

Remaining independent at Vinson Hall

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At Vinson Hall Retirement Community in McLean, the emphasis is on the "independent" in independent living.

At The Innovative Model of Living, CEO Kathy Martin has turned a Vinson Hall apartment into a showcase that combines technology and design to keep aging seniors independent as long as possible.

That philosophy is obvious when showcase visitors are welcomed into the apartment's bathroom – by the toilet, which obligingly opens its own lid whenever someone stands in front of it. The Toto Washlet Toilet also flushes itself, has at least six buttons, and incorporates a bidet with varying speeds and angles of spray. It even has an air dryer. That sounds like a lot of hardware for a toilet, but just like everything in The Innovative Model of Living, it has a point.

"Hygiene is a big concern for the elderly," designer Moira Leite says. "This system makes sure they're clean everywhere ... with this, maybe a nurse only has to come in once a week instead of every day."

The toilet and a wristwatch that monitors residents' falls are technological attention grabbers, but most of what Leite has done to the apartment is simple. She's focused on removing hazards, and making moving about and functioning in the apartment as easy as possible for everyone.

For instance, cabinets have big handles that are easy for arthritic hands to grasp, and doorways have thresholds that are flush with the floor. The kitchen counter extends out from the stove in a smooth unbroken line to an island that serves as the apartment's eating area, allowing unsteady hands to go from cooking to eating without ever risking a spill.

Most of the items in the apartment are not designed specifically for the elderly but are attractive items Leite selected with special requirements in mind. The kitchen stools are 22 inches high, four inches higher than most chairs. According to Leite, the extra height means an elderly person "won't have to drop as far down into it, it's easier on their back and easier to stand up from."

"When people come to a retirement home, they bring all their furniture with them, ... that makes things difficult for them," said Leite, pointing out that hazards like cords, carpets and sharp corners are missing from the apartment. Leite designed the apartment using feedback from Vinson Hall residents, a plan that reflects a change in the elder-care industry.

"There is a push to change from an institutional culture to resident-centered culture, and we want to be open to that," Administrator Dinah Brown said. The staff at Vinson Hall plans to keep the The Innovative Model of Living open for exhibition for a year, and to continually add to it.

"It's a laboratory," Leite said.