

# Universal Design

## PREPARE AHEAD

“Universal design” refers to building techniques that can result in an environment that is more accessible to people with limited mobility. As we age, it’s important to think about “aging in place” or the ability to remain living in one’s own home comfortably while aging, instead of moving to accommodate an increased need for maneuverability within the home. Preparing a home for senior living by removing physical barriers can be accomplished over time with small remodels, or at once with a major remodel project. Start early and adopt a long term approach.

## UNIVERSAL DESIGN TECHNIQUES:

### Increase maneuverability

- Single floor living – Single floor living can be accommodated by including a full bath, kitchen, laundry facilities and bedroom on the first floor, or add a separate mother in law apartment (see [Accessory Dwelling Unit Tip Sheet L-150](#)).
- Wide doorways and hallways – Design doorways at 36” wide and eliminate thresholds over ½” in height. Consider pocket doors which are completely out of the way when open.
- Avoid sunken living rooms.
- Consider removal of a non-weight-bearing wall where appropriate.
- Install handholds on stairs, and guardrails at changes in floor elevation to reduce falling hazards.
- Adding an unobtrusive ramp and wheelchair route between the driveway or garage and the house can be incorporated more easily into the home in the design phase or during a major remodel. The slope of the ramp should not exceed 1 vertical in 12 horizontal.
- Include space within the bathroom to maneuver a wheelchair or walker and sufficient space next to the toilet in order to back a wheelchair against the wall to transfer laterally onto the toilet.

### Surfaces

- Avoid countertops with sharp edges and smooth hard floors such as tile, hardwood and polished concrete. Softer, rougher materials such as cork, textured vinyl, linoleum or marmoleum are ideal to reduce falls due to slipping, and injury.
- Instead of installing regular cabinets under the sinks, consider a convertible cabinet, which has a lower section that can be easily removed to allow for wheelchair access.



### Convenience and Visibility

- Consider installing a seat in the shower as well as a low-flow hand-held shower unit.
- Install blocking for future installation of grab bars in the shower and behind the wall next to the toilet.
- Include lever-style handles instead of round door knobs or pulls, on cabinets, window controls, and faucets.
- Aging eyes require more light for both comfort and to avoid accidents. Bright task lighting is important, as is lighting on porches, in garages and paths of exit. Install plenty of switches for maximum versatility.
- Use thermostats and home security equipment with larger, senior friendly, easy to read and understand controls.

### Energy Efficiency

- Many seniors live on fixed incomes, which can lead to the inability to pay for the rising costs of utilities. Designing to increase energy efficiency helps to reduce utility bill costs. Strategies for increasing a home’s energy efficiency can be found on the Tacoma Public Utilities website at: <http://www.mytpu.org/your/ways-to-save/>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Universal Design Council, [www.EnvironmentsForAll.org](http://www.EnvironmentsForAll.org)  
Accessibility at Home, <http://accessibilityathome.org/>



**Note: This Tip Sheet does not substitute for codes and regulations.**

**The applicant is responsible for compliance with all codes and regulations, whether or not described in this document.**

**More information: City of Tacoma, Planning and Development Services | [www.tacomapermits.org](http://www.tacomapermits.org) (253) 591-5030**

To request this information in an alternative format or a reasonable accommodation, please call 253-591-5030 (voice).

TTY or STS users please dial 711 to connect to Washington Relay Services.

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## ASSISTANCE AND OPTIONS FOR SENIOR CITIZENS AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

**Building Permit Fee Waivers** – Fee waivers for building and land use permits are available in some circumstances, where the applicant can demonstrate that he/she qualifies as a senior citizen\* or permanently handicapped\*\*, as described in City Ordinance Number 25651.

- \*Senior Citizen – Any person, age 62 or older, and who qualifies for property tax reduction under the income guidelines as established by the State of Washington
- \*\*Handicapped – Any person who has a permanent physical or mental impairment which substantially limits that person's ability to perform one or more of the following activities: walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and/or manual tasks. Substantially shall mean a degree of impairment which places that person at an obvious disadvantage when compared to a person without said impairment. The applicant has the burden of establishing the fact of handicap to the satisfaction of the Building Official. Applicant must qualify for property tax reduction under the limited income guidelines as established by the State of Washington.

**Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs)** – The intent of an ADU is to provide homeowners with a means of companionship and security and to provide an increased choice of housing that responds to changing needs and lifestyles. [ADU Tip Sheet L-150](#) includes additional information about ADUs.

**Reasonable Accommodation** – A Reasonable Accommodation is authorization by the City to allow an individual to receive relief from a zoning code requirement. Any person having a disability who wishes to be excused from an otherwise applicable Land Use Regulatory Code requirement or someone acting on his or her behalf who can provide verifiable documentation of handicap eligibility and the need for accommodation may apply. [Reasonable Accommodation Tip Sheet L-050](#) includes additional information about the Reasonable Accommodation process.



**Tacoma Public Utility (TPU) Payment Assistance** – Tacoma Public Utilities and the City of Tacoma offer utility discount rates and utility assistance to customers who meet the income guidelines and other program qualifications. Applications must be filled out completely and returned to the Customer Solutions office.

For more information, visit the TPU Customer Solutions office, 3628 South 35th Street, Tacoma, WA, 253-502-8400, OR online:

<http://www.mytpu.org/your/payment-assistance.htm>.



**Pierce County Aging and Disability Resource Center** –

The Pierce County Aging and Disability Resource Center is located at 1305 Tacoma Avenue, Suite 104 Tacoma, WA and the service hours are 9 AM – 4 PM. They can also be reached via phone: 253-798-4600 or online:

[www.PierceADRC.org](http://www.PierceADRC.org)



**Pierce County Senior Links** – The Pierce County Assessor-Treasurer's Office has compiled a list of partner associations to assist you in maximizing your Senior Citizen benefits and services:

<https://www.co.pierce.wa.us/index.aspx?NID=2898Acce>



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