

Safety

Designing for Security

by Greg Huntman, AIA, Pi Architects

One of the primary comforts of home is the sense of security. As seniors age they begin to require additional safety features that cannot be reasonably provided at home. These safety features compensate for the resident's physical and mental impairments to allow them to continue enjoying life.

The basic security design principles can be grouped into three categories; Accessibility, Safety and Assistance. By incorporating these principles to their fullest potential, they help turn an ordinary project into a home.

Accessibility

In order to make a facility accessible, hazards such as steps and projections need to be removed or protected to allow all residents to take full advantage of the site and building.

Sites are challenging, not only for wheelchairs or walkers, but also for residents with impaired eyesight or difficulties walking. By minimizing changes in levels and providing handrails at appropriate locations the site can become inviting and not an obstacle.

Accessibility regulations require all common use areas and 50 percent of the resident rooms and bathrooms be accessible in assisted living and nursing facilities. It is recommended that all resident rooms and bathrooms be accessible for more flexibility. This requires adequate maneuvering spaces at doors and bathroom fixtures.

Safety

Bathrooms are often the

most dangerous room for residents. By maximizing the use of safety features the risk of injury can be reduced. Grab bars should be provided at all toilets and showers. Decorative grab bars can be selected to minimize the institutional image and act as an additional towel bar. Sufficient space should be provided to allow residents to transfer to toilets with or without assistance. Floors should be selected to minimize the chances of slipping.

Handrails are an excellent safeguard against resident falls. Although they are not required in assisted living corridors they should be incorporated on at least one wall.

As seniors age, their visual acuity diminishes requiring higher light levels. By incorporating increased light levels and preventing glare, residents are better able to distinguish changes in surfaces and denote finer details.

Exterior lighting should be provided along entry and exit route as well as parking. This is especially crucial at changes in ground level or other hazards.

Finishes play a key role in the safety of a facility. Finishes should be considered based on their ability to protect the resident against potential injury. Carpet, although more difficult to clean, minimizes slips and pads falls. Counter tops should have rounded edges to minimize potential risk of injury. Wall and floor colors should be selected to accentuate the visibility of toilets and other objects.

The best protection against fires is a good fire alarm and fire sprinkler system. They are required in most facilities and are strongly encouraged in all facilities.

Each project is unique in its need for additional security control measures to protect against outside intruders. Most projects only require a main

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The attendant station at the Ashwood in Austin, Texas is disguised as a reception desk with direct view of the entry and living room



TALA

Texas Assisted

Living Association
823 Congress Ave.,
Suite 1300

Austin, TX 78701

Tel: 512 479 0425

Fax: 512 495 9031

<http://tala.home.texas.net>

E-mail: bsquires@eami.com

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Key Security Design Considerations

1. Maximize site and building accessibility
2. Increase interior and exterior lighting levels
3. Provide handrails throughout corridors
4. Select finishes that minimize hazards
5. Incorporate an interactive resident emergency call system
6. Encourage staff assistance and observation

controlled entrance. In areas prone to crime or where additional security controls are expected, access gates and access cards can be incorporated. In large facilities, cameras can provide additional supervision of entrances and exits, as well as blind corridors.

Assistance

The primary security feature of senior living facilities is having staff assistance available 24 hours a day. The locations of attendant stations and offices have a direct correlation to their ability to serve the residents and respond quickly.

The primary attendant station should be central with direct observation of the entry and activity areas. Attendant stations can be easily incorporated into activity areas by disguising them as a kitchen or library. Larger facilities may require multiple stations or a

separate reception area. The layout needs to take into consideration how visitors and staff enter the building after hours without diminishing security.

An emergency call system is a crucial element of staff assistance. By utilizing pendant call devices worn by residents and individual room call devices, staff can be quickly alerted when help is needed. Additional pagers should be provided for staff to ensure notification when they are away from the attendant station.

One of the biggest challenges is incorporating all these security design elements into an Alzheimer's unit for residents with an increased propensity for agitation, wandering and injury. Additional locking features are required for the safety of the residents. Magnetic locks interconnected with the fire

alarm provide the best control; however, many local jurisdictions will require delayed egress devices. These devices sound an alarm for five to fifteen seconds, while the panic bar is depressed, before releasing the door. Where site permits, another solution is providing a large fenced yard with secure gates. The fence can also serve as a place where residents can be gathered and supervised during a fire.

The goal is to provide a sanctuary for the residents to feel safe and secure while being self-sufficient. By incorporating accessibility and safety features with staff supervision, residents can enjoy a more fulfilling and meaningful lifestyle.

Greg Huntman is president of Pi Architects in Austin, Texas and is a certified assisted living manager. Call 512-231-1910.



The Barton House in Austin, Texas utilizes a variety of security features to provide a safe home-like environment.