



Lifestyle

Aging in the Right Place: What is universal design and can it work for you?



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Monday, January 13, 2020**

Chuck Vollmer, owner of 101 Mobility who is also a certified aging-in-place specialist and a board member for the Universal Design Coalition, was one of three speakers at Wednesday's Aging in the Right Place Forum at Broadway Promenade. His talk mostly focused on the concepts of universal design and how they can help people of all ages, but especially those 65 and older looking to age in place. [HERALD-TRIBUNE STAFF PHOTO / MICHAEL MOORE JR.]

For those looking to stay in their home long-term and age in place, which according to figures from AARP could be as many as 87% of adults age 65 and older, “universal design” is an important term to know.

This was one of many themes discussed by experts at the recent Aging in the Right Place Forum held at Broadway Promenade in Sarasota. The panel, which was hosted by Cornerstone LifeCare, featured a variety of experts on aging who shared vital keys to planning and implementing steps for those looking to age in place.

A primary focus of the forum was how to adapt your current living environment in order to improve accessibility, convenience, levels of care, functionality and safety while staying right where you are. And what’s the best way to do that? Well, it just might be incorporating some elements of universal design.

For Chuck Vollmer, a certified aging-in-place specialist who is a board member of the Universal Design Coalition and owner of 101 Mobility, a company that focuses on mobility and accessibility solutions for homes, thinking about universal design is more important than ever as the demographic of those 65 and older continues to grow, with the majority of people wishing to stay in their own home.

“The first thing you have to understand about universal design is what it is, because a lot of people believe that universal design is you put in grab bars when you have a problem. That’s not universal design; that’s a necessary evil,” said Vollmer. “Universal design is a plan ... and it’s not just a plan for seniors, it’s a plan that works for and is important for everybody.”

There are seven basic principles of universal design that were developed in 1997 by a group of architects, product designers, engineers and environmental design researchers, with the purpose of guiding design in a way that gives homes characteristics that make them more livable.

These principles are equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use.

Essentially, it boils down to design elements of homes being simple and easy to use, being consistent and easy to understand, and requiring low physical effort with as little chance for hazard and harm as possible. It's all about making homes easy to use and safe for everyone, regardless of what stage you are at in life,

This includes eliminating or minimizing stairs when possible, replacing doorknobs with levers, trading traditional faucets for more accommodating models, minimizing level changes, widening hallways so they are at least 36 inches and much, much more.

Of course, you're not going to be able to do this all at once, which is why it's important to have a plan.

According to Vollmer and other panelists, universal design shouldn't be an overwhelming concept that ties your hands, but instead should be used as a guide that helps you consider what to look for in a house or what changes to make in your own home. Researching its concepts, understanding what it is, and speaking with contractors and consultants who understand universal design could be a key to aging in the right place.

"Whether you're getting a little older and are starting to have some mobility issues, or if you're a child that has special needs or a disability, this is a plan that should work for everybody. And that's the point," said Vollmer.

Find more Aging in the Right Place stories online at heraldtribune.com/aging-in-place. If there are aspects of aging in the right place you would like us to explore, send ideas to mmoore@heraldtribune.com.

This story comes from Aspirations Journalism, an initiative of The Patterson Foundation and Sarasota Herald-Tribune to inform, inspire and engage the community to take action on issues related to Age-Friendly Sarasota, Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, National Council on Aging's 100 Million Healthier Lives and the Suncoast Nursing Action Coalition.