department, 601 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20049. (Note: They do not want their phone number used.)

## **Catalogs:**

Sears' Health Care Catalog 800-326-1750

Sammons and Preston's Enrichments Catalog 800-323-5547

Functional Solutions 800-277-6826

Annual Directory of Accessible Building Products 800-638-8556

Independent Living Aids 800-537-2118

SelfCare Catalog 800-345-3371

Sharing the Caring Catalog 800-454-6612

The Lighthouse Catalogue (low vision items) 800-829-0500

## **WWW sites:**

[www.abledata.com](http://www.abledata.com)

ABLEDATA Database of Assistive Technology (excellent in-home do-it-yourself assessment list)

[www.design.ncsu.edu/cud](http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud)

Center for Universal Design, University of North Carolina (good articles, excellent in-home do-it-yourself assessment information)

[www.nahb.org/resourceguide/resources.asp?mode=view&item=9&cat=DC&sub=19](http://www.nahb.org/resourceguide/resources.asp?mode=view&item=9&cat=DC&sub=19)

Annual Directory of Accessible Building Products (excellent resource!)

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[www.oznet.ksu.edu/ctid/udf](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/ctid/udf)

Kansas State University's Universal Design Facility (excellent information and in-home do-it-yourself assessment information)