



Making Colorado Springs More Livable for Everyone via Universal Design

People with disabilities
building community
**THE INDEPENDENCE
CENTER**

Need

As El Paso County's population has exploded in recent years, we have heard a lot about two groups fueling this growth: our seniors and our Millennials. With both groups essential to our identity, economy and quality of life, people and institutions across the region have risen up to meet their needs.

And yet, in terms of residential development, Colorado Springs and El Paso County continue to be less than accommodating to both seniors and Millennials — in the same way that they are less than accommodating to people with disabilities.

It's one thing to have a shortage of housing, especially affordable housing, as this region does. It's another to work on addressing that shortage without thinking about the budding concept of universal design, which gives homeowners what they want and this region what it needs.

In housing, universal design (UD) refers to architectural design that accommodates the widest possible demographic. From installation of no-step entrances to placement of electrical receptacles, decisions are guided by principles such as flexibility in use and low physical effort. In affordable UD housing, seniors and people with disabilities can age in place, eliminating a source of great expense and concern from their lives — and an element of housing instability from the market. Meanwhile, Millennials get a chance to enter the housing market and to put down roots in homes that readily accommodate growing families.

With an eye toward easing affordable housing crises and attracting the types of people important to an area's long-term health, forward-thinking government organizations are incentivizing universal design. As the Pikes Peak region braces for massive growth in the next couple of decades, it needs to do the same.



Jeremy Chatelain sits at the no-step entry of his universally designed home

The Background

El Paso County is the fastest-growing county in Colorado. The State Demography Office projects that our current population of 701,000 will balloon to 971,000 in 2040. That's a 39 percent increase.

Meanwhile, the population of residents 65 and older in our region will grow from 88,000 to 160,000 — or 81 percent — during that period.

As the senior population grows, so will the population of people with disabilities, notes a 2014 Housing Needs Assessment from the City of Colorado Springs and El Paso County. Consider: Among local adults 64 and younger, 3.3 percent report a mobility disability and 3.8 report a sensory disability. Among those age 65 and older, both of those figures shoot to 20 percent.

These people have needs that existing housing stock often cannot meet. Part of that, in today's market, is sheer cost: In its report on the first quarter of 2018, the National Association of Realtors identified Colorado Springs as the 25th-most-expensive metropolitan area out of 178 tracked nationally. People on fixed incomes are being priced out of more and more homes.

Their pool of options shrinks further when you realize that many older residential structures in Colorado Springs can't be affordably retrofit for accessibility. "As a

What is Universal Design in Housing?

Universal design is the design of living environments that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without requiring further adaptation or specialized design. In architecture, that might mean 36-inch doorways that allow for easy wheelchair access — and also easy intake of furniture. In home finishing, it might mean a lever door handle that works easily for someone with arthritis — or with an armful of groceries. It is design that allows for people with disabilities to live successfully, and for able-bodied people to live comfortably. It also allows for easy customization as inhabitants' needs change/ evolve.

For more on universal design, please see theindependencecenter.org/universal-design-in-architecture.



LIFEhouse, built by New American Homes in Newport Cove Illinois, is a universally designed concept

result,” the Housing Needs Assessment states, “people with disabilities often are dependent on newly constructed units that are affordable and accessible.”

Frankly, that’s a frightening dependency. Despite the Housing & Building Association of Colorado Springs identifying affordable housing as a top priority, city officials say they expect a deficit of 26,000 affordable units in 2019. The Colorado Springs Housing Authority’s June 2018 wait list for public housing included 1,774 households, including 138 with disabilities. Its wait list for Section 8 housing numbered 1,548 households, including 364 (or 23.5 percent) with disabilities.

At least one more factor amplifies the challenge. As seniors and people with disabilities scramble for housing that is both affordable and accessible (or potentially accessible), they are running into competition from the other booming local demographic: Millennials.

LIFEhouse photos provided by Beth Tauke, University at Buffalo, IDeA Center



According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Millennials in Colorado Springs hit 109,000 in 2015 — a nation-leading 14.7 percent increase since 2010. And they're looking to buy homes: A recent National Association of Realtors survey found that Millennials held the highest share of homebuying activity out of all generations for the fifth consecutive year. All of this supports a prediction of that 2014 housing assessment: "The greatest future affordable

housing needs will be among very young and very old households."

Over time, we are likely to see more multifamily housing locally in response to market pressures. But as in single-home construction, accessibility is currently all but an afterthought in most multifamily housing. The Fair Housing Act requires that only one unit or 5 percent of all units (whichever is greater) in new construction

Universally designed home feature and promote safety and accessibility for all ages while adapting to people throughout the lifetime of the home. The LIFEhouse features 42-inch wide front doors with no-step entry and reachable kitchen appliances for those sitting or standing. All faucets, sinks and cabinets are compatible with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). Features also include accessible baths, special lighting, memory niches, along with handles on doors, and cabinets that are easy to use by everyone.





be accessible to people with mobility disabilities. People with hearing or visual disabilities get either one additional unit or 2 percent of all units.

Universally designed multi-unit housing would answer two of the region's biggest residential needs at once: accessibility and affordability. But even universally designed single-family homes can help thousands of people. And these properties will sell: After all, UD components like anti-scald faucets, grab bars and varying countertop heights can be just as attractive to parents of small children as they are to seniors and others with disabilities.

What's more, universal design features don't have to be expensive. According to the State University of New York at Buffalo's Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access, installing a no-step entrance in a new build adds \$150 in costs; wider interior doors add \$50 per door. For an aging homeowner, this might mean avoiding retrofit costs estimated at \$1,000 for the no-step entrance and \$700 for each doorway. For would-be homebuyers with ambulatory disabilities, these features might mean a chance to remain independent — versus moving into the assisted living sphere, where average monthly costs of more than \$3,500 can quickly send someone on the path to Medicaid eligibility.

Call to Action

This region is facing a relentless housing demand. In coming months and years, in areas from Banning Lewis Ranch to the west side, homebuilders will be working to meet that demand. As they do, policymakers need to incentivize them to embrace universal-design principles.

We are in the enviable position of being able to take a statewide lead on this issue while still learning from best practices outside of Colorado. Take the Virginia Housing Development Authority, which administers low-income housing tax credits. Applications that include universal design receive “points” for doing so — similar to points received for proximity to public transportation, LEED building certification and other development strengths.

Citing “the need to create accessible housing that is usable by all people to the greatest extent possible while maintaining aesthetics and affordability,” VHDA has been incentivizing universal design since 2008. Last year, developers created 1,229 UD units through the authority’s tax credit program. And among the 43 applicants for VHDA tax credits this year, 37 of them are doing universal design. Contrast that to Colorado Springs, where Challenger Homes’ Lori Rhodes knows of only two homebuilders (including Challenger) offering universal design.

We are at a pivotal time. By incentivizing universal design, policymakers can make new development in the Pikes Peak region exponentially more impactful. They can answer more people’s needs for affordability and accessibility. And they can make this a place where all of us — whether Millennial or Boomer, able-bodied or differently abled — truly feel at home.

Universal Design in Colorado



Challenger Homes is a Colorado-based home builder that offers a line of universally designed homes, suitable for people with or without disabilities. Homeowner Jeremy Chatelain, who has quadriplegia, was able to work with Challenger Homes to have his home built in a way that is both accessible and beautiful. Without being told that Jeremy’s home was designed with accessibility in mind, you wouldn’t know.



Paddle-style door handles and faucets make it possible for people with limited dexterity to open doors and operate water faucets. No-step doors and showers allow for wheelchair access. Counters built to no greater than 36 inches allow for universal usage. And a wide and level path of travel makes ingress and egress to the home safe and inviting for individuals using wheel chairs or other mobility devices. Features such as these make all the difference in making the home accessible and inviting for everyone.



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?



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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, 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.

TheIC 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.