



VISITABILITY: ENSURING HOMES ARE ACCESSIBLE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

FACT SHEET # 11

Published by the Fair Housing Center of Central Indiana

“Visitability” is an architectural concept that means that new homes, primarily single-family houses, are built to have some basic accessible features which allow the resident’s family members or friends who have mobility impairments to “visit” the home. Visitability also accommodates residents who don’t have disabilities at purchase but who age while still in the same home or who unexpectedly obtain a mobility impairment. Having basic “visitable” features allows the home to be accessible to both young and aged residents.

The Fair Housing Center of Central Indiana (FHCCI) defines minimum visitability requirements as:

- Providing at least one zero-step entrance (which does not have to be the front entrance);
- All main floor doors - including bathrooms - have at least 32 inches of clear passage space and hallways have at least 36 inches of width;
- Providing one accessible bathroom on the ground floor (preferably a full bathroom);
- Additional, more advanced, visitable features beyond minimum requirements noted above can include accessible electrical and environmental controls, shower backing, bathroom grab bars, as well as a main floor bedroom.

It is estimated that only 5% of new construction receiving federal funding nationwide is visitable leaving 95% of new construction creating unnecessary architectural barriers. A recent HUD study found that fewer than “two percent of housing units are accessible, in the common usage of the term.”¹ A 2011 study found that between 25% and 60% of



Visitable homes can incorporate in traditional designs like porches.

homes built in 2000 will have at least one resident with a disability at some point.² Even if a current resident does not have a physical disability that limits his or her mobility,

a lack of accessible features in a home prevents anyone with a disability from being able to visit them. For example, a child who uses a wheelchair would not be able to attend a friend’s birthday



A visitable home featuring a zero-step entrance.

party in a home where the doorways are too narrow to fit his wheelchair, or a grandparent with a mobility impairment would not be able to visit her children or grandchildren if their home has steps leading up to the front door. This effectively segregates families and communities into “disabled” and “nondisabled,” running contrary to the nation’s efforts to enforce and further fair housing.

Visitability is beneficial to all of us, because it saves millions of tax dollars that would otherwise be spent on nursing home and assisted living care for people who are no longer able to live in their home after developing mobility impairments from age or injury. Visitability assists in keeping homeowners, often long-term residents, in the homes of their choice, stabilizing neighborhoods, and preventing the massive costs of home modification later in life. For example, it’s not uncommon that retrofitting an inaccessible bathroom can cost over \$10,000, as opposed to a mere \$100 to \$600 if planned in advance during construction. Cost differences can vary whether the home is built over a basement or not and whether just the minimum visitable requirements are included versus the more advanced standards.³ If a resident has recently developed or obtained a mobility impairment, home rehabili-



Inaccessible homes are expensive to retrofit and often look awkward when completed.

tation to increase accessibility is oftentimes a burdensome expense that requires the family to sell, or even abandon their home, increasing an already stressful situation.

The American Planning Commission has found that making newly constructed homes visitable is practical in more than 95% of situations. In many cases, these accessible features are just as useful to persons without disabilities.⁴ For example, a family with small children that use strollers would be benefited by a no-step entrance to their home. Many people with disabilities want to rent or buy their own home, and have the funds to do so, but are prevented from living independently because so many residences aren't accessible to their needs. A recent real estate study found that "49 percent of respondents [with disabilities] said they have difficulty finding a[n] [accessible] home that fits their families' needs."⁵ As people live longer, there has been more of an emphasis on housing that can "age with" the resident(s).

Visitability is not universal design standards. Universal design (often inclusive design) refers to broad-spectrum ideas meant to produce buildings, products, and environments that are inherently accessible to older adults, people without disabilities, and people with disabilities. Universal design standards are a much higher standard than basic visitable requirements.

Eight states (Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Oregon, and Texas) and over 20 localities have already put in place laws that require basic visitable features in certain kinds of newly constructed housing. Some of these



A visitable home featuring a zero-step back entrance. The zero-step entrance need not be to the front of the home and can be placed over basements.

laws have focused only on publicly financed single family homes while others have applied to all new construction,

regardless of financing. Four states provide tax incentives to developments if they ensure the properties they are building meet certain visitable standards. In areas where certain accessible features are impractical or impossible because of geological or other

Photo: City of Bolingbrook



A zero step door built over a basement.

issues, builders have been permitted to receive exemptions from the state. Legal challenges against visitability requirements have, to date, been unsuccessful. A recent Arizona Court of Appeals decision noted, "...the county addressed a legitimate governmental interest when it adopted a building code designed to increase the number of homes accessible to those in wheelchairs."

The total number of people with disabilities, the majority of whom want to live in their own home in the community, would seem to present a sizable market for housing. There has already been marked increase in interest for ranch-style homes and two-story homes with the master bedroom on the first floor, so that a family can stay in the home even if members develop disabilities or signs of aging.⁶ Visitable homes isn't just a matter of concern for the disability community, but good business sense and long-term planning for all people. The plans and research exist; it's simply a matter of putting visitability into practice here in Indiana.

References - All photos courtesy of Concrete Change.

¹ *Accessibility of America's Housing Stock: Analysis of the 2011 American Housing Survey*, U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development.

² *Shut Out, Priced Out, and Segregated*, Metro Fair Housing Services, 2011.

³ *Visitability Costs Affirmed*, Concrete Change, <http://concretechange.org/construction/visitability-costs-affirmed/>

⁴ Smith, Stanley K., Stefan Rayer and Eleanor A. Smith. "Aging and Disability: Implications for the Housing Industry and Housing Policy in the United States." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 74.3 (2008).

⁵ *Persons with Disabilities Home Buying Survey*, Century 21, July 2015.

⁶ Why 1950s-style ranch homes are all the rage again, *Marketwatch*, November 27, 2012.

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