

## Virginia Everything on One Floor

By: [Judi Hasson and Mike Toner](#) | Source: AARP Bulletin Today | October 12, 2009

### Summary:

- *Universal design standards make houses more livable and visitable by removing barriers to access.*
- *Homes meeting these standards can receive an EasyLiving Home certification.*
- *Accessible homes allow boomers to age in place.*

Janis and Chris Mullsteff sold a house they had lived in for 42 years in June for an EasyLiving Home where they can eat, sleep and relax, all on the same floor.

Janis, 73, a retired registered nurse, has arthritis and back problems. She uses a walker or a cane to get around her house. She rarely went upstairs in her old house.

She has no need to go to the second floor in her new home.



Kitchen cabinets that are easily accessible from a seated position are one of many design features built into Janis Mullsteff's house near Richmond. AARP encourages homebuilders to remove access barriers from new construction.

*Photo by Chip Mitchell*

The master bedroom, kitchen, living room, laundry and bathroom are on the main

floor. There are four upstairs bedrooms for 13 grandchildren and 7 great-grandchildren to visit.

The Mullsteff's new home outside of Richmond, has many convenient options.

"Our house is great," she said. "I love the refrigerator with the bottom freezer door."

The couple can easily walk to a porch adjacent to the breakfast room without a step in the way.

"I didn't want to move at all," Mullsteff said, "but my husband realized my disabilities could get worse."

The Mullsteffs' house is certified as an [EasyLiving Home](#) because it meets certain [universal design standards](#) that make houses livable regardless of physical ability. (Other terms used for these types of homes include: [visitable](#), barrier free, easy access, [inclusive design](#), [human centered design](#) or adaptive environments.)

Four EasyLiving Homes have been built in Virginia since 2008. All include three principles: easy access via step-free outdoor entrances; easy passage with at least 32 inches of clearance in first-floor doorways; and easy use with a main floor bedroom, bath, kitchen and entertainment area. (An [informational video segment on EasyLiving Homes](#) was produced by the educational television program, the National Architecture Report.)

Other features may include safety rails in the bathroom, lever faucet handles, step-in tubs with fold-down seats, adjustable shelves, lever door handles, lower light switches and slip-resistant floor surfaces. Although retrofitting is possible, the most economical time to install such amenities is during construction.

"The cost of adding basic universal design features is negligible," said Jim Chapman, president of Jim Chapman Communities, which has developed four EasyLiving subdivisions in the Atlanta area. But he said most builders aren't likely to embrace universal design "until the market demands it."

Voluntary EasyLiving Homes programs also have been established in [Georgia](#), Kansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. Elsewhere, communities have adopted ordinances to require such features in new construction. Some are trying incentives like [expedited permitting to encourage builders to use universal design](#).

An [AARP Public Policy Institute report](#), "[Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability](#)," last year concluded, "Mandatory programs generally lead to better results," but AARP is seeking a middle ground between mandates and voluntary programs.

"Universal design standards have been around for 20 years, but they still don't have

much public traction,” said Amy Levner, AARP manager of [housing and mobility options](#). In 1960, AARP founder Ethel Percy Andrus pioneered the design concept.

“We clearly need to find a way to push this at the national level,” Levner said. “The boomers are aging rapidly, and they have clearly indicated they want to stay in their homes.”

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*Judi Hasson is a writer living in McLean; Va. Mike Toner is a writer living in Atlanta.*