

By Jana Lynott, AICP
Strategic Policy Advisor
AARP



VISITABILITY: MAKING HOMES MORE ACCESSIBLE FOR THE GROWING 50+ POPULATION

As America ages, home accessibility is becoming a major issue in the United States. The single-family housing in which most Americans live today was built many years ago with structural designs, such as front steps, narrow doorways, and upstairs bathrooms that act as barriers for many persons with limited mobility.

These features can thwart efforts by people with disabilities to remain in their homes living independent lives and participating fully in their communities.

A 2004 AARP survey found that more than four in five (84 percent) persons age 50 and older strongly or somewhat agreed that they would like to remain in their current home for as long as possible. Despite these preferences, many older adults and younger persons

with disabilities may be forced to move to an institutional setting because their homes fail to meet their changing needs or even endanger their safety.

These housing conditions have led to a “visitability” movement in the US and other countries that has led to many jurisdictions now requiring builders to construct new homes with zero-step entrances, wider interior doorways, and first-floor bathrooms. These

three features are the basic core components of the visitability concept. The goal is to improve the ability of older adults and people with disabilities to visit the homes of their families and friends and to permit people who develop mobility impairments to remain in their homes.

US cities that have enacted ordinances requiring easier access include Atlanta, Tucson, San Antonio and Birmingham. A new report by AARP's Public Policy Institute, "Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability" (August 2008) describes these "visitability" initiatives in the United States. The authors of the report are Jordana L. Maisel and Edward Steinfeld of the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (University of Buffalo), and Eleanor Smith of Concrete Change in Atlanta. Concrete Change, a disability advocacy group, introduced the visitability concept in the US in 1987 under the term "basic home access." A young Japanese disability advocate, Yoshi Kawauchi, who was studying in the US in 1990, suggested the term "visitability."

The first US visitability law was enacted in Atlanta in 1992. In San Antonio, a 2002 ordinance has resulted in the construction of about 7,000 homes while an ordinance in Pima County, Arizona, has seen the construction of 15,000 homes under the new standards. About 60 state and local governments have passed either mandatory or voluntary visitability initiatives as of the end of 2007, according to the *Journal of the American Planning Association*.

In the United Kingdom, Parliament passed "section M" in 1999, an amendment to residential building regulations requiring basic access features for all new homes built in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. In Canada, research conducted by the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies from August 2006 to August 2007 found visitability initiatives in Manitoba, Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, and the Yukon Territory — all involving public housing. Also, "FlexHousing" has been developed by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing



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Corporation. In addition to visitability features, this type of housing calls for a bedroom on the entry-level floor and closets on each floor stacked one above the other to allow for easy conversion to an elevator shaft.

Earlier examples of accessible housing for older people and persons with disabilities are found in Sweden, which requires municipalities to ensure that housing is adapted to the needs of these groups. Older people can apply to their municipality for a grant for home adaptation. The municipality will pay the entire cost, regardless of the applicant's financial status. The adaptations generally include removing thresholds and modifying bathrooms.

The visitability design concept differs from full or universal housing design because of

its emphasis on the three features of accessibility that are at the heart of the concept—a ground-level entrance on either the front, side, or back of the house, at least 32 inches of clear passageway space, and at least a half-bath on the main floor. Universal housing design, in contrast, aims for accessible and affordable housing for the general population (people of all ages and all conditions) in which aesthetics also plays a large role.

Visitability initiatives vary from community to community. For example, some programs call only for the three basic accessible features, while others add other architectural elements such as lever handles or grab bars on bathroom walls. Another major variation concerns the nature of local ordinances or laws enacted — whether programs are mandatory or voluntary. Some voluntary programs provide monetary incentives such as tax breaks to encourage incorporation of accessible features.

The city of Austin and the state of Texas have mandatory visitability laws that apply to homes built with the support of public funds. In addition, Austin has developed an incentive program called S.M.A.R.T. (safe, mixed income, accessible, reasonably priced, and transit oriented) housing program for single- and multifamily housing. Builders who adopt the program requirements, which include visitability features, receive fee waivers, fast-track review and permit processing, and a density bonus for smaller lots without the need for a zoning variance.

However, the visitability movement has been slowed by resistance from many home builders to mandatory rather than voluntary laws and regulations. The builders contend that

requiring visitability features can be impracticable at certain sites and very costly. They also argue that there is limited demand from consumers for these designs, and consumers are unwilling or unable to pay the extra costs.

On the other hand, visitability advocates argue that additional costs are minimal. Authors Maisel, Smith, and Steinfeld found the difference to range from \$200 to \$1,000 when the features are incorporated during early design of a house. They suggest that any lack of consumer interest can be traced to an understandable reluctance on the part of many people to face the possibility of declining health and limited mobility as they age. Including these features in newly built single-family housing will create a greater supply of accessible homes, they say, that will enable people with mobility limitations to visit or live in such a house.

Accessibility barriers within homes often lead to extensive and expensive home modifications. A National Association of Home Builders survey found that 72 percent of respondents reported modifying their homes for aging-in-place needs, up from 60 percent in 2006. (Such extensive remodeling can be more costly than having basic accessibility features incorporated during construction.)

US federal law requiring access for people with disabilities applies only to all new multifamily residencies and to about five percent of single-family units built with public funds. Legislation introduced in every session of Congress since 2003 by US Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), the Inclusive Home Design Act, would require the basic visitability features in all single-family homes that receive federal funds for construction and tax credits.

In 2006, the US Census Bureau reported that 32 percent of persons 65 and older had difficulty walking and 31 percent reported difficulty using stairs. As growing numbers of baby boomers join the ranks of the elderly and the prevalence of disabilities increases, housing policy makers and government officials will, no doubt, increasingly turn their attention to housing accessibility issues to help persons with disabilities of all ages to remain in their homes. The concept of “visitability” is becoming one major development in that ongoing debate. **A**

For more information about visitability and to download the AARP Public Policy Institute research report “Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability,” visit: http://www.aarp.org/research/housing-mobility/accessibility/2008_14_access.html

Jana Lynott

Jana Lynott joined AARP’s Public Policy Institute in spring 2007, as a Strategic Policy Advisor to the Independent Living Team/Long-Term Care Team. Her research focuses on the connections among land use, transportation and the creation of livable communities. She received her Masters in Urban and Environmental Planning degree from the University of Virginia in 1996. Ms. Lynott served on the executive board of the Virginia Chapter of the American Planning Association from 2004 to 2008, and continues to serve on the association’s legislative and policy committee.