

Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability

This *In Brief* examines the different types of visitability initiatives and evaluates their potential for improving the prospects for aging independently in one's home and community. Barriers to the implementation of visitability are discussed, as are opportunities for further acceptance of these design parameters in the construction of new homes.

Current trends in health care and community services emphasize aging in place. However, the structural barriers in much of existing housing can prevent older adults and people with disabilities from leading independent lives and participating fully in their communities.

Many houses have steps at all entrances, narrow doorways, long and narrow hallways, and lack an accessible bathroom on the main floor. Although a majority of older Americans prefer to stay in their homes, these barriers can make it difficult for them to do so. Furthermore, architectural barriers make it difficult for nondisabled people to accommodate visits from older friends and relatives who need basic accessibility.

To address this problem, advocates of housing accessibility have developed and promoted a concept known as visitability, a design approach that integrates a few core accessibility features as a routine construction practice into newly built single-family housing.

Visitability defined

A visitable house is defined as a house built deliberately to include the following:

- A zero-step entrance
- Wide doorways with thirty-two inches of clear passage space

- A half bathroom on the main floor

The visitability movement targets housing units not otherwise covered by existing law:

- New single-family homes, duplexes, triplexes, or townhouses (the housing types not covered by the Fair Housing Act)
- Housing not required by federal law to incorporate access features (e.g., not covered by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which mandates a percentage of accessible houses when federal funds are used)
- Housing intended for the open market rather than custom built for a specific buyer

Both voluntary and mandatory visitability initiatives have led to the construction of homes with basic access features. The data on visitability suggest that mandatory programs generally lead to better results. Compared with the estimated 30,000 visitable homes built under mandatory legislation, fewer than 1,300 visitable houses have been built under identified voluntary programs. Omitted from that estimate are houses built with access in age-restricted communities.

The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) supports “voluntary programs promoting accessible design features for single family construction” rather than local and state laws that

mandate such features. The NAHB contends that visitable design can be impracticable for certain sites, restrict consumer choice, and raise housing costs. Furthermore, builders state that they have not experienced much demand from consumers for visitable features.

Advocates counter that the basic features of visitability are inexpensive when incorporated at the early stage, that builders have developed innovative design practices for difficult sites, and that many communities with home access requirements have been flexible in enforcing visitability ordinances to accommodate site or other problems.

New directions and opportunities

Innovative strategies for incorporating accessibility features are emerging, such as new certification and code efforts that incorporate basic accessibility features. These strategies include the development of consensus-based technical standards for visitability features through the International Code Council/American National Standards Institute (ICC/ANSI A117.1). In addition, the new Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-Neighborhood Design certification program now includes a credit for universal accessibility. Advertising and social marketing campaigns could encourage the implementation of

visitability from both the demand and supply sides.

Visitability focuses on new construction, but policymakers and the public also must increase accessibility in the existing housing stock. Retrofitting existing houses and changing the way new houses are built are both necessary to meet the demand that is emerging as Baby Boomers age.

Methodology

The authors identified and compared visitability initiatives through extensive Internet searches and postings on discussion and announcement lists. They conducted telephone interviews with federal, state, and local housing agencies, finance departments, builders, and disability advocates’ offices to ascertain why jurisdictions chose a specific strategy, and determined, to the extent possible, the actual number of visitable homes that have been built as a result of various initiatives.

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Table 1. Cities/Programs with the Most Visitable Homes

| Location | Visitable Homes Resulting from a Mandatory Ordinance | Visitable Homes Resulting from a Voluntary Program |
|-------------------------------|--|--|
| Pima County, Ariz. | 15,000 | |
| San Antonio, Texas | 7,000 | |
| Bolingbrook, Ill. | 3,500 | |
| Austin, Texas | 3,100 | |
| EasyLiving Home ^{CM} | | 950 |
| Pennsylvania | | 18 |
| Demonstration homes | | < 30 |
| Totals | 28,600 | 1,000 |

Note: Numbers are approximate.