

National Center for Seniors' Housing Research

Executive Summary



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Introduction

The National Center for Seniors' Housing Research, funded through a cooperative agreement between the NAHB Research Center, Inc. and the U.S. Administration on Aging, convened a building industry roundtable on October 4, 2000 at the NAHB Research Center's facility in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. The goal of the roundtable was to discuss whether certification of products specifically designed to meet the needs of America's aging population would be beneficial, and if so, the scope and measurement criteria that would be appropriate. Manufacturers, home builders, remodelers, aging consultants, interior designers, Aging Network representatives, researchers, and consumers were among the participants.

SENIORS AND AMERICA'S HOMES: CERTIFICATION OF PRODUCTS FOR THE MATURE MARKET

Background

The population in the United States is aging at a rapid pace, and in 2030, the number of people age 65 and older is projected to reach 70 million. Although the majority of older Americans rate their health as good or excellent,¹ normal physiological changes associated with aging may result in declines in certain abilities that make living independently more difficult. Complicating the issue is the age of the housing stock in the United States. In 1995, the median age was 27 years,² and older houses were not designed to accommodate the changing needs of their occupants. Similarly, newly-constructed houses often do not contain the products and features that facilitate aging in place. The obstacle that many builders, remodelers and older adults face, therefore, is identifying the products and technologies designed to make houses convenient for a lifetime. A product certification program has been discussed as a potential method to remove this obstacle.

Overview of the Product Certification Process

Three experts shared their experiences with developing product certification programs. Thomas Kenney, Director of Laboratory Services at the NAHB Research Center, discussed the differences between mandated standards and voluntary standards when certifying products. Kenney explained the process the Research Center uses to evaluate a product and issue a label. A labeling, listing, and follow-up quality assurance verification process for building products, as well as testing for code compliance reports are among the services currently offered by the Research Center. Most products are tested in the Research Center's laboratory.

Dr. Laxman Nayak, Director of the Centre for Applied Gerontology from the University of Birmingham, England, shared his experience in developing a product certification program in his country, which includes feedback about the product, packaging and instructions. An OWL mark is used to symbolize that a product has been reviewed by a group of consumers, "The Thousand Elders." Reviews are based on the Centre's motto: "Design for the young and you exclude the old; design for the old and you include the young." Product evaluations are conducted to mimic real-life situations, either at the University or at the manufacturer's facility, Nayak said.

¹ Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, *Older Americans 2000: Key Indicators of Well-Being*, p. 2, Available from: <http://www.agingstats.gov/chartbook2000/default.htm> [cited August 22, 2000].

² *Improving America's Housing*, (Remodeling Futures Program), Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, pp. 6-7, Available from: <http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/jcenter> [cited June 28, 2000].



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Margaret Wylde, President of ProMatura Group, LLC, a research and consulting firm, described nine product certification programs in which she participated. In all of the programs, consumers were part of the evaluation process. According to Wylde, her research has shown that consumers are willing to pay more if a product carries a seal of any type, but consumers must understand how to use the product.

Developing a Certification Program for the Building Industry

Most roundtable participants acknowledged the need to understand the benefits and uses of products that facilitate aging in place. Consensus was not reached, however, on the merits of a product certification program. The fear of stigmatizing the products by creating a certification program for products geared only to older adults was expressed by several of the participants.

Some participants suggested developing a set of standards or criteria to use as a basis for including products in a centralized data source. According to participants, the criteria used to include products should be sufficiently descriptive so building professionals understand the benefits and uses of the product and broad enough so products that provide comfort and convenience to anyone are included.

Convenience and functionality were seen as key characteristics that contribute to aging in place. Phyllis Madachy, Administrator of the Howard County Area Agency on Aging, referenced Oxo products as an example of products with these characteristics. Oxo manufactures a variety of consumer products, such as peelers, graters, and scrub brushes, with soft handles that facilitate gripping. According to Madachy, Oxo products are widely available in the marketplace, have broad appeal to the general public because of their ease of use, and provide the added functionality that some older adults and others may need because of reduced hand strength.

Suggestions for Future Action

The project that received the most support from the group was expanding the NAHB Research Center's *Directory of Accessible Building Products* to develop a centralized source of information about the benefits and features of products. The following were among additional projects suggested by participants:

- Developing consumer surveys to assess which products older adults think should be standard and which should be optional and to measure their satisfaction with the products and features in the houses they purchase.
- Adding questions on concept and placement of products to the NAHB Research Center's *Annual Builder Practices Survey*.
- Developing a needs analysis form for builders to use to help them correlate specific products to their customers' individual needs.
- Developing an industry-based training program for contractors.
- Providing examples on the Internet of houses with products and features designed to meet the needs of an aging population.
- Determining the impact of products that facilitate aging in place on consumer affordability.

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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