

What Is Basic Home Access? (Also known as “Visitability” or “Inclusive Home Design”)

Visitability is a policy campaign to make key access features standard practice in virtually ALL new houses. Most homes have steps at every entrance, and bathroom doors narrower than other doors. Basic Home Access involves a fundamental change in construction practices to include the three key features essential for visitability:

- One entrance with zero steps.
- 32 inches of clear passage through all interior doors, including bathrooms.
- At least a half bathroom on the main floor, preferably a full bath, and preferably with designated maneuvering space.

Visitable homes have *at least* these three features. A few additional, low-cost Universal Design features may be incorporated-- but to apply to virtually ALL new houses, the list must be short; include the essentials; and be cost-effective. When space allows, including a full bath and bedroom space on the main floor makes a home not only visitable but livable for people with mobility impairments.

What Are The Benefits?

- Basic access has **major health benefits**: Fewer falls because people (especially older people) don't have to try to manage a step and an entry door at the same time. Less stress on caregivers, whose disabled family members can enter and exit their own homes without being carried and fit through their own bathroom doors. Less depression because people with disabilities can visit the homes of their friends and extended family.
- If disability occurs, the disabled person and their family are more **able to remain in their existing home and community** --- rather than facing expensive renovations, or being forced to move to a different house or a nursing home.
- **All residents find it more convenient** to bring in baby strollers, grocery carts, bicycles, furniture and other items that don't move easily through narrow doors or up steps.
- Residents can **welcome guests** who use wheelchairs or walkers or have other mobility impairments. When basic access is in place, **mobility-limited people are included, not barred by architecture** from visiting others.
- Visitability features **enhance sale and re-sale** in an era where the older demographic is growing rapidly. 88 million U.S. residents will be over 65 by 2050, more than 20% of the population (Census Bureau 2008).
- Visitability is a **“green” issue**. Tearing out existing doors to install wider doors and remodeling existing entrances wastes money, energy and materials. Experienced remodelers state that 75% to 90% of all disability-related remodeling costs would be saved if a zero-step entrance and adequate bathroom door widths were already in place.
- Zero-step entrances on new homes are nearly always **easy to construct**, on flat or hilly terrain. The entrance can be at the front, side, back, or through the garage--- wherever is most feasible for the topography--- and nearly always can be achieved without a “ramp,” by grading so that the sidewalk meets a porch. For the 40% of houses built on a concrete slab, constructing the zero-step entrance is usually extremely easy. For

houses with basements or crawl spaces, several solutions provide low-cost, attractive zero-step entrances.

What about **townhouses** (attached single-family)? There are also Visitability “best practices” for townhouses. See the townhouse text and photos at www.concretechange.org in the “Construction” section.

- **The basic features cost little on new construction**---typically **zero to \$100** for a home built on a concrete slab, or about **\$600 dollars** for a home built with a basement or crawl space. In contrast, a typical cost of widening just one narrow interior door is \$700, and a typical cost of retrofitting for a step-free entrance is \$4,000 (often much higher).
- Visitability **makes fiscal sense** for society as a whole. **25%-60% of all houses built now will have, over the lifetime of the house, a resident with a severe, long-term mobility impairment.**¹ As of 2005, the average cost for one year of nursing home care exceeded \$64,000 per person per year² – 64% of which is paid with public dollars.³ And, nearly 60% of all nursing homes residents enter directly from a hospital.⁴ Architectural barriers are a force keeping many people from coming home from the hospital to their own homes.

More on Doors and Bathrooms

All interior passage doors—including bathroom doors-- need to provide at least 32" of clear passage space when the door is open at 90 degrees. A 2'8" door does not suffice. 2'10" doors are readily available from the wholesale companies where professional builders buy supplies. Standard 3'0" doors are also excellent where space permits. Pocket (sliding) doors are another way to obtain 32-inch clearance.

Adding square footage is *not* necessary to accommodate a usable bathroom. Usually the existing plan already offers enough wall space for a wide door. If additional inches are needed, they can be shaved from an adjoining room.

It's not essential (although it can be helpful) to have a large turning diameter inside a residential bathroom. Even a small half-bath can accommodate the recommended 48" by 30" rectangles of open floor space beside commodes, sinks and tubs. In a small bathroom, the door can be hinged to swing out to give a person using a mobility aid enough room to shut the door when inside the room.

Is Visitability Already Happening?

To some extent, yes. Federal law requires that every unit of new multi-family residences must have basic access if the building has an elevator, and every ground-floor unit in buildings without elevators. What about single-family houses? Whole neighborhoods of VISIBLE houses built for the open market already exist in Georgia, Texas, Arizona, Illinois, Ohio and elsewhere. These 50,000+ houses to date have resulted through policy decisions and legislative action. But the great majority of new single-family houses still are built with steps at all entrances and narrow doors. The change comes about through people being proactive to make it happen.

¹ "Aging and Disability: Implications for the Housing Industry and Housing Policy in the United States, " *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Summer 2008.

² *Met Life*, 2005

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007

⁴ Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) minimum data sets