

## Expanding Implementation of Universal Design and Visitability Features in the Housing Stock

**As adults age and their physical abilities change, they may face environmental impediments in their home that make living independently a challenge. Universal design and visitability features can improve residential safety and usability for older adults and people with disabilities.**

### Universal Design and Visitability Defined

Universal design and visitability are strategies aimed at improving the safety and utility of housing for all people, including older adults and people with disabilities. Although closely related, universal design and visitability differ in their origins and scope.

#### *Universal design*

Universal design is an approach to designing products and environments to be appropriate for all people, including those with physical, cognitive, or sensory impairments. This concept emerged in the mid-1980s and is defined by the Center for Universal Design as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”<sup>1</sup> Within a residential setting, examples of universal design features include a blended step-free entrance route, multiple countertop heights, wide doorways, lever faucets, and a curbless shower with handheld adjustable shower head.<sup>2</sup> Rather than being geared solely to older adults and people with disabilities, universal design features are intended to have general utility and market appeal.

#### *Visitability*

Visitability, a concept formalized in 1987 by the advocacy group Concrete Change, is based on the principle that all new homes should include a few basic features that make them accessible to people regardless of their physical abilities.<sup>3</sup> Unlike universal design, which can be applied to a variety of products and environments, the notion of visitability is focused exclusively on housing.

A visitable home has a main level that is easy to enter and exit. The three key features are at least one zero-step entrance; wide interior doors; and at least a half bathroom on a home’s main level. Advocates for visitability have limited its focus to these three features because of concerns that a more extensive list of features may not be as readily adopted by builders and purchasers of new homes, nor as feasible for legislative and code requirements.<sup>4</sup> But because of this limited focus, a visitable home may not be as accommodating as one that incorporates more comprehensive universal design elements.

#### **Why Are Universal Design and Visitability Important?**

According to an AARP survey, almost 90 percent of adults 50+ prefer to stay in their homes as long as possible.<sup>5</sup> While the homes of many older adults have some

accessibility features, a great number lack features that make a home universally designed or even visitable.

Homes that lack important ease of use and convenience features may make it difficult for older residents to bathe, use stairs, enter and exit, or meet other daily needs. Such barriers may precipitate an unwanted or premature move to an assisted living facility or to an institutionalized setting, which can limit independence and be emotionally taxing and financially burdensome. Through home modifications (i.e., custom remodeling for a specific resident's needs) or the adoption of improved standards in new home construction, universal design and visitability features can enhance functionality, independence, and safety for everyone. These features thus enable older adults to age in place and allow people with disabilities to remain involved in family and community life.

Several federal laws require that certain residential settings meet a set of accessibility requirements. The Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 mandates that any facility designed, built, altered, or leased with federal funds, including federally subsidized housing, must meet accessibility criteria outlined in what are now the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS).<sup>6</sup> Federally subsidized housing must also meet the accessibility requirements of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Additionally, the Fair Housing Act requires that any residential building with four or more units constructed after 1991 must meet seven design and construction criteria, including accessible entrances and common areas and wide doors and hallways.<sup>7</sup>

As important as they are, these laws do not generally require single-family homes (which make up more than 70 percent of the nation's housing stock), duplexes, triplexes, or multistory townhouse

buildings without an elevator to meet any accessibility standards.<sup>8,9</sup> Policies that encourage the adoption of universal design features and visitability criteria can ensure that homes not covered by existing federal law are accessible to people of all physical abilities. It is especially important to incorporate these features into new residential developments, because modifying existing homes is typically more expensive.<sup>10</sup>

### **Strategies to Promote Universal Design Features and Visitability Criteria**

With the exception of homes covered under the federal laws described above, few residential building codes and ordinances address accessibility issues. Several different mandatory and voluntary approaches to promoting the inclusion of universal design and visitability features in new and existing homes are discussed below. It should be noted that little research into the relative effectiveness of these programs has been conducted to date, although some housing practitioners and advocates favor mandatory requirements as a way to increase the adoption of universal design and visitability features in homes.

#### **Mandatory Universal Design or Visitability Requirements**

At the federal level, there is the potential to implement policies that require visitability or universal design criteria in new homes. In March 2009, the Inclusive Home Design Act was introduced in Congress. The bill proposes to increase the number of homes usable by people with disabilities by requiring that all newly built single-family homes and townhouses receiving federal funds meet primary visitability standards.<sup>11</sup>

Several states and localities already require that homes not covered by the Fair Housing Act meet a set of universal design or visitability criteria. As with the

proposed federal legislation, most mandatory requirements are limited to residential projects built with government assistance. For example, the cities of Atlanta, Austin, and San Antonio adopted visitability ordinances for newly built single-family homes and duplexes that receive tax credits, city loans, land grants, or impact fee waivers. Each of these cities has produced several thousand houses that comply with their requirements.<sup>12</sup>

A few states and localities mandate that universal design or visitability features be included even in newly built homes that do not benefit from government assistance. Pima County and Tucson, Arizona, and Bolingbrook, Illinois, require that all new single-family homes meet basic visitability criteria, and these cities have produced a total of nearly 30,000 visitable units since enacting their respective laws.<sup>13</sup>

States and localities can also mandate that builders offer universal design features as options in new homes. As part of California's Health and Safety Code, builders must provide a checklist of universal design "add-on options" to potential homebuyers, enabling buyers to choose accessibility features for their home. Although this policy is not thought to have had a particularly significant impact in California, requiring builders to offer universal design features to buyers, and monitoring compliance, does allow consumers to directly influence the accessibility of their new home as it is being built.

### **Voluntary and Incentive-Based Programs**

Some states and localities have developed voluntary programs to encourage developers or homeowners to adopt universal design features and visitability criteria in homes. These programs often offer financial incentives, building certification, streamlined permitting, or fee waivers to those who participate. Yet some housing advocates express concern that

incentive-based programs are not readily adopted by consumers or developers and thus do not significantly increase the stock of homes that are safe and convenient for all people.

Recognizing that accessibility improvements can be expensive, some states designate tax credits or create deferred loan programs to assist with home modifications for existing homes. In Georgia, for example, a tax credit of \$500 is available to people with disabilities to cover the costs of a no-step entrance, wide doorways, reinforced bathroom walls, and accessible light switches in the construction of new single-family homes.<sup>14</sup>

At the local level, jurisdictions can waive construction permit fees or streamline the permitting process for homes with accessibility features, helping to reduce overall building costs. For example, in 1999, officials in Freehold Borough, New Jersey, passed an ordinance to waive building permit fees for ramps and other universal design features in residential units.<sup>15</sup> In Austin, the S.M.A.R.T. Housing Initiative uses expedited review and fee waivers to incentivize the production of single-family and multifamily affordable homes. To participate in the S.M.A.R.T program, builders and developers must build homes that meet visitability criteria put in place by an Austin ordinance enacted in 1998.<sup>16</sup>

Voluntary certificate programs are another incentive-based approach that "brands" homes meeting accessibility standards under a recognizable label, marketing them for prospective homebuyers or tenants. For example, Johnson County, Iowa, operates the Homes for Life program, a two-tiered certification program that rates homes as either "Level I - Visit-ability" or "Level II - Live-ability," depending on which accessibility features are incorporated into home construction.<sup>17</sup> Such certificate programs

could benefit from coordinated outreach and education efforts to increase awareness of the advantages associated with accessibility features in homes.

Fact Sheet 167, March 2010

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<sup>12</sup> Maisel, Jordana, et al. *Increasing Home Access*.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Kochera, Andrew. *Accessibility and Visitability Features in Single-Family Homes: A Review of State and Local Activity*. Washington, DC: AARP, March 2002.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Maisel, Jordana, et al. *Increasing Home Access*.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson County Livable Community for Successful Aging Initiative and Greater Iowa City Area Home Builders Association. *Homes for Life: A Voluntary Universal Design Certification Program*. Iowa City, IA: Fall 2008.

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Universal Design. Retrieved Sept. 28, 2009, from <http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/>.

<sup>2</sup> AARP Public Policy Institute. *Beyond 50.05: A Report to the Nation on Livable Communities*. Washington, DC: AARP, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access. "What Is Visitability?" Retrieved Sept. 14, 2009, from [www.udeworld.com](http://www.udeworld.com).

<sup>4</sup> AARP Public Policy Institute. *Beyond 50.05. A Report to the Nation on Livable Communities*.

<sup>5</sup> AARP Public Policy Institute. *State of 50+ America*. Washington, DC: AARP, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> United States Access Board. Retrieved Sept. 28, 2009, from [www.access-board.gov/about/laws/aba.htm](http://www.access-board.gov/about/laws/aba.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Fair Housing Accessibility FIRST. Retrieved Sept. 4, 2009, from [www.fairhousingfirst.org](http://www.fairhousingfirst.org).

<sup>8</sup> Maisel, Jordana, Eleanor Smith, and Edward Steinfeld. *Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability*. Washington, DC: AARP Public Policy Institute, August 2008.

<sup>9</sup> See [www.fairhousingfirst.org](http://www.fairhousingfirst.org) for more information on the types of buildings covered by the Fair Housing Act.

<sup>10</sup> Maisel, Jordana, et al. *Increasing Home Access*.

<sup>11</sup> GovTrack.us (database of federal legislation). 2009. "H.R. 1408—111th Congress: Inclusive Home Design Act of 2009." Retrieved Nov 9, 2009, from [www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-1408](http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-1408).