OPINION

Dress Rehearsal for a Disaster:
How Safe are the Elevators in Most CCRCs?

By Lillian L. Hyatt, MSW, Resident of a CCRC and AARP Policy Specialist on CCRCs

I personally observed an elevator outrage in a 26-story CCRC in Northern California with a skilled nursing facility, assisted living facility and about 300 so-called independent living units. I sat for three hours in the main floor lobby and could not return to my apartment to eat the food prepared earlier or to get my medication. I was not alone, since all four elevators were inoperable even manually. Since it was dinner hour and many had not yet come down to the dining room, they were trapped on the higher floors with no food.

Security and food staff were busy running up and down 25 flights of stairs trying to get some food to people trapped on all floors. The repair crew did not come for one and a half hours and were not successful in fixing the problem. A total of three hours elapsed when at 9pm one elevator was possible to operate manually. The elevators currently break down regularly.

The problem, as I discovered from the state agency responsible for oversight, was that a system installed 30 years earlier was left in place and incompatible with the new very high-tech system installed in 2012. The State of California agency elevator unit finally got the repair callback records on April 25, 20 days after the incident which occurred on April 5. The company that was unable to fix the regular elevator breakdowns was asked for the records for the entire year. This occurred when the CCRC needed their elevator permit renewed. The number of repair calls in the year from 2012 to 2013 totaled 58.

There is a solution: Get in touch with the principal safety engineer of the Department of Industrial Relations elevator unit in your area. Then file a complaint. This may require some courage because the CCRC industry does not like to disclose that elevator inspections are performed by the companies responsible for repairing the elevators. In addition, in-house CCRC staff also do the monthly inspections required by law. The “pass’ is then logged. No inspections will be made by the state unless a complaint is made.

The Department of Industrial Relations, elevator unit principal safety engineer was extremely helpful. I was provided with the following information that should help any CCRC resident to report any elevator problems to the appropriate area office. There are eight such offices in California. The website is www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/elevator.html. All eight offices are listed on this website.

In Southern California, another CCRC had elevator outrages in a four-story building that lasted four months. Residents were told that they were to hire help (at their own expense) to get down the stairs to the dining room as if they were disabled. A resident reported his outrage to me. I was sent messages regarding other elevator problems in all parts of California, which I cannot report
in a short column. This leads me to believe that this is a very widespread underreported problem throughout the state.

I spent a full week researching how and who to contact. The CCRC industry is very obstructive and secretive. They deliberately withhold such public information from residents who are very frightened and sometimes incapable of finding such information that could save their lives in the event of a fire or earthquake. No elevators may be available and disabled people would be trapped. Although the systems pass the code for safe evacuation, in reality, disabled people in such circumstances would be a risk.

California News columnist Lillian Hyatt is an AARP California policy advisor. A policy advisor reviews legislation, regulations and other proposals to promote official AARP policy updated annually and approved by its board of directors. Professor Hyatt can be seen at www.youtube.com.