

Condos, townhomes great option for aging in place

Chicago Senior Services Network

11:11 a.m. CST, January 31, 2014

Q: My 75 year old mother lives alone and has osteoarthritis in her hips and knees. She can no longer maintain her two-story home, or navigate the stairs. The family thinks she needs to move to a place where she can get around safely and easily and where she won't be lonely and isolated. Any suggestions?

A: For many seniors, owning their own home is still preferred. But for those with declining health or increased mobility issues there are many housing communities with one-level single family homes and townhomes as well as condominiums. The homeowners associations affiliated with these communities take away the responsibilities of snow removal, lawn mowing and general upkeep, yet give older adults the emotional and financial benefits of home ownership.

Downsizing to a smaller, more manageable place may eliminate the need for a mortgage. Most likely, the senior can use the equity from selling their single family home to pay for the condo or townhome outright, as well as to cover future property taxes and association fees associated with their new residence.

Those who opt to live in a multi-unit building with an elevator often have the added security of a doorman. These units usually come equipped with in-unit washers and dryers as well as indoor parking. Many buildings have fitness centers, swimming pools, and game rooms.

“Many of my older clients love condo living,” says Lisa Davis, a Seniors Real Estate Specialist (SRES) at Coldwell Banker in Glenview. “They live independently yet they are not alone. They have all the freedom they want and remain very active, but there’s no stair climbing and the maintenance-free aspect of condo and townhouse living is especially appealing to mature adults.”

Another option is condos and townhomes specifically for 50+ age adults. There are plenty around Chicagoland. They feature on-site amenities such as a swimming pool, golf course, walking trails, activity center, fitness center, clubhouse and more. Sometimes there’s even a restaurant on the property. The communities are often gated which contributes to an exclusive feel. The activities in the senior condo development can be substantial, and you can take advantage of as much, or as little, as you wish.

After considering the different types of options of available housing, it is imperative to ensure that the interiors have accessible features so seniors can live safely in their homes for years to come.

“These features can be implemented with style and beauty” according to Leslie Markman-Stern, President of Leslie M. Stern Design, LTD. Many self-help devices such as grab bars, and shower seats have been created to blend into the home environment without looking institutional. They assist in providing safe access and usability in a bath or shower. Anti-scald faucets, hardware with specified with levers instead of knobs and counter tops fabricated with rounded edges can be user friendly for any age group and are just as cost effective as materials without these safety features. Textured tile floors or natural stone with a honed finish instead of a polish surface will provide more traction and reduce glare. Having a safe and user friendly environment to prevent falls should always be a first concern in choosing a space.

Lighting is another important consideration. As we grow older, it becomes increasingly more difficult to see. Proper placement of lighting sconces on either side of a bathroom mirror reduces glare when shaving or applying makeup.

When evaluating the kitchen it is important to confirm that there is sufficient counter space next to each appliance so that items can be placed on the counter safely. Rollout shelves make it easy to remove items from cabinets. Soft close glides on drawers create the action to close drawers effortlessly for someone with arthritis or carpal tunnel syndrome. Full extension glides increase the ability to see the full contents in the drawer.

Lastly, check to see if there are 36-inch wide openings to doorways in case there is a need for an assistive device such as a wheelchair, scooter or walker. Accessibility is always the key to giving older adults more independence within their space.

—Lisa Davis, a Broker with Coldwell Banker specializing in senior real estate transactions, has earned the Seniors Real Estate Specialist (SRES) designation. Leslie Markman-Stern, ASID has a full service interior design firm. She offers a holistic approach to creating a safety conscious, functional and beautiful environment so older adults and those who have special challenges can live independently and safely at home, but with an eye toward resale.