

National Center for Seniors' Housing Research

Executive Summary



Introduction

Remodelers and aging professionals have been concerned with improving the delivery of home modification services to older adults. Because many older consumers are not familiar with their remodeling options, they may not receive the most practical and cost effective home modifications.

To address these issues, a roundtable was convened to bring together remodelers, aging professionals, government representatives, and consumers to exchange concerns and to develop strategies for coping with the issues they identified. The roundtable, sponsored by the NAHB Research Center in cooperation with the U.S. Administration on Aging, was convened at the Home Builders Association of Greater Chicago in Lombard, Illinois, just outside of Chicago, on July 27, 2001.

SENIORS AND AMERICA'S HOMES: COST & PRACTICALITY OF HOME MODIFICATIONS

Background

The number and proportion of older people in the United States is increasing at a rapid pace. In 2000, the number of persons ages 65 and older numbered 35 million, and that number is projected to increase to 80 million by 2050 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Surveys continue to show that older Americans want to remain in their homes, but many of their existing homes do not provide safe, comfortable and convenient environments for them as they age. One of the reasons is that many older adults live in houses that were constructed more than 40 years ago, and many of these houses will require home modifications to adapt them to the changing lifestyles of their occupants.

Practical & Cost Considerations - Consumers

Roundtable participants identified several issues that affect older consumers' obtaining the home modifications they need. Many of the concerns identified centered on the need for flexibility, education, and collaboration. For example, lack of knowledge about home modification options was a central theme in the issues identified for consumers. According to participants, many older adults do not see the need for home modification until they are faced with a particular limiting condition. Participants suggested that collaboration between health care professionals, aging professionals, and remodelers in educating consumers is one way to help older adults be prepared should such a need arise in the future.

Lack of flexibility in building codes was another issue discussed as a barrier to the home modification process. According to participants, existing building codes often do not take into account the unique requirements for older consumers and people with disabilities. In the event that time is a factor, when, for example, a consumer is coming home from the hospital, the lack of flexibility in the code process exacerbates the problem. Some older consumers may have to seek other living arrangements if the code approval or waiver process is lengthy.

Several participants emphasized that home modifications were not just for people with mobility limitations. Other types of limitations, such as lower levels of hearing, vision, and mental functioning, are experienced by older adults as well. Further, some modifications that are made for one limitation might be counter-productive for another. Similarly, when considering the



remodeling requirements for people who live in multi-generational households, the needs of all the occupants should be considered — young children as well as older adults.

Practical & Cost Considerations - Remodelers

The key concerns in remodeling for older consumers that were discussed by remodelers centered on communications and profitability. For example, some participants stated that remodeling for older adults is less efficient because the audience is always present while the work is being done. Because of this, the remodeler's work may be slower, and the remodeler has to ensure the safety of the audience as well as the safety of household pets. In addition, older consumers may not always disclose a limitation of a spouse, such as dementia, which can also contribute to a slower work process.

Strategies for Reducing Costs & Increasing Practicality

As preparation for developing strategies, both the consumer group and the remodeler group identified three major areas of concern. Both groups shared concerns for costs — affordability for the consumer group and profitability for remodelers. Both also thought there should be more information and education on the home modification process available to older adults, remodelers, code officials, and manufacturers. The only differences in the major concerns identified were that consumers' had a concern with finding trustworthy contractors, while remodelers had a concern with product availability.

The strategies they identified to address these major concerns fell in the same general categories as the concerns they identified — flexibility, education, and collaboration. In fact, several of the participants made arrangements to meet after the roundtable to discuss how they could work together on initiatives in the future.

Conclusion

Many of the issues discussed were not new issues, according to the moderator, Deborah Adler, NAHB Research Center, but the motivation to work together on initiatives at the grass roots level was. Although the local level is where the most immediate results can be seen, there is also a role for organizations to work together on strategies that have a national impact. Development of a model brochure that could be used by the various states on how to choose a contractor was one such suggestion. However, both local and national initiatives can contribute to making home modifications more affordable and profitable for consumers and remodelers.

Interested in the Full Report?

The full roundtable report is available from the NAHB Research Center's publications department for \$10.00 plus \$5.00 shipping and handling for the first publication and \$1.50 for each additional publication.

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