

Helping Older Adults Age Safely in Place

What Multifamily Owners Need to Know About Home Modification



Introduction to Home Modification

With the aging of the US population, the number of older adults living in HUD-assisted housing is growing and the average age of residents is increasing. Assisting residents to age in place safely is a win-win for both property owners and residents: residents typically want to live independently for as long as possible and stable tenure reduces management costs. However, as older adults age and their needs and abilities change, the features and configuration of their home can present challenges to living safely and independently. Adaptations of the living environment, called home modifications, can help improve the comfort and safety of older persons, allowing them to thrive in independent housing well into old age.

Home modification refers to converting or adapting the environment to make it easier for older adults (or people with disabilities) to manage basic activities more easily and more safely. When they think of home modifications, many people think of making structural modifications such as converting bathtubs to showers or widening doorways. Home modifications can also include installing tub benches, rearranging furniture, fixing uneven flooring, or improving lighting. **Many simple, low-cost modifications can make a huge difference to the health and safety of older adults.**



Simple modifications a resident could make

- Remove clutter from the floor and increase storage
- Secure cords to walls or floors
- Remove throw rugs or secure them with gripper rug pads or gripper tape
- Mark uneven thresholds with contrasting tape or paint
- Install nightlights in the bedroom and bathroom
- Stick motion sensor LED lights on baseboards
- Purchase a shower seat, place adhesive anti-slip treads on shower or tub floors
- Add seating in the bedroom to assist with dressing and in the kitchen for cooking prep



Low-cost modifications that typically require a handy person

- Replace knob style door and faucet handles with lever style handles
- Securely install grab bars around tubs, showers, and toilets, raise toilet seats
- Install adjustable hand-held shower heads and anti-scald water devices
- Replace bulbs with bright, non-glare lighting
- Replace traditional light switches with rocker switches
- Install double hinges to widen doorways



Modifications that typically require a professional installer

- Widen the frames of entryways and doorways
- Remodel bathroom to include a shower with supports and no threshold
- Install slip-resistant flooring in the bathroom
- Create level flooring by removing thresholds and other uneven areas

For more information, see [this webpage from the National Institutes of Health, **Fall-Proofing Your Home**](#)



Resources to Assist with Home Modification

Increasingly, programs and funding are available to help renters modify their home environments to support independent living. Service coordinators can help residents of HUD multifamily housing access these resources.

Home Modification and Fall Prevention

Increasingly, research is showing that, in addition to helping older adults live more comfortably and independently, home modifications (including home hazard removal) can reduce individuals' fall risk. It is estimated that 1 in 4 older adults falls each year, with more than half of all falls occurring in the home. Injurious falls can cause people to move to institutional settings. Home modifications can reduce fall risks and may promote longer tenure in independent housing, and less unit turnover.

Multifamily Owners' Responsibilities for Home Modification

Owners of HUD-assisted multifamily housing are subject to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which provides rights to people with disabilities in HUD-funded programs. Under Section 504, owners have a responsibility to provide reasonable accommodations to residents with disabilities who need such accommodation to be able to participate fully in the housing. For more on owners' responsibilities, see [Reasonable Modifications Under the Fair Housing Act](#).

- **Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs), and Centers for Independent Living (CILs)**, maintain information and resources on home accessibility and available programs to finance home modifications. The programs are funded by the U.S. Administration for Community Living (ACL). To find the AAAs and ADRCs in your area, visit the [eldercare locator](#) or call 1-800-677-1116. To access a directory of CILs, visit ACL's [CIL web page](#).
- All states receive federal grants through ACL to support programs that increase access to **assistive technology devices** and services for individuals with disabilities and older adults. To find out more, including whether the program in your state includes resources for home modification and accessibility, visit the [Assistive Technology Act Technical Assistance and Training \(AT3\) Center web page](#).
- The Department of Veteran's Affairs offers [Home Improvements and Structural Alterations \(HISA\)](#) grants to **veterans and service members** for medically-necessary home modifications. Renters are eligible for the grants if they have a signed and notarized statement from the owner authorizing the improvement or structural alteration.
- Many communities offer comprehensive **home modification programs**, often operated through nonprofit organizations, that help older adults determine the environmental modifications they need and then carry out the modifications free of charge. Some of these programs—such as

[CAPABLE](#)—include a visit from an Occupational Therapist or Nurse to ensure the modifications meet the needs of the resident and are part of a comprehensive approach to helping the resident continue to live independently and safely. The www.homemods.org website maintained by the University of Southern California Leonard Davis School of Gerontology and supported in part by ACL, provides a [directory](#) of home modification and repair programs by state.

- **Medicare Advantage Plans** may pay for home safety inspections conducted by a qualified health professional and safety devices, such as shower stools, hand-held showers, grab bars, and raised toilet seats, to prevent injuries in the home or bathroom. Medicare Advantage Plans are a type of Medicare health plan offered by a private company approved by Medicare to provide Medicare Part A and Part B benefits. Service coordinators can research the specifics of residents' plans. The Medicare.gov website provides [information on Medicare Advantage](#) as well as organizations to contact by state.



- **Medicaid** home and community based services (HCBS) provide opportunities for Medicaid beneficiaries to receive services in their own home or community rather than institutions or other isolated settings. States have flexibility to cover a variety of HCBS services under their Medicaid state plans that improve home accessibility for Medicaid-eligible individuals. For more information on Medicaid HCBS programs, please visit the [HCBS page](#) on Medicaid.gov. Medicaid.gov also provides [information and contacts](#) for each state's Medicaid program.
- When prescribed by a doctor, or as part of their discharge plan when returning from a hospital stay, residents may receive **in-home visits** from an occupational therapist, physical therapist, or nurse. During these visits, the health professionals often identify specific equipment and environmental modifications that residents need for safety and independence. HUD encourages service coordinators to work with the health professionals (and residents) to ensure the resident's needs are met.

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