

Safe Home Designs for the Generation Who Never Trusted Anyone Over Thirty!

By Gary A. Officer

For over thirty years, Rebuilding Together and our national network of affiliates have proudly provided rehabilitation services free of charge to our nation's senior population. Our work, with the support of thousands of volunteers, has enabled our nation's hard working seniors to age in place in an environment of safety, comfort and security.

As the country ushered in 2011, it also welcomed the first wave of baby boomers to reach age 65. Now about 10,000 people a day, every day, will reach that milestone – for the next 19 years! These statistics are not lost on the hundreds of industries – from healthcare to housing – facing unprecedented demands from a population that will live and work longer than any generation before it. In fact, according to the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), already there are not enough homes to match the needs – *or abilities* – of older adults. Seniors in older homes are often exposed to mold, dust mites and other such agents that thrive in indoor dampness causing or exacerbating respiratory illness. And because this group disproportionately suffers from serious falls and other home injuries, safe housing is important to helping them avoid harm and live healthy, independent lives.

So what makes a home safe for seniors? Think universal design and the essential elements – accessibility, convenience and comfort – that make a home safe for any individual, regardless of age or ability. Safe homes feature:

- At least one no-step entry and exit to the home, especially for those who use a wheelchair.
- Single floor living with a bedroom, kitchen and full bathroom on the same floor with plenty of maneuvering room in-between, making the home easier to navigate and less intimidating for older adults.
- Wider doors for quick exits in case of fire and well-lit hallways to guard against falls.

Through our work in the senior community, Rebuilding Together has discovered that a purely housing based solution to the long term needs of the survivors of our greatest generation, will not address the fundamental housing and health concerns of this population. Through our work, and as an outgrowth of our strategic collaborations with organizations representing our Occupational Therapists, Housing Inspectors, and Area Association for the Aging, we have learnt that an integrated approach to addressing the housing needs of our senior population is the best long term remedy for this population. These collaborations have impacted our approach to the methods and scope of our work, allowing our seniors to exercise greater choices around their long term housing needs.

Empirical evidence has also informed us that falls represent approximately forty percent of the reasons for nursing home placements, and seventy percent of death for seniors above the age of seventy five. Yet, the installation of a simple grab bar or wheelchair ramp can remove the likelihood of such a hazard. Statistics support the validity of an interdisciplinary approach to providing a more comprehensive response to the housing needs of our seniors. This approach, we believe, rests in blended housing model that that brings together our housing and health care professionals.

We believe that public health, housing and safety professionals are uniquely qualified to raise awareness about and advocate for the simple changes needed to make homes safer for older adults. The National Healthy Homes Conference is a federally-sponsored event that will bring together the country's leading experts on the topic. The dynamic conference program is designed to inform, influence and inspire action across a wide spectrum of attendee disciplines. Session topics include:

- Home Modifications for an Aging Population;
- Healthy Housing for Seniors;
- Promoting Health and Safety Through Universal Design

As part of the 2011 National Healthy Homes Conference being held in June, top public health, safety, housing and environmental professionals will discuss ways to address the housing needs of seniors. *Healthy Housing for Seniors and Communication Strategies to Create Healthier Homes* are only two of several sessions that will deal with this issue. To learn more about the 2011 National Healthy Homes Conference, visit: www.healthyhomesconference.org.

About the Author

Gary A. Officer is the President and CEO of Rebuilding Together, Inc., the nation's largest non profit home rebuilding organization for low and moderate income homeowners.