

## **Aging people get help in overcoming small barriers**

By *MARIANNA RILEY* Of the Post-Dispatch  
updated: 04/03/2003 03:08 AM

Mildred Dale simply couldn't lift her legs high enough to clear the steep step to her front door. It got so bad that her daughter had to place a telephone book in front of the step to lessen the steepness.

Irene Kalman couldn't turn the faucet handles of her bathroom sink and resorted to brushing her teeth in her kitchen.

Now Dale has a new ramp that has taken the challenge out of the 9-inch step, and Kalman has shiny faucets that work with a minimum of pressure. The changes are relatively minor, but both women say those small changes have improved their lives immeasurably.

The improvements are a result of their participation in the Naturally Occurring Retirement Community demonstration project, a joint effort between the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and Washington University's Center for Aging. The Jewish Federation received a grant of almost \$1.3 million from the federal Department of Health and Human Services for the project, which seeks to help aging people continue to live in their own homes.

Susan **Stark**, an occupational therapist and the lead Washington University researcher in the project, said a study had demonstrated that simple home modifications would help people perform daily activities.

"We want scientific evidence that legislators and policymakers will be able to use in order to make this more affordable with tax credits and help from their insurance," she said.

**Stark** said the success is measured by how people perform daily activities - such as preparing meals, bathing, getting in and out of the house - before and after the improvements are made. Researchers also measure how people feel about their quality of life.

Kalman, 83, and Dale, 76, both live within a square mile in the Creve Coeur area that has been designated a "naturally occurring retirement community" because more than 1,500 residents there are older than 65.

Dale had knee replacements about eight years ago, but arthritis in her arms, hands and back have made her problems worse in the last couple of years - she can't reach high enough to comb her hair, for example. Her home is a ranch house, but she was starting to wonder just how long she could continue living there.

She and her husband, Kenneth Dale, 79, have lived there since they moved to St. Louis in 1960, when the house was a little over a year old.

"This is home. I brought up my children here. We want to stay here," she said.

"If it's such an obstacle to get in and out of your home, you sometimes just don't want to make the effort to go out. And that's not good," she said.

Recently, the couple watched as Dan Ramacciotti, an owner of Oh!Tools, which is under contract to do the modifications for the demonstration project, put a coat of sealer on the metal railings of a new wheelchair ramp he installed.

The unobtrusive ramp, more of a concrete platform, is in front of the Dales' front door and slopes to the garage level on one side and has two shallow steps at the front.

Not only does it help her, "but many of my friends are grateful, too," Dale said.

Kalman, who lives in the Doral Manor condominiums just a few blocks from the Dales' home, exercises daily by walking up and down the relatively dark hallway outside her apartment.

But Kalman has such bad arthritis that she couldn't turn the faucet knobs in her bathroom.

A plumber had thrown up his hands at fixing the old faucets, and she had given up ever using them again. Putting in an entire new cabinet was out of her reach, she said. The people from Oh!Tools created custom faucets.

"We went out and found commercial paddle-handles and adapted them to a new consumer bathroom faucet set," said Tom Podgorski, Ramacciotti's partner. The results are faucets that work with the slightest sideways pressure. No gripping is involved.

"I'm not one to cry easily, but I was so thrilled to be able to use my faucets that I cried," Kalman confessed with a smile.

Kalman said that just having faucets that worked have made a big difference in her everyday life. But that's not the only benefit, she said.

"Being older is not easy," she said. "But knowing that they're really interested in making it better for us - knowing that someone cares - is a revelation."

**Reporter Marianna Riley:**  
**E-mail: [mriley@post-dispatch.com](mailto:mriley@post-dispatch.com)**  
**Phone: 314-340-8121**