

# FURNITURE CONCEPTS

A Buyer's Guide  
To Selecting Furnishings  
For Group Living Environments



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# Introduction

We talk to hundreds of people every month that drew the proverbial “short straw” and are now tasked with buying furniture for their healthcare, education, hospitality or recreation facility despite having no real buying experience. Many small to mid-sized facilities do not hire professional buyers. Instead, they assign the task to a member of the administrative team who often feels completely overwhelmed by the prospect of selecting furniture and / or mattresses for their facility. Buying furniture can be stressful not just because of the abundance of choices but also because the results of the buying decision will be prominently on display for all (including the boss) to see.

## Space Requirements

Your furniture will organize the space within each room by defining usage and traffic flow. Arrange your space in such a way that communication between clients and staff is encouraged while privacy is respected among the people who will ultimately occupy the space. The following space requirements will give you an idea of how much room is needed for smooth traffic flow and efficient functioning:

-Traffic path within rooms	1½ -2’
-Wheelchair path (open as well as straight)	3’
-Space between lounge piece and coffee table	1-1½’
-Space for chair at desk or piano	3’
-Room at table for each adult	24-30”
-Room to get into dining chair	2½-3’
-Space for bed-making	1½ -2’
-Space in front of closet for door swing	3’
-Space in front of chest of drawers	3-4’
-Space for dressing	3-4’
-Space for getting in and out of bed	2½’

## Selecting the Furnishings

If you find yourself in the position of furniture buyer today or in the future, note some simple and practical advice from those who have been there before you:

**-Select a Contract Furniture Seller.** While buying from your local furniture retailer can be tempting, few retailers are prepared to consider the needs of facilities whose furniture will receive high use, suffer many spills, and may even be subject to body fluid issues. Contract furniture sellers on the other hand have experience

with a variety of facility types and can recommend appropriate solutions for your facility. Specialized furniture and fabrics are often priced comparably to standard pieces and offer specific solutions for your staffs', clients', and customers' needs. The results will be more functional and lasting furnishings that you will be proud to have chosen.

**-Know Your Budget.** Imagine selecting the perfect furnishings for your facility only to have your purchase request denied because the cost exceeds the furniture budget. If you know your budget in advance you can shop with confidence and pick the right furniture for your needs and budget. If you have selected a reputable contract furniture seller to work with, you should feel confident sharing your budget requirements in advance. Doing so will help your design consultant guide you to the best furniture solutions given your needs while staying within your budget.

**-Get Educated.** You may learn that furniture designed specifically for healthcare, education, hospitality, and recreation environments comes with some industry-specific terminology. Don't get overwhelmed. The world-wide web is loaded with information on fabrics, foam, frame construction, and everything else you may need to know about your purchase. It may be worthwhile to consult with trained buyers or facility managers at other local facilities. A conversation with your local Fire Marshal may also be advisable as many facilities are expected to comply with local furniture and mattress flammability requirements. Most importantly, a quality contract furniture seller should have an expert staff who can answer all of your questions.

## Defining Quality

There are certain characteristics to look for in furnishings typically used in group home settings. Keep in mind the following qualities so you will be asking the right questions:

**Durability** - Upholstered items are typically the most expensive individual pieces you will seek and will also be the first to show signs of wear. Upholstery fabric is typically guaranteed for 1 year for manufacturing defects. Wear or fabric damage is not covered under warranty so selecting the upholstery appropriate for the type of use it will get is important.

For upholstered furniture construction, ask if the frame of the piece is kiln-dried hardwood. Frames made of green wood can warp and cause wobbly legs or arms. Case goods constructed of solid wood will hold up better than composite materials. Laminate tops offer a worry-free surface that won't show water or ink. Wood tops, on the other hand, can be refinished over time for a like-new look regardless of wear.

Many products appear to be solid wood to the inexperienced eye, but may be constructed of wood composite products like chip core, particle board, plywood, or oriented strand board. Furniture constructed with these materials will typically use a thin printed vinyl veneer over the surface to provide the appearance of solid wood. While prices are lower, furniture constructed using chip core, particle board, and oriented strand board will be difficult to repair on-site once damage has occurred.



**Clean-ability** - Upholstered furniture tends to play center stage of a facilities' common area and visible stains can be a real distraction for staff, customers and clients. While upholstery technology and design does not get a whole lot of attention, there are in fact many new advances for upholstery protection. Crypton® is a remarkable fabric technology that adds a fluid and dirt barrier. Because Crypton® is applied in a submersion technique, the barrier is applied to the top and bottom of the material as well as within the fiber weave itself. Unlike other stain barriers the Crypton® barrier is permanent when properly care for. Crypton® is also effective as a bacterial / microbial barrier making it ideal for health care or any environment where sanitation is a concern. Typical clean-up requires only a dilute solution of laundry detergent and water.

**Fluid-Resistance** - Did you know that furniture design itself can also help with fluid clean-ups? Contract furniture distributors offer pop-out and clean-out seats that encourage fluid to drain through to the floor avoiding pooling. A mop and bucket take care of the majority of the clean-up - the upholstery remains relatively fluid-free and only a minor fabric clean-up may be required. The foam inside the cushion is typically not affected from most fluid spills so both the upholstery and core are protected.

**Flex-ability** – After decades of having to make furniture designed for residential use work in group living environments, manufacturers have finally begun to show their understanding of the needs of staff, clients and consumers. Consider the following design enhancements that can ease the challenges of group living:

- “Crate Style” lounge furniture has solid wood frames and replaceable cushions that are easy to repair and maintain, and will last almost indefinitely.

- Consider all possible uses for a given area, and identify individual furniture items than can perform multiple duties. For example, a storage chest can double as bench seating or as a coffee table.

- Seniors and others with limited mobility must have specialized seating for comfort, ease of use and safety. Consider the following design enhancements:

- Arms on chairs are a necessity for those with limited mobility as they provide extra support for transitioning from sitting to standing and vice versa.

- Seniors and others with limited mobility often suffer from reduced muscle tone. In these cases, seat height must be higher to enable the extension of the knee from the sitting to standing position. Seat Height should range from 20” to 22”.

- A shorter seat depth also aids in the transition from sitting to standing. Seat depth should range from 20” to 22”.

- All seating pieces intended for use by individuals with limited mobility should have a cushion since the person tends to stay seated for extended periods of time. A cushion should not be so soft that it creates an obstacle for standing but should not be so hard that it is uncomfortable for extended use.

Fabric and other design enhancements can add to the comfort and function of seating for those with limited mobility. Limited mobility and incontinence tend to go hand in hand. Fabrics such as Crypton® offer a high-degree of fluid-resistance and can protect upholstered furniture from odor and staining. In addition, pop-out and clean out seat designs encourage fluids away from the client and the furniture. Caregivers and staff can easily access fluid clean-ups which are forced to the floor.

**Credibility** – Contract furniture distributors specialize in furniture designed for heavy-use environments. While going to your local retailer might seem easier, retail furniture is designed for residential use and may not stand up to the demands of a group living environment. *See the Contract Distributor v. Local Retailer chart below for more information!* Once you have selected a contract furniture distributor, ask for a list of satisfied customers and don't be embarrassed to call them on the phone. If possible, go visit a place where the furniture has been in use for longer than the warranty period to see how it has held up over time and use.

	CONTRACT FURNITURE PROVIDER	LOCAL RETAILER
-Style.....	YES.....	YES
-Selection.....	YES.....	YES
-Comfort.....	YES.....	YES
-Hard-Use Warranty.....	YES.....	NO
-Wholesale Pricing.....	YES.....	NO
-Custom Options.....	YES.....	NO
-Fammability Solutions.....	YES.....	NO
-Incontinence Solutions.....	YES.....	NO
-Bariatric Solutions.....	YES.....	NO
-Suicide Risk Solutions.....	YES.....	NO
-Contraband Solutions.....	YES.....	NO
-Aggressive Behavior Solutions .....	YES.....	NO
-ADA/Wheelchair Solutions.....	YES.....	NO
-Group Living Solutions.....	YES.....	NO
-Expert Advice.....	YES.....	NO

## Fabric Characteristics

*Upholstery fabric will wear out before the frame.* The price of a fabric is seldom an indicator of its ability to wear well. Price is determined by such factors as the cost to manufacture the fibers, the complexity of the weaving process, and the dying process used to add color to the fibers. None of these factors affect the ability of the fabric to withstand normal wear and tear.

Modern fabrics can be marvels of technology when they have been selected and designed to sustain wear and facilitate cleaning. Typical upholstered pieces purchased at retail stores do not have the characteristics important for group homes. Many retail fabrics will be damaged by any type of cleaning except for professional dry cleaning whereas contract fabrics allow for cleaning and disinfecting with dilute soap solutions. Always ask for cleaning instructions for your specific fabric choice as cleaning methods other than manufacturers' recommendations will void the warranty.

**-Crypton and other fluid-barrier fabrics** are patented, engineered fabric system with the look and feel of fabric that provides stain, moisture and bacteria resistance, as well as breathable comfort and extreme strength and durability.

**-Soil Repellents** like Teflon or Scotchgard can be applied either at your site or at the factory. Textiles treated with surface coatings are only effective temporarily. They wear off with use or after laundering, and if done on site, are often unevenly applied.

**-Tuffcloth** is a fabric made from Marquessa Lana, an inert manmade fiber that is ideal for use in hard environments. The solution dyed fiber will not fade or react to chemicals or harsh cleaning agents, and is treated with DuPont Teflon to resist staining. It is also resistant to mold, mildew and bacteria.

**-Vinyls** of today only vaguely resembles the vinyl of yesterday. No longer just the less expensive alternative to leather, vinyl has morphed from the plastic-like surface that stuck to your skin to a soft, supple line of highly-durable upholstery. Today's generation of vinyls not only has a new look and feel, it also offers fashion-forward colors, embossments, and patterns.

**-Green Upholstery** has become an increasingly viable product line for many fabric mills which has led to a greater variety of available styles, colors and patterns that fit the "green" label. Once a sleepy category, demand for green upholstery has grown as more end-user companies adopt environmentally conscious buying policies.

## Flammability Standards

California Technical Bulletin 117 was enacted into California law in 1975. CAL. 117 as it is commonly referred to created flammability standards for concealed filling materials and fabrics used on upholstered furniture. A 1992 companion legislation created California Bulletin 133 (CAL. 133). While CAL. 117 was primarily focused on filling, foam and fabric, CAL. 133 was designed to test the upholstered piece as a whole. So, instead of looking at how well components performed as in CAL. 117, CAL. 133 tested the entire assembled piece of furniture. The California legislations were considered to be

comprehensive enough that many states adopted them to govern furniture standards for seating used in public areas.

In the contract furniture industry, CAL. 117 and CAL. 133 standards are widely understood. A piece of furniture offered from a contract manufacturer or distributor typically discloses CAL legislation compliance up front to make complying with your specific requirements easy. While many states and municipalities have adopted these standards, specific compliance requirements vary. To find out exactly what is required for your facility, refer to your local Fire Marshal. Most facility managers are well-versed on the topic and will be able to direct you further should you have questions.

## Furniture Construction Methods

Our global marketplace provides an unlimited selection of furniture items - from the most durable to the most poorly constructed items. Price is rarely an indication of longevity. There are a number of issues to keep in mind if you want the items that you've selected to last as long as possible:

- Solid wood is best when it comes to chairs, dining tables, bedroom pieces and those occasional pieces used in the living room.
- Whenever possible, request a laminate top on the horizontal surface of each piece as this will help to prevent damage to the top.
- It is important to ensure that dining chairs with joints that are both glued and either pinned or screwed for extra reinforcement.
- Catalytic varnish is durable and provides protection from bed bugs.
- Oiled finishes are less expensive but the natural grooves of the wood remain exposed making ideal hiding spots for bed bugs.

## Delivery

-Furniture ordered direct from wholesale distributors will typically come direct to you from the manufacturer. Items can be delivered on 53' tractor trailer rigs with a single driver who will typically not be able to help unload items. These rigs are restricted from using residential streets and may not be able to access your site. For these types of orders, you may want to consider full service delivery and installation. If you choose to purchase from a local retail furniture store, delivery will typically "free." Of course, the cost of this service is hidden in the "retail" pricing. Visit our blogs: "[\*Furniture: Understanding Your Delivery Options\*](#)" and "[\*Is there Really Free Shipping for Your Furniture?\*](#)".

## Mattress Construction

-*Mattresses are not all alike.* There may be significant differences beneath the cover that result in greater comfort and support for the sleeper, as well as durability and lower cost for the purchaser. Most agencies request fluid-proof covers when multiple people will use mattresses. This prevents any kind of accidental penetration of bodily

No need to be overwhelmed at the prospect of purchasing mattresses. It is really a simple, two step process – pick your core then pick your cover. Try using the chart below to determine which mattress best suits your needs.

## CORE

Core Type	Benefits	Cost Range
Fiber Core	Made of recycled content to meet “green” standards. Densified fibers mimic the feel of foam. Not made of petroleum biproducts so pricing is not linked to fuel costs. Naturally flame retardant so no costly fire barriers are required. Available in a variety of depths and densities.	Low
Foam	Provides both support and comfort due to consistent compression characteristics. Available in a variety of depths and densities.	Mid
Innerspring	Innersprings allow for air to circulate around sleeper’s body resulting in less heat retention. Springs provide additional measure of support and comfort and act as shock absorbers to reduce wear and tear on mattress.	Mid-High
Memory Foam	Reduces pressure points for sleepers resulting in increased comfort. Memory foam adjusts to the shape of the sleeper’s body which reduces stress on joints.	High

## COVER

Cover Type	Benefits	Cost Range
Vinyl	Reinforced vinyl laminates are measured by weight per square yard, with the heavier weight providing more durability.	Mid
Correct Tick	Correct Tick is a vinyl product that has elastic properties that allow it to stretch and conform to a sleeper’s body. Its stretch properties also make it more resistant to puncture.	Mid
SoFlux/Vinylized Nylon	This type of cover delivers a fluid-resistant, yet breathable mattress fabric that blocks transmission of fluids into the mattress core, as well as other allergens, including dust mites.	High

## In Closing

Furnishings are a large capital expenditure for the average facility. Whether the facility you work in is a privately operated community based three bed group home, or a state funded facility with dozens of residents, it is a proven fact that environment impacts behavior. The process by which the environment is managed and controlled is tremendously important in the success of group homes. Life in the community is the intended alternative to confining people to institutions. If we hope to make a difference in peoples’ lives, we need to examine the environment as well as the issues behind our choices.

