


Opening the Door To Safety

By R. Christopher Johnson



The primary features that make assisted-living facilities so popular among seniors and their families are security and independent living, privacy and companionship, and physical and social well-being, according to the National Center for Assisted Living. Though most residents want to maintain their independence, some need help performing physical tasks, such as opening doors and navigating stairs. Seniors, particularly those using walkers or wheelchairs, are confronted daily with challenges around every corner—and at every doorway.

Struggling with a heavy manual door can throw seniors off-balance and result in falls and injuries. Because of their decreased mobility and difficulty performing certain physical tasks, seniors may benefit from automatic doors. They allow residents to pass through a door without having to wait for a nursing assistant or other staff member to hold it open, which will in turn, free up more time for caregivers.

Many assisted-living facilities provide care for seniors in early to midstages of Alzheimer's disease or other cognitive impairments. Such residents may be confused about how to open doors, whether to push or pull. Other residents may wander, necessitating the integration of doors into a security system while still offering ease of use.

The Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) do not specifically mandate the use of automatic doors for new construction of assisted-living facilities. If automatic doors

are used, however, ADAAG state they must be used according to code. Thus, the decision to use automatic doors carries with it the responsibility to work with a building designer familiar with the standard requirements. The automatic door manufacturer should install a properly functioning door system that provides safety and security.

Architect David DiFrancesco, an associate at Herman Gibans Fodor Architects, specializes in the design of assisted-living facilities. "When we design larger assisted-living facilities, our firm generally specifies automatic-sliding doors with electronic-eye controllers," he says. "For smaller projects or where residential image is the primary concern, we often use power-assisted swing doors." DiFrancesco says the primary factors in determining the most appropriate door for a particular application include function, aesthetics and cost.

Many manufacturers recommend pocketed-sliding doors with appropriate speed settings for assisted-living environments. In facilities with Alzheimer's units, the sliding doors should be combined with an access-control system such as key cards that would allow only authorized passage through the doors. Also, the use of redundant sensors (microwave motion sensors coupled with infrared sensors) will provide coverage for the resident population, as well as the staff and visitors who walk through at normal speeds.

Together, the facility owner, designer and door supplier must take the responsibility of ensuring the doors work with the facility's security system. DiFrancesco says he has had no problems, so far, integrating automatic doors into security systems. Typically, the sliding-automatic doors are used at the front entry, and the security system can be easily disabled without affecting emergency egress.

The American Association of Automatic Door Manufacturers (AAADM) has put together some safety guidelines:

- The automatic door should be properly specified to suit the intended use and the ANSI A156.10 Standard for Power Operated Doors should be followed.
- Automatic and power-assisted doors should be installed by qualified technicians and inspected by AAADM-certified inspectors.
- Preventive maintenance and a daily inspection are strongly recommended. Daily safety-check procedures are outlined on a label that can be obtained from AAADM or any certified inspector.
- Doors should be properly marked as automatic.
- Door-closing speed and force should be adjusted for the intended public. Time delay should be set, and activating devices properly positioned and adjusted.

Seniors are often challenged by their physical surroundings. For those in assisted-living communities, particularly walker- and wheelchair-dependent residents, opening manual doors is sometimes an impossible task. The presence of well-chosen automatic and power-assisted doors in an assisted-living residence can promote independent mobility and a better quality of life for every person.

R. Christopher Johnson is the director of AAADM, an organization established to raise public awareness and administer a program to certify automatic door inspectors. For more information, contact (216) 241-7333.