

‘Forward thinking’ can keep you in your home despite disabilities

By Glenn Schicker

You suffer a stroke, and suddenly you find that you can't negotiate the steps into your home with your wheelchair or walker. Inside, the doors and hallways are too narrow, and the bathroom or kitchen won't accommodate you and your mobility aids.

Maybe you can walk all right, but your hands are arthritic and you have trouble turning door knobs.

Or perhaps you're still young and healthy, but an elderly parent comes to live with you in a house that wasn't designed for his or her needs.

"I just see tons of this coming as us Baby Boomers grow older," says Tom Barber of Barber Construction, Roscommon. Since remodeling accounts for about 90% of his business, Barber has long worked to help people make their homes more disability-friendly. He recalls widening hallways for a wheelchair patient a decade ago.

Last year, Barber decided to take it up a notch by attending a two-day seminar that focused on modifying homes to meet the needs of people as they grow older. After completing the program, developed by the National Association of Home Builders Remodelers Council, Barber became a Certified Aging-in-Place Professional.

"It really opened my eyes on how simple the modifications can be," Barber says. "They don't have to be real elaborate."

It can be as simple as replacing doorknobs with levers for an arthritis sufferer. It can mean widening doorways and hallways or installing grab bars in the bathroom. It can mean constructing an entry ramp, adding accessible rooms or even building a whole new house where

everything is designed for the owner's needs.

An Aging-In-Place Specialist interviews clients to identify mobility problems and looks over the house to determine what needs to be changed. "The whole point," Barber says, is "so you can live in the house as long as possible."

"Manufacturers are really getting on the bandwagon and making the products we need," Barber adds. For example, a kit allows a remodeler to cut away part of the wall of a bathtub for easier access, instead of replacing the whole unit. Some new microwave ovens are designed to slide out of a cabinet, rather than being placed at countertop level or higher.

Other relatively easy modifications include raising the height of a dishwasher, modifying a sink cabinet so a wheelchair can go underneath or replacing deep pile carpet with material that is easier to cross with a wheelchair.

"Lifetime Design" and "Universal Design" are two of the monikers attached to homes that will allow a person to remain in his own home despite mobility limitations, whenever they occur. To meet Lifetime Design criteria, a home must have accessible entrances, at least one with "zero step." Main floor doorways must be at least 36 inches wide and hallways at least 42 inches wide. At least one bedroom and one bathroom must be on the first floor, and the bathroom and kitchen must have at least a 48-inch turning radius for a wheelchair. Electric switches must be accessible, with a recommended maximum height of 48 inches.

The homes are designed to not look "institutional" or "noticeably different" from other houses. And the benefits are not only for the

disabled. Moving furniture, bringing in groceries and preparing meals become easier for everyone in the house.

A young home owner may think he doesn't need to worry about such things because he'll move to another house—or maybe move several times—before mobility problems arise. But Barber says aging-in-place features can make a home more marketable.

Similarly, people who build second homes where they plan to live after they retire should consider incorporating such features at the outset so they'll be there if they're needed.

"You're not talking huge amounts of money up front," Barber says, "but it can be quite expensive later on." He estimates wider doorways, hallways and closets and larger bathroom and kitchen floor areas would add only \$600 to \$1,800 to the cost of building a home.

"The whole house doesn't have to be set up that way," Barber says. "The front door is where it all starts," he adds. Other important areas are the bathroom, bedroom and kitchen.

When someone comes to Barber with building or remodeling plans, he suggests they include such features as backing in walls for future installation of grab bars. The National Association of Home Builders provides model plans, and Barber has worked with Roscommon architect Thomas O'Brien on several aging-in-place projects.

"We're just trying to get forward thinking instead of backward thinking," Barber says.