

Free assessment, minor changes can help seniors live safely at home

By Jack Rubinger
The Southwest Portland Post

The U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention defines aging in place as “the ability to live in one’s own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level.”

Not that it makes sense or is feasible for everyone, but for some there are positive changes that can be made to accomplish the goal of living at home as a senior.

Jeff Strang, an environmental health specialist for Multnomah County, addressed this topic at a presentation at the Capitol Hill Library. Strang conducts home health and safety assessments for low-income seniors and the disabled, and is a certified home inspector.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2050 the number of Americans aged 65 and older will be 88.5 million, and nearly one in five Americans will be aged 65 and older by 2030. Senior citizens make up more than 10 percent of the population of Oregon.

Six percent of Oregon senior households have an annual income of less than \$10,000 and 23 percent receive less than \$20,000. According to the bureau, 25 percent of Oregon residents 60 and over received food stamps in the last year.

Many homes in Southwest Portland were built 50 years ago or more

before grab bars, ramps, and even smoke alarms were widely used.

Finding a responsive and reliable contractor who can help with more challenging projects like upgrading electrical systems for your older home can be difficult, according to some of the folks who attended the presentation.

“They don’t call back with estimates or come back to you with ridiculously high estimates,” said one woman. Attendees agreed that maybe it’s a case of supply and demand or maybe all the good ones are getting older or perhaps younger people don’t want to be contractors.

In any event, incremental improvements can begin sooner rather than later whether you do them yourself or hire a contractor.

Some improvements are so simple they can take seconds to complete. Other projects require skill, time and help from a friend or professional. It’s pretty easy to install night lights in a bathroom and in hallways that are used after dark.

Strang offered room by room tips, including opening doors with levers instead of round knobs, as seniors may lack the strength to turn a knob. Surface changes can cause trips and falls, such as going from carpet to hardwood floors.

Also in the easy-to-install category are higher toilet seats which can fit over standard toilets.

LED lights can be an easy replacement as they offer better light and

more contrast which can help seniors with poor vision.

Strang also recommended testing smoke alarms once a month and using a combination carbon monoxide and smoke alarm.

Seniors with asthma are cautioned about using aerosol fragrances. “If it smells bad, it’s bad. If it smells good it’s bad. If it doesn’t smell, it’s good,” said Strang.

Hoarding behavior, while not necessarily a symptom of aging, can cause problems such as crowding open spaces and creating confusion and clutter.

When people own their homes for 40 years, an accumulation of furniture and paperwork is likely.

There’s a lot that can be done, but people don’t know where and when to start, Strang said. “It’s tough for some to ask for help. It may feel like you’re giving up your independence,” he said.



Jeff Strang gave a recent presentation at the Capitol Hill Library on seniors aging in place. (Post photo by Jack Rubinger)

Strang said that if you’re older or disabled, you may qualify for a free home assessment to identify safety hazards and get suggestions of non-profit organizations that can help make improvements.

To sign up for a free home assessment, call Jeff Strang at 503-988-7866 or email him at this address: healthyhousinginspections@multco.us

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