

Encourage the Creation of Accessible/Adaptable Housing In Your Community through a Lifelong Housing Certification Program



Communities across the United States are beginning to feel the impact of an aging population as “Boomers” reach retirement age. The fastest growing age cohort in the country is the 85 years and older group. In addition, the number of active disabled adults and children is increasing, due to medical advances and other factors. As people age the chance increases that they will experience disabling conditions that impact their daily lives. Since most people prefer to live in their own homes for as long as possible, rather than in a facility, it is important that the physical layout and features of their homes support that intention. We call those homes “Lifelong Housing.”

Ideally people will find an accessible home at the time they buy or rent. Or perhaps they build from the ground up or remodel their current house. The decisions are made family-by-family. However, there are steps communities can take to encourage the increased availability of Lifelong Housing for residents. Action can be taken at both the policy/regulatory level and at the practical level. Examples of policy and regulatory steps include: the encouragement of building accessible accessory dwelling units (sometimes called “granny flats”) through zoning and building codes; the requirement of a percentage of accessible units in developments financed with public money; or the inclusion of accessibility requirements for residential structures in local building codes.

Creation of a Lifelong Housing Certification Program is an example of a practical, market-based, voluntary, program that can be put into practice at a community level to promote the development of accessible housing. This document describes the strategy implemented by a group in southern Oregon, to evaluate accessible housing and then make that information available to people who might be looking for accessible housing.

Lifelong Housing Certification in Southern Oregon

Rogue Valley Council of Governments Senior and Disability Services (RVCOG SDS) is the Area Agency on Aging for Jackson and Josephine Counties in Oregon. In partnership with AARP Oregon, RVCOG SDS convened a small working committee to develop a program to certify accessible housing. The goal was to raise the awareness of the community about the value of accessibility in private homes and thus, eventually increase the amount of accessible housing available in the two counties to people with disabilities and those who simply want to “age in place.”

- The Lifelong Housing Certification work group met monthly for a year and a half to develop the project. The steps taken by the committee are listed below. The Lifelong Housing Certification work group launched the program with a booth at a local home show. At the next meeting the work group members voted to continue as an advisory committee for the project, meeting on a quarterly basis. Roll-out shelves in all cabinets
- Control devises (light switches, thermostats, plugs) at 42-48 inches height off floor and side- to-side.
- Automatic temperature controlled (anti-scald) tub/shower or offset tub/shower controls toward front edge of tub/shower for easy access

How does the program work?

A certified inspector evaluates a home to see if it meets the standards for one of three levels: Basic Accessibility, Full Accessibility, or Enhanced Accessibility. Once a home is certified: the home is listed in the Lifelong Housing database; a certificate, with a copy of the checklist, is issued to the owner; and the certification level is entered in the local Multiple Listing Service database. Individual buyers are able to search the Multiple Listing Service for accessible homes. Potential renters may phone Rogue Valley Council of Governments for referrals to available accessible homes listed in the database.

Steps to Create a Lifelong Housing Certification Program

1. Find a capable entity willing to host the Lifelong Housing program.

The host agency will staff the ongoing project and advisory committee, maintain the database of certified homes, process the paperwork of homes as they become certified, receive calls regarding the database and inspectors, and be guaranteed to be in existence over time.

If the original convening organization does not intend to fill this role, one of the first goals of the work group should be to locate a willing host agency. The capability, focus, and energy of the host organization will determine the scope of the program and shape the final product.

2. Set up a work group to develop and implement the project.

Participants on the work group should represent diverse interests and include people from senior and disability consumer groups, so that the final product is well grounded, practical and marketable. Participants who represent business interest groups will also provide links into their own communities that will prove invaluable for getting feedback, providing connections and for getting the word out about the project once it launches.

Potential members of the work group might include:

- Home Builders
 - Certified Aging in Place Specialist (CAPS)
 - Connection with the local Home Builders Association
 - Others in the builder/remodeler community
- Architects
- Licensed Building or Home Inspectors
- Realtors
 - Connection with local Realtors Association
 - Multiple Listing Service
- Rental Owners
 - Connection with local Rental Owners Association
- Persons with Disabilities
 - Center for Independent Living
 - ADA Specialists
- Older Adults
 - AARP members
 - Senior Center
- Senior/Disability Service Providers
 - Local Area Agency on Aging
- University Extension Service

- 3. Review Standards Checklist and Accessibly Levels for appropriateness to your community.**
The Jackson/Josephine Counties group began with literature from AARP and other sources regarding accessible/universal designed housing. Meeting over the course of a year they reviewed and sorted features into three levels based on the degree of accessibility needed by a potential homeowner. The work of developing standards need not be repeated by other communities. The Jackson/Josephine Lifelong Housing Certification Checklist is available to any community for modification and/or adoption, with no copyright considerations. The local group should review the list, however, to see that it will meet the needs of the community.
- 4. Design how the program will work.**
You will need to answer questions such as: Where will it be housed? How will homeowners contact inspectors? How will the paperwork flow? Will you have a website and who will maintain it? How will you work with local Realtors and the Multiple Listing Service?
- 5. Decide on fees for inspection and the certification process.**
It took several conversations by the Jackson/Josephine County work group to arrive at consensus on this topic. The inspection fee is to be agreed upon by the Lifelong Housing Certification Inspector and the homeowner, since there will be variables that affect the cost, such as location of the home and whether it is newly constructed or a remodel. It is assumed that most homes will require two visits; some may require more. The “target” inspection fee is \$150.00. An additional fee of \$35 per certificate is paid to the administering agency to cover the costs of handling the paperwork and database, responding to phone calls from the public and professionals, and continuing ongoing promotion of the project. The host agency will also convene the ongoing Lifelong Housing Certification Advisory Committee.
- 6. Decide on the inspection process and how to recruit and train inspectors.**
The best way to assure that you have qualified inspectors is to involve licensed inspectors in the work group from the beginning. Both home inspectors (do inspections for loans) and building inspectors (work for jurisdictions and perform code inspections) would be appropriate for the job. They have an understanding of both the *International Building Code* (apartments) and *International Residential Code* (single family or duplex). Although they may have to brush up on the particulars of accessible features and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) law during orientation, their experience ensures the success of the project.

In southern Oregon, new inspectors are required to attend an orientation in order to be on the referral list. Orientation guidelines include a review of the principals of universal design, along with the specifics of the Lifelong Housing Certification program.

The work group set up a communication process for referring new applicants to inspectors and for inspectors to report back. The administering agency keeps a database of all referrals. After several inspections had been completed, the committee reconvened to evaluate the process and make changes. The program will certainly continue evolving over time as committee members gain experience and gain a deeper understanding of the needs of the different markets for Lifelong Housing.

7. Work group members take the concept and the list to their constituent groups for feedback and acceptance.

Your work group members will have ideas about which group to approach first, who should attend the meeting, etc. If a particular group endorses the project, request permission to use its logo on your brochure.

8. Design administration, database and website maintenance procedures.

The Lifelong Housing Certification Project, as designed by the Jackson/Josephine County group requires relatively little administration on an ongoing basis. As the lead agency RVCOG maintains the database of certified homes, receives and responds to requests for information from the public, maintains the website and staffs the Lifelong Housing Advisory Committee. Occasionally RVCOG staff prepare press releases and respond to the media.

The website permits the public to learn about the project, download the brochure and checklist, and contact certified inspectors.

9. Plan for ongoing promotion of the program and public education about the importance and practicality of lifelong housing.

The Southern Oregon group, with the help of AARP professionals, designed and printed outreach materials. The primary documents are a tri-fold brochure, explaining how the program works and what the levels of certification are, and a document detailing the accessibility features in each of the three levels.

Even while the project was in the development phase, committee members made presentations to affiliated groups (Home Builders Association, Realtors Association, boards, committees, etc.). As well as staffing a booth at a local home show, volunteers created displays for literature to share at the Senior Fair and made presentations at two statewide conferences of housing and service providers. Committee members and staff presented at local forums for seniors.

10. Convert the work group into an ongoing Lifelong Housing Advisory Committee.

The advisory committee meets quarterly, unless an upcoming event requires additional planning. Members also continue to participate in outreach and educational events.