

Visitability: Home Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities

Fact Sheet #7



"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, friends, and guests (who have mobility impairments) to "visit" the home. Visitability also accommodates residents who might not 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 have increased accessibility in areas that are often the most expensive to modify.

Minimum Requirements

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; and
- Providing one accessible bathroom on the ground floor (preferably a full bathroom vs. powder room).

Additional, other helpful, visitable features *beyond* these minimum requirements may include accessible environmental and electrical controls, shower wall backing, bathroom grab bars, as well as a main floor bedroom.

Who benefits from visitability?

Visitability is beneficial to each of us. It saves millions of tax dollars that would otherwise be spent on nursing home and assisted living care when someone is no longer able to live in their home after developing mobility impairments from age or injury, due solely to the home's structural limitations. Visitability assists in keeping homeowners, often long-term residents, in the homes of *their choice*, stabilizing neighborhoods and minimizing the massive costs of home modification later in life that often forces people into nursing homes and assisted living.

For example, retrofitting an inaccessible bathroom can commonly cost thousands of dollars, as opposed to a fraction of this amount 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. If a resident has recently developed or obtained a mobility impairment, home rehabilitation to increase accessibility is often a burdensome expense that requires the family to sell, or even abandon their home, increasing an already stressful situation.

Photos of Visitable Homes



Photos credit: Concrete Change © 2011

Is inaccessibility a problem?

In a 2021 AARP survey, 70% of participants indicated wanting to stay in their residences and communities as they aged. Of all participants, 1/3 said they would need to modify their current residence so that they, or a loved one, could continue to live there if they had physical limitations.

- 79% said they would need to modify bathrooms with grab bars or no-step showers.
- 71% said their home has inside and outside accessibility issues.
- 61% said they would need an emergency response system.
- 48% said they would need smart-home devices, like a voice activated home assistant or a doorbell camera.

Even if a current resident does not have a disability that limits mobility, a lack of visitable features prevents those with a disability from being able to visit. For example, a child who uses a wheelchair would not be able to attend a friend's birthday party in a home where doorways are too narrow to fit a wheelchair or a grandparent with mobility issues would not be able to visit children or grandchildren if the home has steps to the front door.

For more information, check out the FHCCI's Education page on this topic:

<https://www.fhcci.org/programs/education/disability/>

Or scan the QR code:





Isn't housing supposed to be accessible anyway?

The Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 requires multi-family housing (4 units or more), built for first occupancy on, or after, March 13, 1991, be accessible. However, this construction-based regulation does not apply to single-family homes. This is why visitability and universal design is increasingly important when building new single-family homes.

Reasonable Modifications

For persons with disabilities that live in rental housing that is not accessible, they may request a reasonable modification from their housing provider for their dwelling (such as a grab bars) or to common areas (like a ramp to a community room with steps). This can include HOA and condo association common areas. Who pays for any modification depends on if any government-based funding supports the property. See our fact sheet #4.

What should I do if I believe I'm a victim of housing discrimination?

Housing discrimination due to a protected class is unlawful, and you have the right to file a complaint. Contact the FHCCI with any questions or to learn of your options under law.

FHCCI Mission Statement

The mission of the Fair Housing Center of Central Indiana (FHCCI) is to facilitate open housing for all people by ensuring the availability of affordable and accessible housing; promoting housing choice and homeownership; advocating for an inclusive housing market; working toward stable and equitable communities; and eradicating discrimination within Central Indiana, the State of Indiana, and nationally.

Are these requirements practical?

The American Planning Commission has found that constructing visitable homes is practical in more than 95% of situations. In many cases, these accessible features are just as useful to persons without disabilities. For example, a family with small children that uses strollers would benefit from 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 2022 JCHS study found that 6.8 million households report difficulties navigating or using their homes; approximately 5% of all households. As people live longer, there is becoming more of an emphasis on housing that can "age with" the resident(s).

Universal Design Standards

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

Laws regarding visitability 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 laws have focused only on publicly-financed single-family homes while others have applied to all new construction. Four states provide tax incentives to developers if they ensure their properties meet certain visitable standards. In areas where certain accessible features are impractical or impossible because of geological or other issues, builders have been permitted to receive exemptions from the state. Legal challenges against visitability requirements have, to date, been unsuccessful. A 2003 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."

Is there a need for visitability?

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 construction. 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. Visitable homes aren't just a matter of concern for the disability community, but they're also long-term planning for all people. The plans and research exist; it's simply a matter of putting visitability into practice here in Indiana.

Contact us!

If you are experiencing barriers to housing or need assistance with locating accessible housing, please reach out to the FHCCI:



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