

BUILDING SAFER, MORE ACCESSIBLE AND MORE AFFORDABLE HOMES FOR EVERYONE

With Canada's population aging at a faster rate than ever before, there is a growing demand across the country for homes and communities that are attractive, comfortable, and accessible for people of all ages and abilities. Some developers, however, still assume that incorporating accessibility or universal design features will either make their projects look too "institutional," or end up costing them or their customers too much money.

The B.C.-based SAFERhome Standards Society is turning that assumption on its head by proving that universally designed homes not only cost about the same as a conventional home, they also look better, are worth more—and can appeal to a much larger market of potential buyers.

SAFERhome: a brief timeline

"SAFERhomes look just like any other beautiful home," says SAFERhome Executive Director, Gordon Porter. "Except they have these simple, basic design features in place that can last a lifetime. Best of all, most of these features cost almost nothing to add. But they create homes you can sell to 100% of the population, instead of just the young and able-bodied."

Essentially, SAFERhome is a certification program that encourages safer home environments for people of all ages and abilities, by setting out a series of housing standards and practices that are safe, healthy and sustainable for everyone.

Today, the non-profit SAFERhome Society provides a wide range of services to homebuyers, municipalities and the construction industry, from educational programs and planning assistance to home inspections and new home certification. When it was originally founded in 2004, however, the focus was almost entirely on helping developers understand the concrete benefits—and true costs—of implementing universal design features into their projects.

Quick facts

- Seniors are the fastest-growing age group in the country. Nearly one in six Canadians are over the age of 65. By the year 2051, that number is expected to grow to almost one in four.
- SAFERhome is the only 100% measurable Universal Home Design certification standard in the world.
- SAFERhomes offer stylish, comfortable and sustainable living environments that can adapt easily to changing needs, and which appeal to people of all ages and at any stage of life.
- For every extra dollar invested in universal design features, it is estimated that a SAFERhome can return up to 10 dollars.
- More than 400 homes have been SAFERhome-certified in British Columbia.

Source: SAFERhome Standards Society

What is universal design?

Universal design is a set of features, principles and strategies that can be incorporated into the design and construction of a home, to allow it to be adapted easily and cost-effectively to keep pace with changing needs. Universally designed houses allow their occupants to live safely, comfortably and independently in their home as they age, without the need for any costly upgrades or renovations.

"If you want to widen a hallway or move a light switch in a home that's already built, it's a huge project that will cost you thousands of dollars," Porter explains. "It's so much easier and less expensive to just take those long-term needs into account at the design stage. So to make a real difference in people's lives, we knew we had to bring the builders and developers on board first."

One of the biggest challenges they encountered was the perception that following universal design principles would either be prohibitively expensive, or would result in esthetically unappealing homes that people simply didn't want to buy.

According to Porter, the success and marketability of the first few SAFERhome-certified houses went a long way toward addressing those concerns. They also provided concrete proof that SAFERhomes could be a great investment.

"We proved that you could build gorgeous homes that were completely SAFERhome-certified for as little as a few hundred dollars more than a traditional house. In many cases, those homes sold more quickly and for a higher price than conventional houses in the very same neighbourhoods."

The SAFERhome standards: creating a better standard of living

At the core of the SAFERhome program is a set of 19 universal design standards that any house must meet in order to be certified as a SAFERhome. Those standards are divided into three key categories:

- Structural and design standards
 - Exterior and interior thresholds must be flush and meet minimum code restraints.
 - Hallways must be at least 1,016 to 1,067 mm (40 to 42 in.) wide.
 - Doorways and pinch points must be at least 864 to 914 mm (34 to 36 in.) wide.
 - Washroom walls have to be reinforced with block lumber at tub, shower and toilet areas.
 - Staircases should be 1,016 to 1,067 mm (40 to 42 in.) wide.
 - Walls at the top of all stairs must be reinforced with block lumber.
 - Space must be provided in multi-storey homes in stacked closets or a staircase for an elevator to be installed if desired in the future.
 - Sink cabinets must be removable to make room for a wheelchair.
- Electrical and telecom standards
 - Light switches should be positioned at 1,067 mm (42 in.) to centre of the electrical box from the finished floor.
 - Electric receptacles must be positioned at 457 mm (18 in.) to centre of the electrical box from the finished floor.
 - Electrical receptacles must be located beside windows and toilets, at the bottom of stairways, above external doors, on the front of kitchen counters and at a central control node for smart home options.
 - Four-plex receptacles should be installed in the master bedroom, home office, garage and rec room.
 - RG-6 coaxial cable runs must all return to one central area.
 - Telephone lines must be pre-wired for smart home applications.
 - Low-voltage runs should all return to a central area.
 - Larger smart electrical boxes must be installed for all light switches and A/C receptacles.
- Plumbing standards
 - Bath and shower controls should be positioned for accessibility.
 - Waste pipes should be brought in at 305 to 356 mm (12 to 14 in.) to the centre of the pipe from the floor.
 - Pressure and temperature control valves must be installed on all shower faucets.

The SAFERhome Standards



SAFERhome standards



Structural and design standards



Electrical and telecom standards



Plumbing standards



SAFERhome and the City of Vernon: building new partnerships and increasing housing affordability

Today, more than 400 homes in British Columbia have already been SAFERhome-certified. As the program's reach and visibility have increased, it has also expanded to include partnerships with key industry groups and associations ranging from BC Housing to the Canada Green Building Council, as well as several B.C. municipalities.

The cities of Maple Ridge, Vernon and Armstrong, for example, have all joined the SAFERhome Society to promote SAFERhome certification in their communities. The City of Vernon took its support one step further, by including the requirement that all new private-sector rental developments that receive a rental housing grant from the municipality must be designed and constructed to meet all SAFERhome standards, and certified by a SAFERhome inspector.

"The City of Vernon is an active supporter of SAFERhome standards being incorporated in all residential construction," says Vernon Mayor, Akbal Mund. "We consider including SAFERhome standards in new homes to be a 'no brainer.' It allows homeowners and tenants to live comfortably and age in place without the need for costly and inconvenient home renovations."

The rental housing grants, which provide up to \$4,000 per unit, are available to any new private-sector multi-family development with at least four dwelling units. The grants were introduced by City Council to encourage the construction and operation of new rental housing in the community. There is also a separate grant program available for non-profit rental housing.

According to Dale Rintoul, Manager of Current Planning for the City of Vernon, the price of both rental and ownership housing has been rising dramatically in Vernon over the past few years, as it has for much of the Okanagan and other parts of British Columbia. SAFERhome is one of the ways the City is working to encourage the creation of more affordable housing options, lower energy and operating costs for both tenants and homeowners, and help meet the housing needs of residents of all ages, abilities and income levels.

"The 19 standards set out in the SAFERhome program can be exceedingly cost-effective when they're included as part of new construction," Rintoul explains. "It's a perfect fit for our residents, and an important part of our overall affordable housing strategy."

As a result of these and other efforts, one major builder in Vernon has already become SAFERhome-certified and constructed several homes in full accordance with SAFERhome standards. One of those homes was featured at a recent affordable housing forum.

Next steps: the way forward

Going forward, Porter says he could see the program expanding to other provinces and territories, and potentially even reaching out to homebuyers directly.

"Our main focus now is on educating the public as well as builders, developers, architects and designers about the concept, and rolling it out across Canada. All we need to do is the same thing in other provinces that we've done here in B.C., that is have enough local inspectors on hand to carry out the certifications."

"Ultimately, it would be great to get to the point where we have consumers coming to their builder or designer, and asking for a SAFERhome by name. There's a lot of work still to be done. But there's no doubt in my mind that universal design is the way of the future, and I'm confident we'll eventually get there."

To find out more, visit the SAFERhome website at <http://saferhomesociety.com/>





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