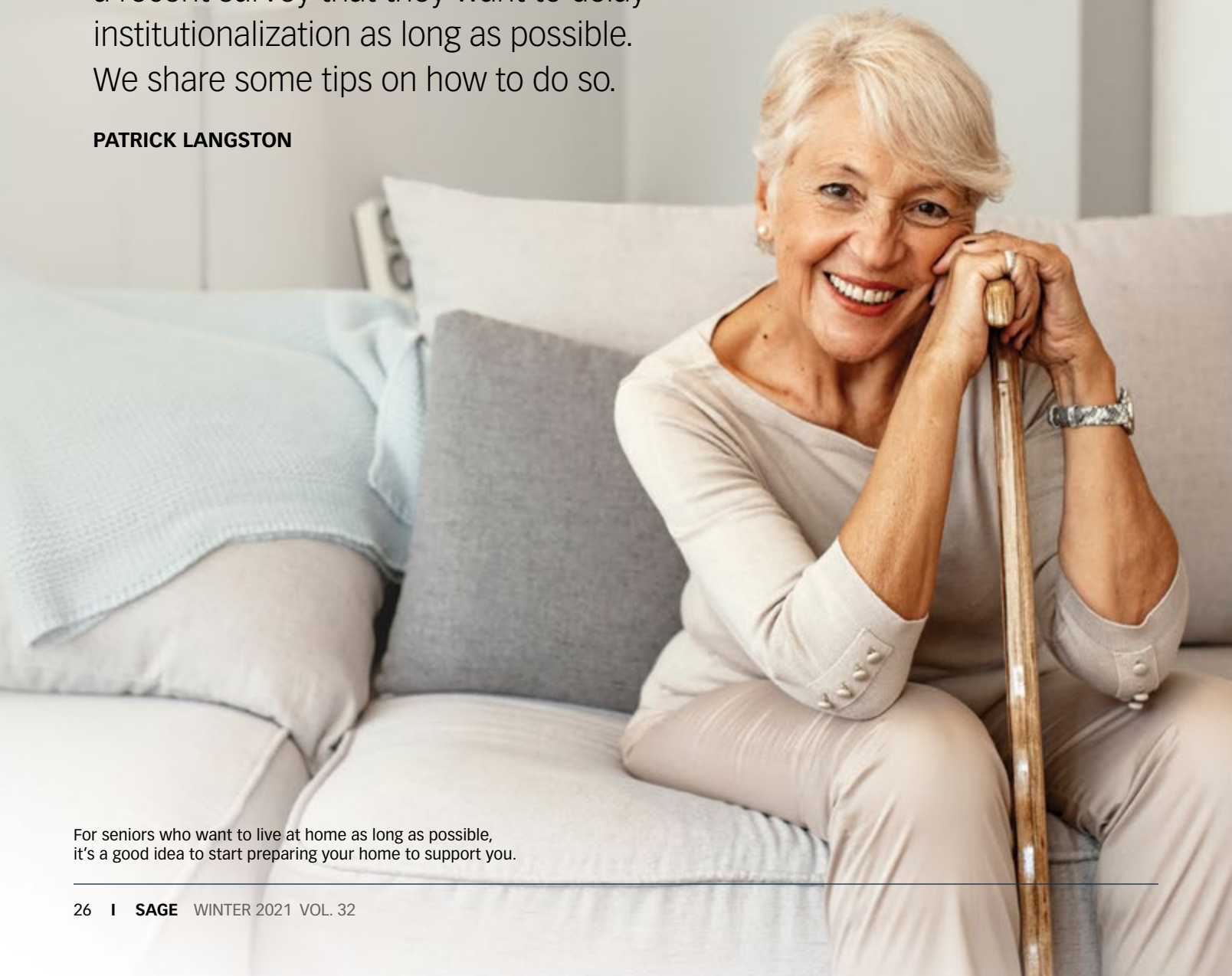


# AGING IN PLACE PERFECTLY

A full 81 per cent of seniors reported in a recent survey that they want to delay institutionalization as long as possible. We share some tips on how to do so.

**PATRICK LANGSTON**



For seniors who want to live at home as long as possible, it's a good idea to start preparing your home to support you.

Start now. That's the takeaway when it comes to safely and comfortably aging in place, which simply means remaining in your own home for as long as you can.

It's certainly what a lot of us desire. A survey commissioned by March of Dimes earlier this year found 78 per cent of Canadians and 81 per cent of seniors want to age in place. COVID-19 deaths in long-term care facilities have doubtless heightened our desire to delay institutionalization as long as possible.

Problem is, while we may have financial plans to see us through retirement, we put off preparing our homes to support us, sometimes until it's too late. A homeowner with diminishing eyesight trips on a scatter rug, breaks a hip, lands in hospital and, instead of going back to her beloved but unsafe home, lives out the rest of her days in long-term care.

"We all feel younger than we are and although we know we're aging, we typically don't change our behaviours until we have to," says Marnie Courage, CEO of Winnipeg's Enabling Access and a registered occupational therapist specializing in aging in place. "If your



Marnie Courage, CEO of Winnipeg's Enabling Access

needs change, your environment has to change."

In your home, that can mean anything from better lighting to a more accessible bathroom with a walk-in shower to simply ditching your hazardous scatter rugs.

Courage helps identify appropriate changes through a detailed assessment of the homeowner, including cognitive and mobility challenges, the client's home and the activities they do in their home. An assessment by her company typically costs \$400 to \$500 and gives the homeowner the information needed to make informed decisions about where they live.

Aging safely in place brings important benefits, says Courage. For example, life-sustaining relationships — with neighbours, nearby family, even pets — can remain intact, which may not happen if we have to move to a distant condo or get shunted off to a nursing home.

Courage points out that modifying a home for aging in place can also benefit others. For example, re-landscaping a front yard so there are no steps to mount — a good example of "barrier-free design" — could also be a boon to a young parent with a stroller or a middle-aged person with disabilities.

No matter the modification, adapting a home for aging in place starts with a reality check, according to Roger P. Gervais, an Ottawa-based certified aging-in-place specialist (CAPS). That check includes recognizing that our homes aren't always our allies and that decisions made in haste — piecemeal renovations after a nasty accident, for example — tend not to be good ones and can be costly because they're rushed.

"The second your abilities and needs change, your home becomes a liability, health- and safety-wise — and financially," says Gervais.

Making provisions now to age in place means you can formulate staggered renovation plans. Perhaps you first make your main bathroom accessible with a walk-in shower, a floating vanity for wheelchair use, a raised toilet and grab bars for safety. Then, down the road you revamp the kitchen with pull-down upper cabinetry, more clearance space for a walker or wheelchair and slip-resistant floors.

### Tips for aging in place

- Accessible bathrooms are an aging-in-place must. Grab bars, a curb-less shower and a raised toilet or a toilet-seat extender are smart investments.
- In the kitchen, a microwave at or just below counter height makes lifting cookware easier.
- A kitchen countertop with contrasting colour around the edge warns older eyes about where the counter ends, decreasing the chance of spills.
- Doorway openings should be 32 inches or wider for walkers and wheelchairs.
- Dump the throw rugs, which are tripping hazards because we don't lift our feet as high when we age and often don't see as well. Installing non-glare, non-slip flooring is also a smart idea.
- Light switch covers are more clearly visible if the colour contrasts with the wall.
- Stairs need to be brightly lit with handrails on both sides.
- Ensure indoor walking areas, especially around furniture, are well-lit and free of clutter.
- Install lever-style handles on doors and bathroom taps.

“Fortunately, some renovation companies are doing beautiful (aging in place) designs,” says Gervais. “You can have a high-end bathroom that is friendly versus looking institutional.”

Staging your modifications also means you can space out renovation costs according to your needs and budget.

Those costs depend on everything from the nature of the project to the type of home and material costs, which have been fluctuating crazily because the pandemic has interrupted supply chains.



Jack Parsons, the CAPS co-founder of K & P Contracting Ltd. in St. John’s.

For example, a stair lift for homeowners with mobility issues and a straight staircase can run \$2,500 to \$5,000, while a full-blown kitchen reno might easily top \$50,000.

Government programs can help some seniors with the cost of home renovations for aging in place. For instance, Alberta’s seniors home adaptation and repair program (SHARP) offers an equity-based low-interest loan of up to \$40,000 for homeowners with an annual income of \$75,000 or less. Other provinces, including British Columbia and Ontario, have tax credit schemes. Some may also be eligible for programs to assist with property taxes, caregiving and other expenses when aging in place.

When spending money on renovations to age in place, don’t forget the potential impact on your estate, cautions Jack Parsons, the CAPS co-founder of K & P Contracting Ltd. in St. John’s, N.L.

“If (something) is going to cost five dollars, but in terms of equity you’re only going to get a dollar back, well, that’s a problem.”

Parsons says bathrooms can be the trickiest to renovate for aging in place



Roger P. Gervais, Ottawa-based certified aging-in-place specialist (CAPS)

because there is often little room in which to work and wheelchairs or walkers demand space for manoeuvring. He says older bathrooms that have a bathtub with a built-in shower are especially dangerous because of the risk of slipping and should be swapped for a walk-in shower.

When hiring a renovator for aging in place, you need someone with a track record in this specialized area. They also need to provide references and show proof of liability insurance. If you’ve had an occupational therapist do an assessment, they should be able to suggest a reliable renovator.

Parsons also says to do what you’d do when hiring any renovator. Check their Better Business Bureau record. Find out how long the company has been in business. And “sit down and have a good conversation. Make sure the contractor talks about equity, talks about budget (so you can say), ‘Yup, he knows what he’s talking about.’” ■

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An Ottawa-area writer, **Patrick Langston** knows his 117-year-old farmhouse is not conducive to aging in place. He’s working on the necessary upgrades.

## Aging-in-place resources

**Thinking about your future? Plan now to Age in Place — A checklist (Government of Canada)**

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/seniors/forum/aging-checklist.html>

**Aging in place (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation — CMHC)**

<https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/professionals/industry-innovation-and-leadership/industry-expertise/accessible-adaptable-housing/aging-in-place>

**Aging in place safely and independently (CMHC)**

<https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/consumers/owning-a-home/aging-in-place>

**Aging in Place (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists)**

<https://caot.ca/site/adv/aginginplace?nav=sidebar>

**Aging in Place Toolkit (United Way British Columbia & the Aga Khan Council of Canada)**

<https://aginginplaceplan.ca>