SENIOR LIVING: FLOORING

Safer surfaces for seniors are an underrated asset

From outdoor walkways to pool decks and common areas to living rooms, senior living communities are addressing the finer points of resident safety and comfort from the ground up. It's a simple solution really, and it starts with the flooring.

For senior communities everywhere, underfoot stability is key to preventing falls, and that stability is largely dependent on the flooring surface. Many don't give a second thought to how the right choice of flooring can make a big difference in fall risk reduction, but it can shift the odds significantly for senior populations trying to avoid fall-based injuries. Just one of the many little-known tips is this: Rolled flooring has fewer transitions, and less transitions means a smoother surface, and decreased tripping hazards – something to keep in mind when the choice is between rolled flooring and tiles.

Another surprising safety benefit of surface choice is in the color. Lighter-colored flooring provides visual depth, meaning that it's easier for residents to perceive distance and progression, which makes it easier to navigate stairs, hallways, corners and even entranceways. Darker colors can camouflage some things, but that can be a disadvantage in senior living environments where hard-to-see edges, lips or height changes can create risks. If your desired flooring is darker in color, try to ensure that it has a generous amount of lighter flecks or a recognizable pattern, to break up the solid dark surface and create depth.

Shiela Stevenson
Flooring design consultant, Wellness Flooring

In fitness or activity areas, energy absorption is a flooring attribute that isn't always recognized, unless you don't have it. Proper underlayment or even some of today's woven vinyl or luxury vinyl plank products have energy absorption qualities that can dampen sound as well as cushion the impact of walking, playing, sitting, or doing anything on top of the surface. Rubberized options are usually the first choice for fitness or activity areas, but current vinyl options can be luxurious and aesthetically attractive and still have high-quality energy absorption qualities.

The comfort of carpet has long been a popular choice, but thick carpets create mobility issues in many cases. If residents use walkers, canes or wheelchairs, carpet can be a challenge. Anything but low-profile carpeting in active aging or senior living environments can be a tripping hazard, which should be avoided.

That's not to say that safety-friendly flooring can't be cozy and comfortable. Current woven vinyl options are hygienic and energy absorbing, and with the nearly infinite color and pattern variety, the choices are just as easily used on yachts and in country clubs or spas as they are in condominiums and community centers.

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Speaking of which, outdoor walkways and pool decks (wet areas) are usually covered in mats to prevent slips and falls, especially in senior living communities. Tile options can be beautiful, but slippery is the enemy of safety, and once you cover the surface in non-slip mats the point of having a gorgeous floor is lost. Plus, the mats themselves can be tripping hazards, much like throw rugs. What's the point?

There are several new materials that are both nonslip and stunning to look at. In wet areas, woven vinyl options work very well in all conditions, are easy to keep clean, and have impressive anti-slip ratings. There are wood-grain vinyl options in the luxury vinyl plank category that are also non-slip, and these are showing up in kitchens, hallways, bathrooms and living rooms all over the country, making life easier with dramatically lower fall risks.

Another clever use of flooring to increase safety in senior living communities is cognitively motivated. Communities use flooring options to differentiate activity sections, or even floors of buildings, to make it

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Robert Smith
Economic Development Director
303-987-7732
rsmith@lakewood.org
www.lakewood.org
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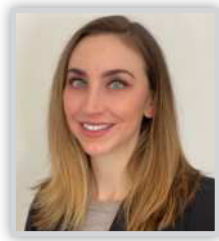

Stephanie Pitts-Noggle
Economic Development Manager
303-651-0128
stephanie@longmont.org
www.longmont.org
Targeted Industries: Smart Manufacturing, Food & Beverage, Business Catalysts, Knowledge Creation & Deployment

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Jeff Holwell
Director of Economic Development and Public Affairs
303-708-1818
jeff.holwell@cityoflonetree.com
http://www.cityoflonetree.com
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Raymond Gonzales
CEO
303-620-8092
raymond.gonzales@metrodenver.org
www.metrodenveredc.org
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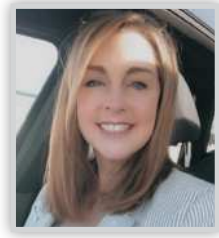

Allison Moeding
Economic Development Director
303-450-8743
amoeding@northglenn.org
www.northglenn.org/biz
Targeted Industries: Advanced Manufacturing, Retail, Restaurants, Health & Wellness, and Hospitality

NORTHWEST DOUGLAS COUNTY EDC

Trista Borrego
Interim President
303-791-3500 ext. 4
tborrego@nwdouglascounty.org
www.nwdouglascounty.org
Targeted Industries: Aerospace, Health Care, Outdoor Recreation, Professional Services, Technology

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Jill Mendoza, CEcD
Economic Development Manager
303-499-3675 ext. 141
jillm@superiorcolorado.gov
https://www.superiorcolorado.gov/
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Adam Krueger, CEcD
Economic Development Director
303-538-7398
Adam.Krueger@thorntonco.gov
www.businessinthornton.com
Targeted Industries:

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Stephanie Troller
Economic Resilience Manager
303-658-2318
stroller@cityofwestminster.us
www.westminstereconomicdevelopment.us
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Stacy Miller
Economic Development Director
970-674-2414
smiller@windsorgov.com
www.windsorgov.com
Targeted Industries: Manufacturing; Retail Trade; Professional, Scientific and Technical Services; Accommodation and Food Services

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Fussy

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food service venues or a fitness center – opening the door to potential new residents and revenue streams.

• *Programming smaller living units and fewer floor plan types* to better accommodate the stacking of units could result in reduced development costs.

• *Thoughtful space planning* to incorporate cost-saving aspects into an attractive residential unit. This may include thoughtful flow patterns, large windows bringing in natural daylight, patios or balconies, which can make the units feel more spacious and further adaptability of units when more care and accessibility is needed in the future.

• *Smart-food serving venues*. Designing smaller kitchen footprints can help maximize space and reduce costs. For examples, the sous vide cooking technique can cut hours of in-house prep time down to minutes, and ordering pre-portioned fully cooked and ready to be finished food items both minimize the labor-heavy tasks in a kitchen and help reduce overhead expenses.

We believe that thoughtfully designed active adult living environments with on-demand services and strong programming can solve several challenges for developers and operators while delivering attractive living options for seniors. Seniors deserve attainable housing options that afford them to age gracefully, and live longer, healthier and happier. As senior living providers integrate more flexible, innovative and cost-effective design solutions, we can deliver new models in active adult communities as natural entry points for middle-market senior housing. ▲

cfussy@hcm2.com

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easier for residents to remember what is where. If residents with any level of cognitive decline can't remember which floor they should be on, they can more easily remember a color than a number. The one caution here is to stay away from yellow, as individuals with advanced dementia have a hard time seeing the color yellow.

Whether it's the materials, the color or the usage, flooring is one of the more underrated assets to helping senior communities be safer. Indoors or outdoors, underfoot surfaces are one of the biggest, most-used pieces of equipment in the community, and subtle decisions can make a significant difference for older residents. No longer relegated to fitness or activity centers, flooring with safety, energy absorption and wellness properties is a natural selection for every space in a senior living community. With resident safety and comfort being a priority, it's time to consider modern, safety-forward options that can help protect senior populations from the ground up. ▲

sstevenson@wellnessflooring.com