

## **THE HOME FOR ALL AGES: AN INTERACTIVE EXHIBIT TO PROMOTE UNIVERSAL DESIGN**

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### **Need and Purpose:**

In 1990, most Iowans had not heard of *universal design*, "... an approach to design that incorporates products as well as building features and elements, which to the greatest extent possible, can be used by everyone" (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1988). Few were aware that homes could be constructed to accommodate the changing needs of individuals throughout the life span and still be appealing to a non-disabled audience.

To help Iowans understand the benefits of universal design, Iowa State University Extension (ISUE) staff constructed "The Home for All Ages." The three-room exhibit features furnishings, equipment, and assistive devices to promote universal design principles and products.

### **Description:**

The exhibit was created for the 1990 Farm Progress Show by two ISUE faculty members: Mary Yearns, Extension Housing Specialist, and Lois Warme, Extension Specialist in Interior Design. It has been used at home shows, fairs, and agricultural expos throughout Iowa. The 40-foot long exhibit has a kitchen, bathroom, and living/sleeping space.

The bathroom includes a lavatory equipped with an electronic eye and a counter with accessible knee space underneath. Grab bars are placed at convenient locations by the tub and toilet. Thousands of people have taken a ride on the electronic toilet seat lifter that makes toileting safer for persons with limited strength and mobility. A stacked washer-dryer unit provides access to clothing care on the main level of the home.

The kitchen combines standard counter heights and a lowered work area that can accommodate seated users. The shelves and drawers are stocked with a variety of assistive devices to make daily tasks easier. The living room includes a daybed, work table, and storage units for clothing and personal items. A clap-on, clap-off light control and a portable seat lifter for an armchair are popular attractions.

The exhibit is interactive. People can try out features and gadgets in each room that will accommodate people with mobility limitations, hearing and vision loss, and low energy. Devices range from a high tech electronic faucet to inexpensive utensils for food preparation. Fact sheets provide information about the cost and source of each item and ways to make an existing home more accessible.

The exhibit is plumbed and wired to be fully operational. Staff and volunteers are trained to demonstrate the special furnishings and equipment and to explain how these items might be used, whether building a new home or doing major remodeling.

### **Funding:**

Yearns and Warme made telephone calls and personal visits to Iowa businesses, suppliers, and manufacturers to explain the Home for All Ages proposal. They obtained about \$35,000 in furnishings, equipment, and appliances on outright grant or extended loan through these solicitation efforts. University funds paid for labor and materials to build the basic structure.

Each time the exhibit is used at a major event, a university truck and two-person moving crew must be paid to transport, set up, and tear down the exhibit. Local groups and organizations are found to pay moving costs and exhibit fees.

### **Staff and Volunteer Training:**

The exhibit requires a major time commitment. Volunteers are used in all phases of the operation. Strong backs are required for heavy lifting during set-up and tear-down. Mechanics are needed to connect plumbing and electricity, hang mirrors and grab bars, and see that appliances are working properly. A cleaning and maintenance crew is used to wash off dirty fingerprints, touch up chipped paint, hang blinds, and accessorize the exhibit.

People who enjoy visiting with the public are recruited to demonstrate the features in each room and encourage participants to handle the assistive devices. They are trained by videos and/or on-site practice sessions. Volunteers have included AARP members, other retired people, staff from a variety of health care and social service agencies, and residents of several correctional facilities.

A promotional package has been prepared to send to prospective groups and organizations that wish to have the Home for All Ages in their community. The package includes photos, slides, video, cost estimates, staffing guidelines, and sample media releases.

### **Results/Successes:**

The Home for All Ages has helped almost 500,000 people learn about *universal design*. The interactive approach is effective: people are more likely to remember and use the new information when they have a chance to touch and test the gadgets. Even two or three years after an event, people have called to say that they now need specific information about some of the assistive devices they saw in the exhibit.

The display increased ISUE visibility on disability issues and helped attract funding for an Iowa AgrAbility project. ISUE and the Easter Seal Society of Iowa have jointly received almost \$700,000 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to help farm families affected by disabilities remain on their farms and in their homes.

### **Challenges:**

Building and maintaining the exhibit is an expensive and time-consuming operation. The cost of furnishing the home was reduced by soliciting products and equipment from local businesses. Storing the display is expensive, as is transporting it to various exhibit sites around the state. The massive size limits the settings in which the display can be used. The set-up and tear-down of the display require many hours of labor by staff and volunteers. Two smaller bathroom displays have now been constructed with AgrAbility grant funds to use at one-day events.

### **Transferability:**

A similar exhibit could be built in another state by soliciting items from local businesses that sell universal design products and equipment. Institutional support, interagency assistance, or grant funds would be needed to provide ongoing support to store, transport, and maintain the exhibit.

### **Reference:**

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (1988). *Universal design -- housing for the lifespan of all people* (August, HUD-1156-PA). Washington, DC: Author.