

The house got smarter. The skills did not change.

Ryan Odland · September 29, 2026

What a decade of smart home technology changed for disabled and older people living independently, what it did not, and where it got harder.

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PLAIN-LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Ten years ago, running a home meant learning your space and your routines. It still does. What changed is how the house tells you what is going on, and how much of the routine it can carry for you. This post walks through what shifted, what did not, and where it got harder, with the evidence where evidence exists. It ends with three things to do this week.

WHO THIS IS FOR

Deaf, hard of hearing, DeafBlind, blind, low vision, mobility disabilities, cognitive disabilities, older adults. The setups described are the author's own home as of September 2026.



What independent living meant then

Strip away the technology and independent living has always been a short list of skills. You learn to take care of yourself. You learn your space: where things are, what is normal, what is not. You build routines so the day does not depend on memory or luck. You learn the proper way to do each task, because the proper way is usually the safe way, and you learn to notice when something is wrong before it becomes a problem.

Anyone who has been through independent-living training knows that list. It was true for the person learning to cook on a gas stove in 1995 and it is true today. None of it is optional and none of it has been replaced.

It is also not a niche concern. More than one in four adults in the United States, over 70 million people, reported a disability in 2022, and among adults 65 and older the figure is 43.9 percent¹. About 16 percent of adults have some hearing loss². Three in four adults over 50 say they want to stay in their current home as they age³. Managing a home well, on your own terms, is the ordinary case, not the exception.

What changed in ten years

What changed is the house. A decade ago the home essentials were mechanical and mute. The thermostat had a dial. The lock had a key. The washing machine buzzed once and gave up. If the basement flooded, you found out when your socks did.

Now most of those essentials can run themselves and, more importantly, can report. I think of the shift in four parts.

****Home management.**** The routine the person used to carry, the house can carry. Lights on a schedule. Heat that drops at night and rises before you wake. The vacuum that runs while you are out. A grocery list that rebuilds itself from what you scanned into the bin. The skill of running a routine is the same; the load of remembering it is lighter. A University of Illinois study gave older adults with mobility disabilities a small kit, a voice-controlled smart display, one smart bulb, one smart plug, and a custom manual, and found participants used it for daily tasks, health monitoring and leisure, with voice control mattering most to people for whom crossing the room to a switch is the hard part⁴.



****Mechanical awareness and energy.**** The old skill was knowing your machines by feel: the furnace that sounded wrong, the fridge that ran too long. The new version is a thermostat that shows the furnace runtime, a plug that tells you the space heater has been on for six hours, a meter that shows where the money goes. For someone who could never hear the furnace, this is the first time that awareness has been available at all. The energy side is measurable: ENERGY STAR puts the average saving from a certified smart thermostat at about 8 percent of heating and cooling bills, roughly \$50 a year, more in some climates and homes⁵. Not life-changing money, but it is money that used to require paying attention, and now requires a schedule.

****Safety, security, and proximity.**** Leak sensors under the sink. Smoke and carbon monoxide alarms that report to a phone and a watch instead of only shrieking. A doorbell that knows someone is at the door before they press it. A lock that tells you it is still open at 11 p.m. A motion sensor that notices nobody has walked past the bathroom this morning. The skill here, noticing when something is wrong, is the oldest one on the list, and the house now helps with it. The best evidence I know of is on water: an insurance study of 2,306 homes fitted with an in-line smart water shutoff found escape-of-water claims fell 96 percent in the year after installation, and the claims that did occur were 72 percent less severe, while a matched group of homes without the device saw claims rise 10 percent⁶. That is one device, one hazard, and a sponsored study, so hold it loosely; but the direction is hard to argue with.

****Interior communication.**** This is the part that matters most to me. A house full of sounds, the doorbell, the timer, the dryer, the alarm, is a house that talks only to people who can hear. The shift of the last decade is that every one of those events can now be delivered another way: a lamp that flashes, a watch that taps, a line of text on a tablet, a braille display that shows "front door" while you are in the kitchen. Fire safety got there first: the NFPA has long recommended strobe alarms and bed or pillow shakers for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, because an alarm you cannot perceive is not an alarm⁷. The smart home generalizes that idea to everything. Researchers designing these systems for people with disabilities say the same thing from the other side: the delivery channel has to match the person, spoken for someone who cannot see, visual or tactile for someone who cannot hear, and the system has to alert without overwhelming⁸. The house did not learn new signals. It learned to say the same thing in more than one language.



What did not change

You still have to know your house. An automation is a routine someone wrote down; if you do not know the routine, you cannot tell when it has failed. The person who let the smart thermostat "handle it" and never learned where the furnace switch is has not gained independence. They have moved their dependence from a person to a device.

The proper technique still matters, and so does the fallback. A lock that unlocks by voice is wonderful until the internet is down and you are outside in January with a phone at four percent. Independent living was always about having a way to do the task that does not need anyone else. Now it is also about having a way that does not need the network.

And the skill of self-care did not move an inch. Nothing in the house takes your medication for you, gets you out of a chair, or decides that today you should call someone.

So is it harder?

Honestly: it depends on the person, and I will not pretend otherwise.

It is harder if the setup is the barrier. Most of these devices are configured through an app, and app accessibility ranges from excellent to hostile. It is harder if your income is fixed and the device quietly needs a subscription to keep doing the thing you bought it for. It is harder if you are the kind of person for whom one more thing to learn is one thing too many this year, and there is no shame in that. The Illinois researchers named learning barriers and privacy worries as the two things most likely to stop adoption, and found both eased with plain instruction written for the person in front of them⁴. It is harder if nobody told you that a failed automation is a new kind of failure, one that is silent by design.

It is easier for almost everyone else, and easier by a lot. The events of the house are no longer locked behind one sense. The routines that took discipline now take a schedule. The awareness that took years of listening now takes a glance. For the person who could not hear the smoke alarm, could not see the thermostat, could not get to the door in time, or could not hold the whole routine in their head, the house has become a partner instead of a puzzle. People over 50 seem to know this already: in the same



AARP survey, 64 percent expect to need a medical alert system and 44 percent expect to need smart security features to stay where they are³.

The skills are the same. The approach got easier. You still have to apply the skill, and now there is a second skill: knowing what your house is doing on your behalf.

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Where the evidence is thin

I want to be plain about what the sources above do and do not show. There is good evidence that smart thermostats save a little energy, that leak shutoffs prevent a lot of water damage, that most people over 50 want to stay home and expect technology to be part of that, and that older adults with mobility disabilities can use a small kit well when someone writes the manual for them. There is almost no published evidence on the question this post is really about: whether a person who is blind, DeafBlind, or Deaf runs a home more independently after the house learns to talk in more than one channel, and what it costs them in setup, subscriptions and silent failures. What I have offered on that is one person's experience.

That gap is an invitation. If you have lived it, the comments are open and the Journal takes guest pieces in the author's own words. If you research it, we would like to read the work and will link it here. This post will be updated as the evidence catches up with the experience.



Three things to do this week

1 Start from something that went wrong

Pick one thing that has gone wrong in your home in the last year. A missed delivery, a burnt pan, a door left unlocked, a bill that surprised you. Start there, not with the product that looks the most impressive. One real problem, one signal.

2 Deliver that signal two ways

If the answer is a leak sensor, make it reach you as a phone alert and a lamp flash, or a watch tap and a text. Never one channel. Never only sound, and never only a screen.

3 Write down the fallback before you need it

Where is the physical key? Where is the furnace switch? What do you do when the app will not open? Put it on paper, in braille, or on the fridge, wherever you will find it without the thing that just failed.

IF YOU SUPPORT SOMEONE

Counselors, family, and care teams: the highest-value hour is not installing the device, it is walking the person through what the device does on its own and what to do when it stops. The Illinois kit shipped with a manual written for its recipients, and the researchers credit that manual for much of what worked. A house that has been explained is independent. A house that has been handed over is not.

All sources were checked on September 5, 2026. Figures are quoted as published and none have been recalculated.



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