

## Insight on the Issues

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

Shannon Guzman  
AARP Public Policy Institute

Janet Viveiros  
National Housing Conference

Emily Salomon  
Formerly with National Housing Conference

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

### SUMMARY

By 2030, one in five Americans will be age 50 and older.<sup>1</sup> It is critical that communities address their range of needs now. Homes must be designed without barriers so residents can navigate safely from room to room as they age. Many homes across the country do not currently meet that goal. Adopting policies that encourage the integration of universal design and visitability features into existing and new homes can meet the needs of a variety of families across all life stages.

### 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. As characterized by the Center for Universal Design, the intent of this concept, which emerged in the mid-1980s, is to

“simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and the built environment more usable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost . . . benefit[ing] people of all ages and abilities.”<sup>2</sup> Within a residential setting, examples of universal design features include a no-step entrance, multiple countertop heights, wide doorways, lever faucets, and a curbless shower with handheld adjustable shower head.<sup>3</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.

AARP’s support and participation in the Redefining Home: Home Today, Home Tomorrow design competition



further its efforts to help create a new vision for housing through the Future of Housing initiative. The design competition shows how innovative design and the collaboration of diverse partners can successfully address affordability and accessibility challenges. To learn more, visit <http://www.aarp.org/futureofhousing>.



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## 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 (the building accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act does not extend to housing).<sup>4</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 no-step entrance, wide interior doors, and at least a half bathroom on the main level. Advocates for visitability have limited their focus to these three features because of concerns that a more extensive list may not be as readily adopted by builders and purchasers of new homes, or that such additional features would not be feasible for legislative and code requirements.<sup>5</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 80 percent of adults ages 45 and older prefer to stay in their homes as long as possible as they age.<sup>6</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. Only about 1 percent of homes in the United States have five important accessibility features—no-step entry, all living space on one floor, switches and outlets at easily reachable heights, wide hallways and doors, and lever door handles and faucets—that would make a home accessible to individuals with mobility impairments.<sup>7</sup>

Homes that lack important ease-of-use and convenience features may make it difficult for older residents to use stairs, enter and exit, bathe, or meet



Photo credit: Benjamin Redhour

**AARP and partners renovated a home in Memphis, TN to incorporate universal design features to accommodate the needs of residents as they age.**

other daily needs. Such barriers may precipitate an unwanted or premature move 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 their homes and communities 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 (including some single-family homes) designed, built, altered, or leased with federal funds, including federally subsidized housing, meet accessibility criteria outlined in what are now the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS).<sup>8</sup> The UFAS contain numerous accessibility requirements, including specifications for doorway dimensions, hardware used for handles, style of thresholds, width of hallways, and the ability to navigate through a unit and building in a wheelchair.<sup>9</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 meets accessibility design and construction criteria for

- entrances and routes through the building;
- public and common space;
- doorways;
- routes through the housing unit;
- locations of switches, outlets, and thermostats;
- construction of walls to support grab bars; and
- kitchens and bathrooms.<sup>10</sup>

Federally subsidized housing with four or more units built after 1991 must comply with both the requirements of section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Fair Housing Act.

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>11, 12</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>13</sup> Development of these policies to incentivize or require accessible features in new home construction had taken place mostly at the local level in the 1990s and early 2000s before efforts trailed off in the mid-2000s.

**STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE UNIVERSAL DESIGN FEATURES AND VISITABILITY CRITERIA**

Beyond the federal laws described above, few state or local 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. Although there is a lack of research on the relative effectiveness of these programs, 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 universal design or



Photo credit: Benjamin Rednour

After interior renovations, this home features an open space plan with wide hallways to allow for walking aids such as wheelchairs and a room with movable walls to create an office or caregiver’s bedroom. A new bathroom features a curbless shower with bench and countertop with different heights that could be used by small children or older adults in the family.

visitability criteria in new homes. For example, the Eleanor Smith Inclusive Home Design Act 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>14</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, Georgia, and Birmingham, Alabama, adopted visitability

ordinances for newly built single-family homes and duplexes that receive tax credits, city loans, land grants, or impact fee waivers.<sup>15</sup>

A few 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 the city of Tucson in Arizona, as well as Austin, Texas, and Bolingbrook, Illinois (see profile below), require that all new single-family homes meet basic visitability criteria. As a result, these cities have produced thousands of visitable units since enacting their respective laws.<sup>16</sup> Some cities, like Chicago, Illinois, require that a

### PROFILE OF VISITABILITY IN BOLINGBROOK, ILLINOIS\*

In 1999, a Bolingbrook resident with disabilities began educating town leaders about the unmet need for accessible housing in the community for people with disabilities and older adults. He suggested the town require new homes to include accessibility features to help limit the need for homeowners to make costly home modifications. This resident's efforts led the mayor, village board, and building inspector to support the creation of a mandatory visitability ordinance for all new single-family homes. These town leaders began informing the community about the need for, and benefits of, incorporating visitability design into all new homes.

Initially, the local home builders' association objected to a mandatory visitability ordinance over concerns that it would increase development costs and make homes less desirable to homebuyers. To address these concerns and ease the transition to a mandatory ordinance, the town set a period of voluntary compliance between 1999 and 2003 to allow developers time to change their home designs and test the process of building visitable houses before the village board would vote on adopting a mandatory ordinance.

The visitability features of the ordinance included

- no-step entrance,
- bathroom on the ground level,
- wide hallways and doors, and
- adjusted height for outlets and switches.

By the time the village board voted on the mandatory ordinance in 2003, local developers had analyzed the impact of the ordinance and found that it would have minimal financial repercussions on their projects. Some developers voluntarily built several developments in accordance with the visitability ordinance at a very small additional cost and found that the homes sold well. The limited cost of visitability features (an average of \$2,911 per house) and their popularity among homebuyers led the home builders' association and local developers to support the adoption of the mandatory visitability ordinance and led to the approval of the mandatory ordinance by the village board in 2003. Since the ordinance passed, 1,916 visitable homes have been built in Bolingbrook in addition to the 1,288 visitable homes built voluntarily before the ordinance went into effect. Bolingbrook maintains a map of its subdivision with visitable homes.\*\*

\* Fuller, Katherine. "Assuring Accessible Housing: The Visitability Code of the Village of Bolingbrook." *SPNA Review Vol. 4, No. 1* (2008).

\*\*See the Bolingbrook Visibility Map at <http://www.bolingbrook.com/maps>

portion of all new single-family homes and duplexes be visitable or easily adapted.<sup>17</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 them 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 grants, or create deferred loan programs to assist with home modifications for existing homes. In Georgia, for example, disabled low-income homeowners are eligible for state grants of up to \$15,000 to complete home modifications to improve the accessibility of their home by widening doorways, building ramps, and lowering shelves.<sup>18</sup>

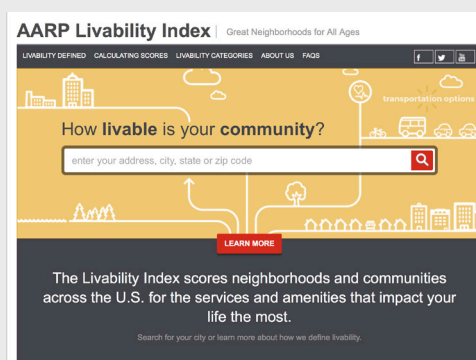
At the local level, jurisdictions can waive construction permit fees or streamline the permitting process for homes with accessibility features, helping to reduce overall building costs. For example, in 1999, officials in Freehold Borough, New Jersey, passed an ordinance to waive building permit fees for ramps and other universal design features in residential units.<sup>19</sup> In Austin, Texas, 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>20</sup> Approximately 12,000 housing units were built between 2000 and 2015 through the S.M.A.R.T. program.<sup>21</sup>

Voluntary certificate programs are another incentive-based approach that "brands" homes meeting accessibility standards under a recognizable label, creating a tool for marketing them to prospective homebuyers or tenants. For example, Johnson County, Iowa, operates Homes for Life, 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>22</sup> Such certificate programs could benefit from coordinated outreach and education efforts to increase awareness of the advantages associated with accessibility features in homes.

When developing these policies, jurisdictions can refer to building codes, such as ANSI/ICC 117.1 (2009), the Standard for Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities, for guidance on integrating visitable and accessible features into homes.<sup>23</sup>

### **THE LIVABILITY INDEX**

AARP's Livability Index: Great Neighborhoods for All Ages is an online resource that measures communities across several categories, including housing, on how well they are meeting the needs of people as they age. The tool scores any location in the United States against a set of indicators that, when combined, reflect AARP's livable communities principles. The index includes several indicators that highlight a number of housing issues and policy solutions discussed in this *Insight on the Issues* such as the prevalence of homes with accessible features within the community and the existence of state or local policies that support home accessibility. To score your community, visit <http://www.aarp.org/livabilityindex>.



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