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'Visitability' means thinking ahead for mobility needs in housing

By Teri Reinemann •Correspondent • June 16, 2010, 6:00 pm

The word is "visitability." Ever heard of it?

Visitability is a movement to change **new home construction** practices to create more accessible, affordable and integrated housing. It's based on the evidence that it is much easier and far less expensive to design and build basic accessibility features into new homes versus retrofitting older, existing homes.

"When someone builds a home, they're not just building it for themselves -- that home is going to be around for 100 years. These things hurt nobody and they help a lot of people," says Eleanor Smith, founder of Concrete Change.

So, what makes a "visitable" home? Just three things:

One zero-step entrance on an accessible route -- at the front, side, back or through the garage.

Thirty-two-inch openings on all interior doorways.

One bathroom on the main floor that can accommodate a person in a wheelchair.

The spirit of visitability is the belief that people who use wheelchairs, or have other **mobility** disabilities, like to live in and visit homes that are welcoming and physically safe. And, visitable homes provide for the changing needs that occur over a lifetime. Eliminating needless physical barriers allows people to stay in their homes longer and reduces unwanted institutionalization. According to a position paper by ADAPT, "In many states, housing is the number one reason that people with disabilities, of all ages, are forced into institutions. Simply put, people with disabilities face a housing crisis. There is little housing that is accessible, even less that is also affordable, and still less that is also integrated."

The scarcity of accessible, **affordable**, integrated housing will increase as the population in the United States ages and the number of people with

disabilities increases. Visitability provides an affordable and sustainable design strategy which will increase the number of homes and neighborhoods available to people with disabilities. States and communities across the nation have embraced the visitability movement through legislation or voluntary, incentive based programs. Pima County in Arizona holds the record with 15,000-plus visitable homes.

If you would like to **learn** more about visitability, I suggest two resources which are available online. The first is from AARP's Public Policy Institute entitled "Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability." The second is from the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access of the University at Buffalo entitled "Visitability: An Inclusive Design Approach for Housing." Or, do your own search -- the word is "visitability."

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