The Western Rural states are aging. It is expected that by 2025, Montana’s population will be the fourth oldest state in the union. It’s also estimated that by 2030, Montana will be one of ten states in the country to have more people over the age of 65 than under the age of 18, and it will be one of only six states to have 25 percent of its population aged 65 and older.

Policy makers are reshaping Medicare; politicians are trying to protect Social Security… but what are each of us doing to be sure that we can age-in-place in our own homes? Each day, 10,000 Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) are celebrating their 65th birthday and joining the ranks of “older adults.”
Accessible housing with universal design features is critical to our ability to house and care for this large aging demographic while protecting individuals’ wishes for dignity, control, and independence. If we want to maintain control of our lives, we need to look ahead and plan. Most of us work towards maintaining our health and extending our independent years, but we must also recognize that injury and illness may impose limitations on our mobility without warning. Our environment must also be ready to meet our needs to allow for ongoing independence.

If you fell or required surgery today and needed to use a walker or wheelchair, could you safely go home during and/or after your rehabilitation?

What are the costs of NOT going home?
The national average monthly costs of staying in a nursing home in a double occupancy room for one person are about $6,692.00 and are expected to increase 3.53 percent in the next five years. This does not include the costs of physician care, rehabilitation, supplies or equipment.

Are you or your parents “empty nesters”?
This is the best time to make changes in home location and/or structure. Before we consider the structure of your home itself, what about your community? An aging-friendly community is safe, accessible, includes level and well-lit sidewalks, provides many transportation alternatives if driving becomes difficult, and has good medical care locally. In some areas, you might find there may be Village networks, cohousing neighborhoods and other creative housing solutions for elders as well. You may also opt to look for or promote a “Blue Zone Project.” This project is a community well-being improvement initiative designed to make healthy choices easier through permanent changes to environment, policy, and social networks. This may include greater disability access at outdoor activities, acquisition of easily accessible bus lines, multi-generational community centers, and others.

Once you decide where to live, this is a perfect time to make sure that your home will serve your needs as you age. Considerations and changes should occur LONG before they are needed. Modifications to your existing home may or may not be feasible or affordable. At times, it becomes more realistic to move into a new home. It is recommended your home meet basic requirements of Universal Design. In addition to supporting you later, universal design will make your home “visitable” to others with disabilities such as aging parents or neighbors.

When my husband and I bought our last home, we found that living far out of town with a lot of land, limited home and community-based services, and dark roads was not a reasonable choice as we approached retirement. Although our current home does not include all aspects of Universal Design,
the needed changes are simple and affordable. Our second floor is a wonderful addition now, but our home would also allow us to live on the entry or main floor if we were not able to negotiate or adapt steps later.

**What questions should I ask?**
Basic questions and discussion starters should include:

1. What Assistive Technology (AT) and/or home modifications are needed now and what may be needed in the foreseeable future?
2. Can this home allow for all of the needed modifications?
3. Is it better to modify or move?
4. Who can plan the modifications?
5. Who can make the needed changes?
6. How can we afford the modifications and AT that we need?

**Who can help you?**
As always, working with a knowledgeable therapist, architect, contractor, and/or builder is key to ultimate success. When available, try to select a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) who has specific training in this area. If you are working with an occupational or physical therapist, you might inquire if they have completed the Executive Certificate in Home Modifications. Although these certificates are not mandatory, they may be a key to someone who is more experienced in providing these services.

**What would we like to see happen?**
According to AARP, nearly 90 percent of seniors want to stay in their own homes as they age, oftentimes referred to as “aging-in-place.” AARP, the National Association of Home Builders, and MetLife Mature Marketing Institute have all defined parameters of the ideal home to support aging-in-place and workbooks are available on their websites. (See Resources.)

**What do I need at a minimum?**
Basic building parameters for an accessible and safe home include accommodations such as:

- Safety features including non-slip floor surfaces
- Bathroom aides such as grab bars
- A personal alert system that allows people to call for help in emergencies
- Entrance without steps or “zero entry” and a covered entry
- Wider doorways
- Lever-handled doorknobs
- Higher electrical outlets
- Lower electrical switches

Assistive Technology used within an accessible home environment can further allow for independence and safety. These items vary in price, technology needed in the home such as wireless communication, and level of cognition and physical abilities needed to utilize the product. AT that supports aging-in-place falls within one or more of the following categories:

- Physical activity monitors to facilitate healthy lifestyles
- Fall sensors and alarms or Personal Emergency Response Systems (PERS)
- Medication management technology
- Sensors to alert caregivers of elopement, out of bed, etc.
- Mobility assistive devices
- Adaptive equipment for self-care, cooking, dressing, bathing, and toileting
- Home health monitoring technology for blood pressure, diabetic care, sleep patterns, etc.
- Vast amounts of apps for phones, tablets, laptops, and home computers to enhance:
  - Organization
  - Schedule maintenance
  - Memory games and cognition improvement
  - Simple access to communication with family and friends
  - Control of home functions such as lighting, door locks, etc.
Meet your state’s Assistive Technology Program!
Every state has a federally-funded Assistive Technology Program and you can find the location of yours by visiting: http://esnapprojects.org/allcontacts/statewidecontacts.html. These programs are supported by the Assistive Technology (AT) Act of 1998 which provides funding for education, demonstrations, training, and loans of assistive technology to support independent living and a better quality of life. The staff of these programs can help you determine the best AT to meet your needs and may have items in inventory for loan to allow you to “try before you buy.” To learn about the law visit https://www.disability.gov/assistive-technology-act/. Demonstrations and loans are free to state residents.

How do I keep up with the newest technology?
One outstanding website for non-commercial, evidence-based assessment of new technologies is found online at Tech Enhanced Life. This website will help you learn about reviews of many devices to support successful and affordable aging-in-place. (See Resources.)

Planning ahead to successfully age-in-place should begin with looking for that perfect home or updating your current home. Failing to plan may result in time spent in nursing homes at a great financial and emotional cost to you and your family. You maintain health insurance for your body. Now take steps to insure that your environment will support you as well!

RESOURCES FOR AGING IN PLACE

Assistive Technology Program
resnaprojects.org/allcontacts/statewidecontacts.html

Blue Zones
bluezones.com/about-blue-zones/

CAPS Builder
nahb.org/en/find/directory-designee.aspx?sort=%40last-name%40069%20ascending&f=fdesignationsheldabbreviation%40069=[caps]

Census Data

Executive Certificate in Home Modifications

and/or
homemods.org/online-courses/legal/certificate.shtml

MetLife Aging in Place Workbook

MetLife Aging in Place 2.0
metlife.com/mmi/research/aging-in-place.html#insights

Montana Population information
worldpopulationreview.com/states/montana-population/

National Association of Home Builders
nahb.org/

Nursing Home Costs by State
skillednursingfacilities.org/resources/nursing-home-costs/

Promoting Aging in Place PowerPoint
aarp.org/home-garden/livable-communities/info-11-2011/solutions-forum-aging-in-place.html

Residential Design for Aging in Place
ageinplacebook.com/

State Survey of Livability Policies and Practices
aarp.org/home-garden/livable-communities/info-11-2011/Aging-In-Place.html

Tech Enhanced Life
techenhancedlife.com/

Toolkit for Local Governments
aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/livable-communities/plan/planning/aging-in-place-a-toolkit-for-local-governments-aarp.pdf

Universal Design
universaldesign.com/what-is-ud/ and http://www.udeworld.com/visitability.html

Village Networks
agingincommunity.com/