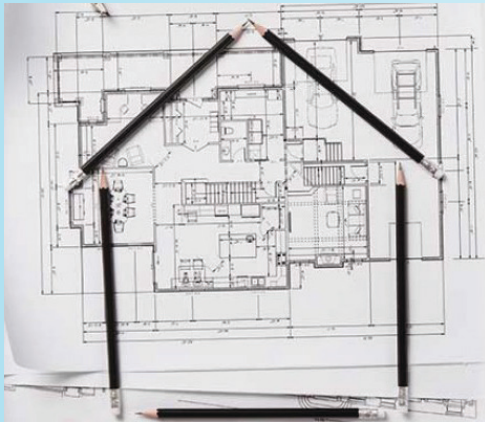


HomeCare

# A New Boom in Aging in Place

Thanks to the pandemic, more seniors want to stay at home—here's how to help

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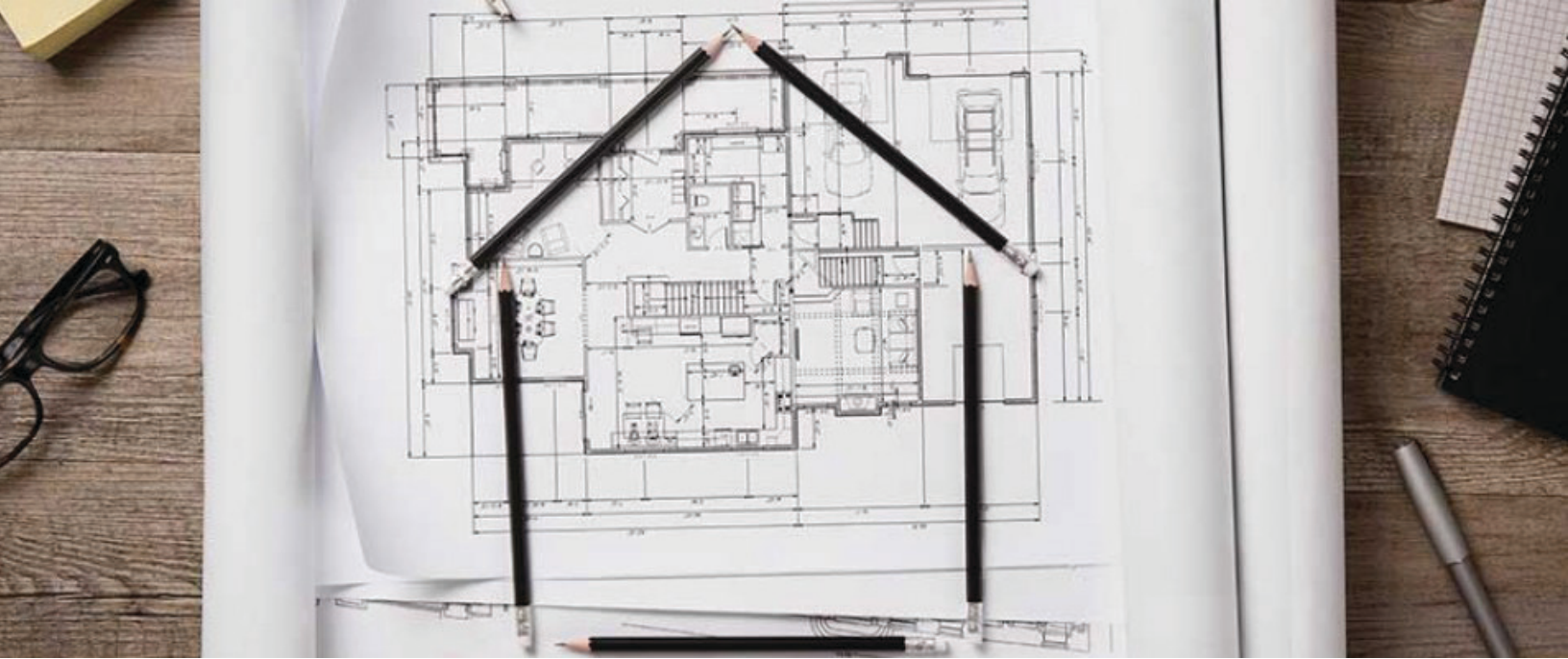
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## HomeCare

# Big Investments Fuel Record Growth in Home Accessibility Market

If you build it, they will come

BY JIM GREATOREX

In Iowa—where VGM Live at Home is based—there are two sayings from the iconic movie “Field of Dreams” that are reiterated often. They are, “If you build it, they will come;” and “Is this heaven? No, it’s Iowa.” I can’t help but think of these two phrases as I report on the current state of the home accessibility market.

### CLIENTS ARE STARTING TO COME

For many years, the home accessibility contractor market has been asking whether clients will respond if a service platform is built that allows people to age in place successfully. In the last two years or so, the health care industry as a whole has seen a spike in support for telemedicine, hospital-at-home programs and other services that help people remain in their homes over the years; in-home care is also growing at a rapid rate. New technologies for senior home automation and easy connectivity to family are growing markets. But until recently, little attention was paid to the home living environment. It seems home access professionals are now being welcomed to the party as others in the care continuum are realizing that their concepts don’t work if the home setting isn’t appropriate.

### BIG BOXES BUST IN

It all started when big box stores decided to make plays in the home accessibility market. Home Depot was the first to publicly announce

that they had an agreement in place to work with National Seating & Mobility (NSM). Then Lowe’s publicly announced their program—called Lowe’s Livable Home—with agreements with Lifeway Mobility and Harmar. Together, Home Depot and Lowe’s have 4,000 stores in the U.S. with high traffic. As they roll out their programs, there is and will continue to be increased consumer awareness of the aging-in-place market. Lowe’s also recently announced they had an agreement with AARP to help provide tips for successfully aging in place. In the 24 hours after the announcement, there were almost 100,000 impressions or downloads of that message.

New startup companies are bringing technology solutions to market that connect clinical, consumer and service providers. These companies are well funded and are working to provide conduits that will bring awareness to all parties about the services available that enhance the choice to stay home. Most of these startups realize they need a reliable, vetted professional home accessibility contractor referral resource as part of any successful program. With the whole home access industry still in the maturing mode, there are many entrepreneurial opportunities available and many hats will be thrown in the ring. Not everyone will be successful, but for those who are, there is a fantastic opportunity to make the final years of life much better than it is in too many cases today.

Even though established home access

contractors had ups and downs in 2020 (like many other businesses), the vast majority still experienced modest growth. In 2021, once people got vaccinated, the demand for services had a noticeable uptick and almost everyone VGM Live at Home works with is in line to experience double digit growth. New businesses are being established with above average success rates and sustainability—but the market is far from saturated. There is still a need for professional companies to meet the increasing demand for home accessibility contractors. The industry is in a build more phase because more people are realizing the need and clients are coming in quickly.

### LEGISLATIVE PUSH

The government is also starting to take notice. The great news is there are six different pieces of proposed legislation that mention home safety upgrades. The not-so-great news is that all of the bills focus mostly on other services and have no clear path to benefit taxpayers. The Homes Renewed Coalition had some success in 2021 lobbying for a bill that would provide tax breaks for homeowners who make specific approved home safety upgrades. The approach has been to put together a bill that would allow homeowners to use retirement funds tax free on home accessibility upgrades.

Like all bills, there has been a wait as the Congressional Budget Office looks to score the

bill to get an estimate of how much it would cost. The good news is that a competing bill with a projected higher cost came back from scoring with a lower estimate than expected. It's within probability that the Homes Renewed effort could come in with a cost very close to neutral, which would make it a non-partisan issue; therefore, it could be added to any bill package without requiring up or down votes. If this happens, consumer awareness will get a dramatic boost.

### **IS THIS HEAVEN?**

While the home access industry is clearly on an upward trend, it's not heaven yet—there are challenges aplenty! Despite the nice growth the industry is experiencing, it is also bumping up against the supply chain challenges affecting other industries. Freight delays, damage and

price increases are also prevalent. Contractors are seeing crazy volatility in building material prices and struggling to find and keep quality employees, which causes delays in getting projects completed. Somehow through all that, the industry is still seeing record growth for many.

### **PROFESSIONALIZING THE INDUSTRY**

The home access industry is still maturing. Providers and contractors need to concentrate on defining the field so prospective clients know what the experts do and that they exist. There's also a need to bring meaningful professionalism that will elevate dedicated workers. There are several certification programs in the marketplace, but currently there is no legal requirement for a contractor to earn and retain a certification

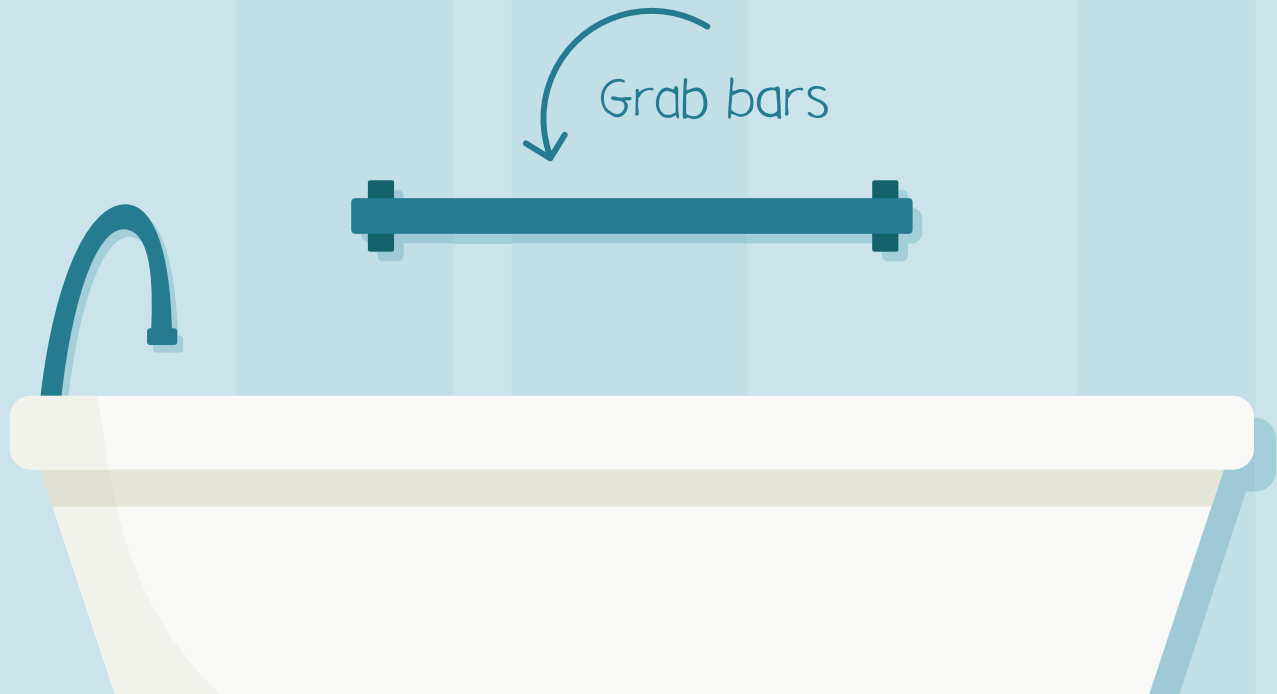
to complete an accessibility modification to a home. Industry leaders hope to change that soon. Because they serve the senior market and people with mobility limitations, providers have no chance of being taken seriously unless their motives are pure and the needs of clients are handled with the highest ethics and service.

The home accessibility business gets to participate in preserving the home—and it's not just about the house. Home is where all the great memories are made and loved ones either live or visit frequently. Home access modification is meaningful work, and it means a lot to the people served. Entrepreneurs who enter the business and understand the customer that comes with the work have a great opportunity for growth in a fun industry.

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# BATHROOM SAFETY



HomeCare

## 4 Key Aging in Place Trends Fueled by COVID-19

How to reach seniors that want to age in place

BY AMY MONEYPENNY

The pandemic has changed the conversation on senior care options. As hospitals and health care systems were overwhelmed by the rise of the pandemic, deciding how to care for seniors became a hot topic of discussion. Technological innovations emerged quickly, and a higher quality of care and safety became a top priority.

While tough conversations about where a senior will reside so they can receive the best care are sometimes side-stepped by families until they're unavoidable, this renewed focus on staying healthy and safe has created the momentum to think proactively about aging loved ones.

### AN AGING POPULATION

By 2025, the Census Bureau projects that the number of seniors is expected to surpass the number of children 13 and under for the first time. All of the nation's 74 million baby boomers will be 65 or older by 2030.

When assessing the best ways to provide care for the aging population, it's important to be aware that the landscape is changing quickly. Options like assisted living centers and skilled nursing facilities have adapted to the pandemic by upgrading their technology and infrastructure to accommodate telemedicine and to meet heightened cleaning protocols. Improvements such as extra ventilation, air purification systems and sanitization stations contribute to increased safety and reduced risk for seniors in institutional care.

Yet even as these facilities invest in safety improvements and work to provide a higher quality of life overall, a recent national survey from Capital Caring Health reported that 90% of Americans aged 50 and older expect to age in place. As the population ages, health care and homecare solutions will need to adapt to meet the growing demand of seniors looking to stay home in their twilight years.

Here are four key trends fueled by the pandemic around aging in place. Understanding them will help you reach this demographic effectively.

1. Seniors value their independence.

Seniors often still live where they raised their families. Home serves as a personal oasis, and the suggestion of leaving due to a serious illness or health care complication can create anxiety and stress. Being able to stay at home and function independently means preserving a level of dignity—and avoiding the feeling of becoming a burden on others. Adult children often prefer to keep their loved ones in their homes too, sidestepping the tough conversations, emotional arguments and high costs of finding an alternative living situation.

**However, certain risks are much higher for seniors at home:**

- One out of every four older adults (65+) will fall each year

- One out of every five falls causes a serious injury
- More than 95% of hip fractures are caused by falling
- Falls are the most common cause of traumatic brain injuries

The amount of risk highlights a growing need for accessible and affordable home upgrades to keep seniors safe. Solutions that help older adults maintain their independence are—and will continue to be—in high demand.

## 2. Home solutions can make all the difference.

The National Institute on Aging reports that 80% of falls occur in the bathroom, making improvements to this space the first line of defense for seniors and their loved ones. Solutions that help seniors and adult children identify high-risk areas—and provide guidance on how to address them affordably—can significantly reduce the chances of an injury while meeting the demand for adaptive home solutions.

### For example:

- Converting a conventional tub into a low-threshold or a walk-in tub can drastically reduce fall risk by removing the need to step over the tub.
- Replacing loose throw rugs with flooring

options decreases fall risks.

- Installing grab bars in areas where loved ones commonly use furniture or other objects to brace themselves can provide needed support and stability.

Making solutions like stair lifts increasingly available and affordable can help maintain or return access to the whole home. Often, seniors will be confined to a single level of their home due to their inability to move up and down stairs easily.

## 3. Home modifications are valued investments.

While significant home modifications can cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$100,000, emphasizing that these investments translate into higher home values can help rationalize the initial dollar amount. Offering different patterns, an array of styles and sleek finishes can help families feel like they're shopping for another home appliance rather than dealing with a life change. By steering towards options that don't look institutional, the home solutions industry can continue to position modifications as an investment—especially now, with home values rising—as much as for home safety. As the population keeps aging, the demand for modern modified homes that support independent living will rise, too.

## 4. Seniors want to be involved & in charge.

When advocating for a safer space, conversations proposing modifications can cause a lot of anxiety. Including seniors early on in conversations and empowering them to shape the outcomes can help sidestep the fear that stems from uncertainty. Education is a crucial step for seniors, caretakers and decision makers. If you include the people affected by these decisions from the start, you'll remove a major barrier to adoption.

When communicating with older adults, it may take a little extra time for the message to resonate. Repetition can be a helpful, too—and leaving time for longer calls with customer service reps can increase close rates. When putting together marketing and sales materials, relying on visuals rather than dense paragraphs of written descriptions helps communicate the value of features and their benefits faster. Lead with messages of kindness and with an awareness of a senior's desire to maintain independence.

If you prioritize the needs of seniors and their families and propose solutions that simplify the path to independence, you'll successfully reach more of this population.

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## HomeCare

# Simple Fixes You Can Offer to Make Clients' Bathrooms Aging Friendly

Splish splash more safely

BY JON WINER & AMY VILLARS

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a paradigm shift that is altering lifestyles and industries around the globe, often in a permanent way. One fundamental change involves how and where people want to care for their aging parents and themselves. COVID-19 radically accelerated the desire to age in place rather than in a nursing home if possible.

The problem is that many people don't know what steps to take to get their homes ready for aging in place. Many people believe updating the bathroom with grab bars in the shower will be enough. This is where home medical equipment (HME) business owners can step in and offer their expertise on which products to purchase and how to best install those products.

Some HME providers may want to pursue the Certified Aging in Place Specialist (CAPS) certification to bolster their authority on the subject. Here are some products that can help make the bathroom—and the home in general—safer.

### GRAB BARS

Grab bars are a simple, cost-effective solution for falls. But in most bathrooms, the grab bars are only placed in the tub or shower and not at the point of entry or next to the sink and toilet. Just placing a grab bar in the shower or tub does not mitigate all fall risks. Seniors with chronic progressive diseases or simply advanced aging tend to lose their balance, stability and depth perception. Therefore, every wall or location where a senior might stand or sit should have a device they can grab onto for added stability and support.

Many grab bars today now offer dual functions and many have a more modern style, providing a high-end look to the home. Grab bars can serve as toilet paper holders and heaters for towels. For most areas, grab bars should be both vertical and horizontal—especially in the shower.

### BATHING SOLUTIONS

If the bathroom has a tub, the ideal solution

is to remove the tub and install a barrier-free shower. This eliminates trip hazards entering and exiting the tub and, if mobility continues to deteriorate, the senior can be wheeled into the tub or use a walker. The shower should have a stool or preferably a wall-mounted shower seat for comfort and security. A shower chair that reclines is another option. Barrier-free showers are typically installed for \$11,500 and up. They can be simple or look like a luxury bathroom. An existing shower with a significant threshold can be converted into a barrier-free shower for less cost.

Where the removal of the tub is not feasible for financial or other reasons, a tub cutout can be installed for under \$1,000. Again, grab bars should be used. Walk-in safety tubs and transition tubs should be considered, but they cost more and have some downsides, including that the senior needs to sit unclothed in the tub while it is filled and again while it is drained, as the door needs to be closed during this process.

With both tubs and showers, a shower wand that can be reached and used while the senior is sitting is also a very helpful addition. Stating the obvious, all this may be useless if the bathroom floor has wet spots or wrinkled mats that can cause slips.

## **TOILETING SOLUTIONS**

The toilet poses the greatest area of danger, as most falls occur when someone is getting on and off the toilet. Installing taller toilet seats, either by raising the base or purchasing a new toilet, may be the simplest solution, depending on a senior's level of mobility. Grab bars definitely should be placed around the toilet as well. The best types attach to the wall, fold down and extend beyond the toilet bowl with appropriate weight capacities. There are also numerous options that mount on the toilet, but the key is very stable and long bars. Where mobility and lower body strength is compromised, powered products that lift the senior off the toilet can be very effective, but they can also prevent

others from using the toilet. Learn what your customer's needs and desires are before making a recommendation.

## **FORM & FUNCTION**

Where wheelchairs or shower chairs are used, door widening and reversing the swing of the door are great options for safety and functionality. Door widths should be minimum of 36 inches wide to accommodate a wheelchair or rollator. Where space in the bathroom is tight, changing the door direction to swing into the hallway or bedroom creates greater accessibility for daily activities or for caregiver assistance. Barn-style sliding doors are also an option to provide more space, as well as for functionality and aesthetics. All doors can be coupled with automatic door openers. The sink may need to be replaced with a lower wheelchair-accessible sink.

Improving bathroom lighting and adding a bold color scheme are other great ways to prevent falls. Most seniors lose depth perception, so

incorporating brightly colored walls helps create a strong contrast against white fixtures. Similarly, ensuring that the bathroom is well lit, particularly at night, is important. Lighting options include motion-activated switches, LED lighting, back-lit mirrors and floor lighting under cabinets.

## **TO WRAP UP**

Other bathrooms in the house should also be reviewed and updated with appropriate fixtures. Attention should be paid to dangers in getting to the bathroom, particularly at night. These can be minimized through lighting, wall rails, slip-proof flooring, slip-proof socks, bed alarms and lowered beds.

COVID-19 has shown that most of us want to be in our homes for as long as possible; however, for many, this will require making changes. As an HME provider, when a customer asks how to make their home safer, have them consider moving the bathroom to the top of the list.

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