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# Vision Loss? Simple Aids Can Help

By KAYA LATERMAN

Coping with vision impairment has become a necessity for many more people as the baby boom generation ages, but some simple improvements can help aging homeowners stay independent and safe.

It can be something as basic as painting a door frame a different color or getting rid of dinner plates that blend into a tablecloth. "They're mostly subtle changes, but it can have a high impact," said Charnora Simon, the coordinator of the adaptive living program at Helen Keller Services for the Blind, a nonprofit group.

She recalled one client, for example, who was having a tough time eating and drinking without spilling things. Ms. Simon spotted the problem right away: The client was using beige dishes and mugs on a white tablecloth.

"It was an easy fix," Ms. Simon said. She suggested switching either the tablecloth or the dishware to a darker color to better define the objects.

For people who have lost some vision but who still see shades or have some visual acuity, using color contrast can help determine where things should be located, according to a 2015 report about low vision architecture and design from the National Institute of Building Sciences, a nongovernmental organization.

At Selis Manor, a 12-story affordable housing complex for the visually impaired in Chelsea, the doors, door frames and walls inside the apartments have all been painted different colors. The contrast can help indicate where a door is and whether it is open or closed, said Magnus Magnusson, whose Manhattan-based design firm, Magnusson Architecture and Planning, is overseeing a three-year renovation of the building that will finish in a few months.

Marking stairs and cabinet doors with bright-colored tape can also help accentuate edges. "Bold colors and textured markings and walls help people identify where they are," Mr. Magnusson said.

Many people will have to tackle small home improvement projects like these if they start to lose their vision, he said.

The number of Americans with blindness or low vision, which is defined as having an uncorrectable vision loss that interferes with daily activities, is steadily growing. There were more than 3.3 million people over 40 who were blind or had low vision in 2004, a figure expected to double by 2030 because more people will be found to have diabetes and other chronic diseases, and the nation's population is rapidly aging, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Other practical household changes in-



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clude using solid colors for floors or kitchen countertops instead of patterned tiles or designs to make it easier to find things that have dropped.

"You take for granted how easy it is to clean something up" when you have your vision, said Gerald Hayes, who became legally blind about nine years ago because of complications from glaucoma.

Mr. Hayes, 74, said he liked to keep clear paths in the living room of his one-bedroom apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, to

Paula Dertouzos, 68, who was born with congenital glaucoma and lost sight in both eyes by the time she was a teenager, lives at Selis Manor in Chelsea, where she is happy with technological upgrades like a new intercom system, an emergency pull cord, above left, and a National Library Service digital player for audiobooks.

avoid tripping. "I know exactly how many steps it takes from my front door to the living room chair, but I certainly don't need things in my way," he said.

Paula Dertouzos, who lost sight in both eyes as a teenager from congenital glaucoma, agreed, saying she kept her apartment at Selis Manor "open and airy." Ms. Dertouzos bought a smaller couch and chairs for her living room, which are pushed up against the wall and window. She also got rid of her coffee table after "killing her legs" one too many times.

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"I call it creative modification," said Ms. Dertouzos, 68. "If you want to be independent, you need a home that's functional."

Ms. Dertouzos said she especially liked some of the new technological upgrades that were included in the overhaul at her building. A talking thermostat has made adjusting the temperature much simpler, and a new intercom system has made it easier to contact the front desk.

Although she hasn't ordered any goods using the Amazon Echo she received for Christmas, Ms. Dertouzos said she used the smart speaker to check the weather, play music and participate in what has turned into one of her favorite activities, a daily quiz game.

Ruthie Aybar, who lost most of her sight because of a retinal degenerative disease, lives with three of her four children in a Downtown Brooklyn apartment. She said one of the most important changes she made involved the lighting in her home.

"I had track lighting but they're really not good," she said. She bought new lamps and installed LED light bulbs. Some of the

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lamps bend, so she can point them where she needs light, and blinds or shades that adjust easily help keep out the glare, she added.

She'd like more sunlight, though, after living in a unit that faced an indoor courtyard for 12 years. "Your light source makes a huge difference," she said.

In the city, individuals with low vision or blindness can contact local nonprofit organizations like Helen Keller, Lighthouse Guild or Visions/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired to help them adapt to a new living environment. National organizations include the American Foundation for the Blind and the National Federation of the Blind.

Many of these agencies have occupational therapists and staff members who teach classes and make house calls to help determine what needs to be altered and what adaptive products might be needed to help people with impaired vision remain in their homes.

Ms. Aybar, 42, said she recently started using a cellphone app developed by Microsoft called Seeing AI, an intelligent camera app that can verbally describe what is viewed through the phone.

"It doesn't work correctly all the time," she said, "but the fact that I have a tool on my phone is simply amazing."