

BARRIER-FREE BUILDING; LIFEWISE HOUSE SHOWS THE INDUSTRY HOW TO MAKE ACCESS EASIER FOR ALL AGES

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BOWIE, MD.- At first glance, the house at 16218 Pennsbury Drive seems unremarkable. In fact, the neighbors are surprised at how well it fits into this bedroom community about 20 miles due east from the nation's capital.

But a closer look reveals some surprising and unusual details. Handrails disguised as chair molding, for example. Contrasting borders in flooring and around counter tops. A microwave that's reachable from a seated position. A flush doorway with no step-up. Stair rails you can latch on to. Welcome to the house for all ages. But more important, it is a 1,900-square-foot home for folks who are moving through the later stages of life and would rather stay put than move to another place better designed and equipped to handle the infirmities that are part and parcel to old age.

It's called the LifeWise House, and it's been built by the NAHB Research Center to show builders they don't have to go to great lengths -- or great expense -- to erect houses their owners can remain in for their entire lives.

"Not everything in the house is 100 percent accessible," says Charlotte Wade, a senior research analyst at the Research Center. "But it's pretty much totally adjustable so someone can live with it as their conditions change."

Which is, of course, what the research says most people want.

Despite the rush of seniors leaving the harsh winters behind for the warmer climes of Florida, Arizona, Southern California and places in between, survey after study finds that the majority of people -- 90 percent of people age 65 or older, according to the latest AARP figures -- would prefer to remain in their homes for as long as possible.

Unfortunately, those who develop disabilities that limit their daily activities will find it difficult, if not impossible, to stay put because most houses being built today are not designed or equipped to accommodate changes in physical abilities.

The LifeWise house is not a senior's house, at least not per se. In fact, its 1 1/2-story layout is not a traditional senior's design. But it is senior-friendly, and it is just what the doctor ordered, says Terre Belt, acting president of the Research Center, a place that facilitates the ability of older adults "to live comfortably, safely and independently in their homes as they age."

William Stothers, deputy director for the Center for an Accessible Society in San Diego, is encouraged. "Hopefully," he says, "builders will begin to see this as a market whose time has come."

During the next 18 years, the number of people 65 or older will increase by more than 50 percent, rising from 35 million in 2000 to 54 million by 2020.

Historically, builders haven't perceived a need for even the basics of accessibility -- an entrance without a step, at least one accessible bathroom on the first floor and doorways that are 36 inches wide on the main living level.

In fact, Stothers says, builders have been opposed to universal design, or "visitability," as the movement is becoming known, arguing that the market doesn't want it.

But Concrete Change, a nonprofit organization in Decatur, Ga., dedicated to making all homes barrier-free, points out that the people who need these features "often have their need emerge suddenly after an illness or injury and are in no position to advocate for their needs on the market."

On its Web site, concretechange.home.mindspring.com, Concrete Change says legislation is necessary to affect the status quo successfully -- not just measures like the one passed in Georgia in 1978, which encouraged builders to make the necessary changes voluntarily, but laws that force builders to do so. "Once [accessibility features] are required, they will become routine," the site says.

Some jurisdictions already have enacted such ordinances.

Normally, local accessibility requirements apply only to single-family houses subsidized with local funds. But Florida passed a law in 1989 requiring that main-floor bathroom doors be wide enough to accommodate standard wheelchairs.

Last year, Pima County, Arizona, became the first place in the country to require a zero-step

entry among other features in all new houses in the unincorporated county.

Similar laws are under consideration in Santa Monica, Calif., and Pittsburgh. At the national level, U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky**, D-Ill., introduced a bill last year that would require all new homes receiving federal funds to meet the three standards of accessibility.

"It defies logic to build new homes that block people out," says **Schakowsky**, noting that three out of 10 people will face a disability before they are 67.

But legislation may not be necessary, suggests Andrew Kochera, a senior policy adviser at AARP in Washington, who says builders are beginning to pay attention to the demographics.

"Overall," Kochera says, "builders are very cognizant of the large generation of baby boomers" that is approaching senior status. "And many are now trying to maneuver themselves to have a product that is attractive to this group."