



A PLACE CALLED HOME

We all need homes that we—and those who visit us—can get around with ease. This is important for families as well as communities. The disability rights movement has always been a champion of accessible housing and independent living. Too often, however, society has assumed that people with disabilities would simply live in nursing homes or rehabilitation centers.

One important way that homes often fail to meet our needs is that we are unable to use walkers, wheelchairs or scooters to enter the home, go to bathroom or maneuver around the kitchen. Stairs, which are still built into many homes, can pose additional barriers. They not only block the path of persons who use wheelchairs and walkers, but also many seniors who can no longer continue to live in or enjoy their homes or to visit friends, relatives and neighbors. Stairs present a problem for mothers with infants in strollers, and for students who use rolling bag to carry books.

Unless society makes changes now, people with disabilities will continue to be non-integrated members of society. States and local communities must enforce current laws and enact new ordinances to ensure that accessible homes are built and readily available. Only by working together can we encourage changes that ultimately benefit us all.

An accessible home is one that is designed with such special permanent features as grab bars in the bathrooms, which allow people with some disabilities to live there. An adaptable home allows an owner to adjust a unit to suit the access needs of the resident. For example, an adaptable home would have reinforced walls around the toilet so that grab bars could be installed. Accessibility and adaptability features are inexpensive to build into newly constructed dwellings, and there are an increasing number of products that are beautiful, architectural and functional.

A terrific example of incorporating attractive accessible element is the Louvre Museum in Paris, which made a wheelchair lift a centerpiece in the middle of the iconic landmark. The lift's round, steel and glass design operates through the middle of the site's spiral staircase. Though not a housing example, the lift represents how accessible elements, and even those that stand out, can be incorporated into structures with style. If accessible, yet elegant design elements are incorporated from the beginning, consumers may begin not only to accept, but seek out these features in their homes.

Some federal laws require these elements be installed in newly constructed apartments and condominiums. For example, the Federal Fair Housing Act applies the concepts of adaptability and accessibility to seven key areas:

- Accessible building entrances on an accessible route
- Accessible public and common-use areas
- Usable doors
- Accessible routes into and through the unit
- Light switches, outlets, thermostats and other environmental controls in accessible locations
- Reinforced walls in bathrooms for later installation of grab bars
- Usable kitchens and bathrooms

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has devised a useful and informative design guide that explains the requirements for construction of multi-family residences, including apartment buildings and condos built after 1991.

While the Fair Housing Act will improve the situation in certain circumstances, we will need a much broader application of disability access standards as the population grows. Some states and localities are thinking ahead. For example, California state law requires that developers of new housing provide to buyers a list of universal accessibility features that would make the home entrance, interior routes of travel, kitchen and bathrooms fully accessible.

Additional features include visual doorbells, accessible levered door handles, lowered closet rods and shelf, sink and countertop workspaces that can be repositioned or enhanced by a contrasting-edge color. On the floor level, contrasting designs can mark accessible routes and work areas. Anti-scald devices in plumbing

fixtures and under-cabinet lighting in bathroom and kitchen areas, for instance, can prove important safety features.

If California can respond to consumers' requests and require a developer to provide elements beyond those outlined by the Fair Housing Act, other states could as well. These benefits may also add value to a home and enhance sale and resale prices. This may be especially attractive to Baby Boomers who are growing older, and often caring for aging parents.

Some cities are responding to this need by requiring that new developments include a minimum percentage of accessible or adaptable housing. Murietta, CA, for instance, enacted a landmark ordinance that requires developers to make 15 percent of new homes and rental units accessible to people with disabilities. These dwellings include level thresholds so wheelchairs and walkers can pass easily, walk-in showers on the ground floor, wide doorways and hallways, and reinforced walls for grab bars.

These requirements, which are relatively inexpensive, can be incorporated stylishly and prevent the need for more costly adjustments later; they also fall roughly within the guidelines for "visitable" housing standards. As was mentioned earlier, the goal in that instance is to provide features that allow guests with disabilities to come a-calling, while allowing the resident to remain in the housing over time as his or her physical needs change. In general, visitable homes comply with basic access requirements and include at least one entrance with no steps, 32-inch clearance through all interior doors (including bathrooms), and at least a half bath on the main floor, according to the National Organization on Disability. The intention is that a person with a disability can visit without having to be lifted up stairs, can enjoy a meal and be able to use a first floor restroom.

To ensure a continuous supply of accessible housing, advocates must continue to monitor and enforce the Fair Housing Act and other laws of its kind. Now the pressure must be brought to bear on more single-family residences.

Several ordinances require visitability features in housing that receives local public funding. The first ordinance of this kind was passed in Atlanta in 1992, and requires certain visitability criteria for new single-family dwellings, duplexes and triplexes that receive city assistance. By 2002, more than 600 homes had been built in Atlanta under this ordinance. Naperville, IL, and Pima County, AZ, are also among the few localities that require visitability features in new single-family homes.

Widespread availability of accessible housing can mean the difference between a population that is an integrated, vibrant component of society, and one that is segregated from family and friends and dependent on others or the government.

Progress doesn't happen by chance. It takes a concerted, sustained effort. The good news is that best practices exist and we can and should learn from them. From the accessible homes of small town Murietta, CA, to the accessible taxis of a great London metropolis, we have glimpsed what is possible. ■ ABILITY

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The Mission of the Disability Rights Legal Center, formerly the Western Law Center for Disability Rights, is to promote the rights of people with disabilities and the public interest in and awareness of those rights by providing legal and related services. We are located on the campus of Loyola Law School in Downtown Los Angeles and work with Loyola Law students in all of our programs.