

Visitability Policy

MPP Professional Paper

In Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Public Policy Degree Requirements

The Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs

The University of Minnesota

Jenny Lewis

December 8, 2009

Name and Title of Paper Supervisor

Signature of Paper Supervisor, certifying successful completion of oral presentation

Date of oral presentation

Name and Title of Paper Supervisor

Signature of Paper Supervisor, certifying successful completion of professional paper

Date

Name and Title of Second Committee Member

Signature of Second Committee Member, certifying successful completion of professional paper

Date

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	Pages 2-3
Visitability Context.....	Pages 3-4
Legislative History.....	Pages 4-6
Design Concepts and Ideologies.....	Pages 6-10
Guidelines.....	Pages 10-12
Local and State Efforts.....	Pages 12-16
National Efforts.....	Pages 16-18
International Efforts.....	Pages 18-19
Feasibility.....	Pages 19-20
Stakeholder Response.....	Pages 20-22
Minnesota Specifics.....	Pages 22-23
Next Steps.....	Pages 23-26
Conclusions.....	Pages 26-27
Chart of Local and State Efforts.....	Page 28
References.....	Pages 29-31

Introduction

Bob, a good friend of my family, loves to visit our farm for card games and movie watching and Sunday dinner, and we love to have him. He calls and says he's coming out, and instead of adding another place-setting to the table, my mom starts making calls, rounding up a crew of people that can help get Bob into our home. Bob has Multiple Sclerosis and relies on a heavy power wheelchair to get around. It usually takes about four strong and agile people to get Bob up into the front porch, and then again, up into the main level of our home. When Bob has to use the bathroom, he uses a urinal in one of the bedrooms on the main level because the bathroom doors are too narrow for wheelchair clearance. When he is finished, he has to ask one of us to take the urinal and empty and clean it for him. When it's time for Bob to go home, again a crew is gathered.

My grandfather had a brain tumor in the later years of his life. The tumor affected the balance control in his brain and he was unable to walk. We assembled a similar crew, but my grandfather was 7' tall, and the crew could never safely handle the lifting. My grandfather never got to see our new house or take part in the activities there.

My 100 year old great-grandmother is now mobility impaired. The crew could easily handle her small frame and tiny wheelchair, but it's too much for her. She refuses to be lifted and jostled. She says it makes her feel unsafe and burdensome.

My stepdad has osteoarthritis in his knees and he'll need to get the joints replaced next winter--but he won't be able to stay in our home to recover. No, he'll have to stay in a local nursing facility where he'll be able to move about freely, unrestricted by stairs or doorways too

narrow for the walker he'll need during his rehabilitation. He will join the ranks of those unwelcome by the barriers of our home.

The costs of remodeling our home would be immense, and no one thought of the potential obstacles we would face when the home was built years ago. None of the residents at the time had mobility impairments and that was the only consideration. Today there is a different option that allows for a home to welcome everyone, regardless of age or impairment. It's called visitability.

This paper explores visitability in single-family homes. First, I will identify the prevalence of disability and the implications of an aging population. I will discuss the impact and evolution of the disability rights movement and accessible housing policy. Next, I will compare the ideologies and implications of the three design principles: accessibility, universal design, and visitability. I will look at the architectural features that compose visitability. International, state and local governments have initiated voluntary and mandatory visitability programs with varying success and I will discuss these, paying particular attention to Minnesota policy. I will identify stakeholders and illuminate their concerns about visitability. Finally, I will look to the future and the potential for the expansion of visitability.

Visitability Context

At the beginning of the 20th century, people with mobility impairments were an insignificant minority. With an average lifespan of 47 years, few people aged into disability. Demographics have changed. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, people are living longer, with an average life span of 78 years (World Bank, 2007). The United States Census Bureau

estimates that by the year 2030, 70 million people will be 65 years old and older (Kochera, 2002). As the aged population grows and grows older, more and more are aging into disability. An estimated 22 million Americans aged 65 years old and older reported having physical difficulties in 2006 (Maisel, Smith, & Steinfeld, 2008).

Not only is the general population living longer, but people disabled at birth or at younger ages are living longer, too. While the United States engagement in wars has created a large and visible population of veterans with disabilities, advances in medicine have enabled people to survive otherwise fatal illnesses and traumas. A 2007 survey reported that 12.8% of Americans aged 21-64 have a disability (Bjelland, Erickson, and Lee, 2008).

The demographic shifts have encouraged a change in attitudes as well. People with disabilities are no longer an invisible, institutionalized population. In the 1999 Olmstead case, the United States Supreme Court ruled that services should be delivered to people with disabilities in the most integrated setting possible. The most integrated setting possible is often a single-family home in a residential community.

Legislative History

The Disability Rights Movement began in the 1960's, inspired by the philosophies and gains of the Civil Rights Movement. Working largely through legislation, the Disability Rights Movement was able to achieve great leaps in the 1970's, 1980's, 1990's, and into the 21st century. New laws were enacted, prohibiting discrimination in education, telecommunications, transportation, and accommodation.

Momentum for access within the Disability Rights Movement began in opposition to institutionalized maintenance. With a multitude of veterans with mobility impairments, the most tangible obstacles were physical barriers. The Veterans Administration, The President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped, and the National Easter Seals Society teamed up to develop national standards for "barrier free" public buildings. In 1961, the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) published the first accessibility standard entitled "A 117.1—Making Buildings Accessible to and Usable by the Physically Handicapped." The goal of the standard was buildings that could be entered and used by people with disabilities. Never adopted by state or local legislative entities, these standards were not enforceable (Welch and Palames, 1995).

By 1966, 30 states had passed their own accessibility legislation; by 1973, it was 49 states. In addition, different federal agencies continued to develop and issue additional regulations and minimum standards. These efforts resulted in complicated and competing accessibility standards for buildings and facilities. In 1984, an attempt was made to standardize federal accessibility guidelines, and incorporated the ANSI principles into the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standard.

The Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 (ABA) was pivotal. Focusing on the physical design of buildings and facilities, this act mandated all sites designed, constructed, altered, or leased with federal funds to be made accessible. This nationwide prescription was seen as a great victory for the movement: a gain in credibility and visibility. The ABA was the first time physical access to buildings was required by Federal law.

In 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act expanded the scope of accessibility to include program access. Section 504 prohibited discrimination in any program, service, or activity of the Federal government. While the preference was for a program, service, or activity to be offered through comparable, alternative methods, Section 504 required structural modification if there was no other feasible way to make a program accessible.

The Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 was even more expansive. Requiring accessible units be constructed in all new multi-family housing with four or more units, this act included both private and public building, not just those that received federal funds. In 1991, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issued guidelines to facilitate compliance. This foray into the private housing market was truly a breakthrough (Shapiro, 1994).

The most far-reaching and comprehensive legislation to date is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Declaring discrimination in access to places of public accommodation illegal, it mandated that physical barriers impeding access be corrected or removed wherever they exist. The Architectural and Transportation Compliance Board issued Accessibility Guidelines for accessible design in 1991, and they were adopted by the U.S. Department of Justice and became enforceable ADA Standards for Accessible Design (Welch and Palames, 1995).

Design Concepts and Ideologies

When properly applied, most legislation applying to housing implements a “percentage mentality”: the percentage of accessible homes should roughly equal the percentage of people

with mobility impairments in the population. Once a determined percentage of accessible units has been reached, the remaining units can legally remain inaccessible or can be reconstructed without accessibility standards. First, this rule assumes incorrectly that people with mobility impairments need access only in their own homes. It assumes that able-bodied residents will not want to invite friends or relatives with disabilities into their homes. Second, this rule makes no allowance for the development of a disability in an able-bodied person, either temporary or permanent. The definition of a disability is important in understanding this incorrect assumption. As defined by Mary Jane Owen, the Executive Director of the National Catholic Office of Persons with Disabilities, 2002:

Disabilities are the normal, expected, and anticipated outcome of the risks, stresses, and strains of the living process itself. This definition recognizes that the eventual outcome of the shared fragility of our bodies is the development of physiological glitches at some point in the normal life cycle. Disability is not something that happens only to the unlucky few but is an event that can be anticipated by us all.

Until the 1990's, accessibility was *the* design that considered people with mobility impairments. Even then, accessibility in single family homes was only considered at the time of building when a person with a disability would be a resident—accessibility was most often the goal of a set of adaptations to current structures. Accessibility has become less conceptual and more rigidly viewed as adherence to a specific set of building codes. True accessibility is about barrier-free living which is entirely individual and not possibly contained in code. Accessibility for a person with vision loss is different than accessibility for a person with mobility impairment.

While code-bound accessibility can be too prescriptive and restrictive for broad application, individualized accessibility is too custom and can mean anything. Architects and builders learned that remodeling to achieve access was cost-prohibitive in many cases, and changes that accommodated people with disabilities were found to benefit everyone. Furthermore, accessibility features could be commonly provided, less expensive, unlabeled, and attractive. This laid the foundation for new movements: universal design and visitability.

According to Ron Mace, the father of universal design, universal design is “the design of environment to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialization.” The goal of universal design is to “reduce the physical and attitudinal barriers between people with and without disabilities, to promote full participation in society” (The Center for Universal Design, 2002). Attitudinal barriers are immense, and universal design considers the impact on the image as well as function of the user. Universal design is comprised of seven principles: equitable use (useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities), flexibility in use (accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities), simple and intuitive (easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level), perceptible information (communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities), tolerance for error (minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions), low physical effort (can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue), and size and space for approach and use (appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user's body size, posture, or mobility).

Visitability is a relatively new design concept. “It’s about correcting current building practices, which have disabled people and their allies desperately seeking help to undo past barriers—while a half-mile down the road a new development is going up constructing exactly those same barriers.” Visitability is not about retrofitting or remodeling, rather visitability is about new construction. Visitability narrows accessibility with a focus on homes, all homes, and only the most essential features of access: entrance into the home and fitting through the interior doors. More of a lay description, visitability can be summarized aptly: “Get in and pee” (Concrete Change, 2008).

It is worth discussing how the design concepts of accessibility, universal design, and visitability are related to each other. In a continuum of adaptation, accessibility is the most highly adapted, visitability is the least adapted, and universal design is somewhere in the middle. Some Disability Rights advocates, looking at visitability in comparison to the other design concepts, have suggested that visitability is “half a loaf” in its lack of adaptation. Viewing these design concepts only in comparison is short-sighted.

If one assumes that these design concepts have a common goal of barrier-free living, then visitability does seem inadequate. Each of them, however, has its own unique approach and goal. Universal design seeks design and building consciously designed with function in mind. The goal of accessibility is full, barrier-free use. The goal of visitability is entirely different: it seeks to change a little about a lot.

Visitability began in the United States in 1986 when Eleanor Smith drove past Habitat for Humanity homes being built in Atlanta, Georgia, and wondered about their accessibility. Why, she questioned, didn’t they make them at least a little bit accessible so someone with a disability

could live or even visit there? Eleanor rallied support from a group of disability advocates in the area, and they pushed Habitat for Humanity to include a very basic set of accessible design features into every home produced. They named this basic set of features “visitability” and a movement was born (Truesdale and Steinfeld, 2002).

Guidelines

The visitability movement is gaining momentum and it is very organized. Eleanor Smith and the eight disability advocates founded Concrete Change, a non-profit organization dedicated solely to visitability. Concrete Change has published a set of guidelines outlining the essential features of visitability. The most critical and generally accepted components of visitability are a zero-step entrance, doorways with 32” of clear passage space, and at least a half bath on the main floor with adequate maneuvering room for someone who utilizes a mobility aide.

It is crucial that a zero-step entrance to the home be exactly that: no steps, completely level. Even one small step poses a significant barrier. This zero-step entrance may be a ramp, a sloping sidewalk, or even a garage entry on the main level of the home. Ideally, this entrance is the same that the residents and able-bodied persons use. However, considering possible topographical issues such as a heavily sloped site, the entrance could be placed around the back or side of the house. In this case, an accessible route such as a sidewalk over which a mobility aide (motorized or manual wheelchair, stroller, walker, etc) can travel is recommended.

The slope of the accessible route must not be too steep. The ratio of height to length should be at least a foot long for every inch of height, and less steep than that when possible. If

the total rise is less than a foot, the ramp or walkway can be proportionately shorter, as the danger of a mobility aide rolling or tipping out of control is much less on a short rise.

The slope must end in a level platform such as a porch or patio, so that people with mobility impairments do not roll or fall backwards when trying to manage the door. In addition, the slope must be level, side-to-side, be flat from top to bottom, and end smoothly at the bottom, with no drop-off. Also, a ramp should have rails according to the standard building code requirements for porch rails. For the portion of a ramp that may not have rails, a 2"x2" board along each edge can prevent a mobility aide from rolling or tipping off.

The bathrooms and interior doorways are the next potential obstacles. All interior passage doors must be a minimum of 32", which leaves 30" of clear space. 34" doors are better, with 32" of clearance, and are increasingly available because it is the width requirement of the Fair Housing Amendment in new multi-family dwellings.

Special attention needs to be paid to the bathroom door, as it is usually narrower than other doors in the house. In addition to the minimum 32" doorway, a 32" clear path to the commode is essential. The bathroom door can be hinged to swing out (rather than in) to provide additional room and give the guest enough room to close the door. Swing-away hinges are also an option (Concrete Change, 2008).

Some visitability legislation includes additional features. The three most common additions to the basic three visitability features are reinforced bathroom walls, full bathroom required on the main floor, and accessible handles, electrical outlets, and environmental controls. Reinforced bathroom walls make the installation of grab bars possible. Levered door handles

and single-lever kitchen and bathroom faucets are more readily usable by all, as are raised electrical outlets, lowered light switches, and lowered thermostat controls

(http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/housing/visitable_housing.html, 2009).

Local and State Efforts

In 1989, the Florida “Bathroom Bill” passed through legislature. The first US law to mandate a basic access feature in all new homes throughout an entire state, the “Bathroom Bill” reads,

Single-family houses, duplexes, triplexes, condominiums, and townhouses shall provide at least one bathroom, located with maximum possible privacy, where bathrooms are provided on habitable grade levels, with a door that has a 29-inch clear opening (Concrete Change, 2008).

The Atlanta City Ordinance of 1992 was the first law in the United States to mandate a zero-step entrance in certain private, single-family homes. The regulation applies to new, single-family dwellings, duplexes, and triplexes that receive city assistance (Concrete Change, 2008). In addition to the zero-step entrance, the Atlanta regulation mandates 32” clear door openings, 36” clear, level routes through the main floor, wall reinforcement in the bathroom to allow for future grab bars, and environmental controls in accessible locations (Nishita, Liebig, Pynoos, Perelman, & Spegal, 2007).

In 1998, Austin, Texas, passed an ordinance requiring barrier-free residential construction of single-family homes, duplexes, and triplexes where city funds were expended. With a clause stating the goal of greater economic opportunity for accessibility, the Austin

ordinance mandated a 32” zero-step entrance, 30” interior doors, a 36” level route through main floor, reinforced bathroom walls, and environmental controls in an accessible location (Nishita et al., 2007). The ordinance is upheld by the Austin Department of Fire and Building Code (Concrete Change, 2008).

In 1999, the State of Texas followed the example set by Austin. Although statewide, this mandate was limited in scope, only applying to state and federally funded single-family housing for individuals and families of low and very low income. The specifications of the ordinance follow that of Austin, save for the specification regarding internal doors: the statewide requirement is a 32” opening (Nishita et al., 2007).

In response to the city-state phenomenon in Austin, Texas, Georgia replied with its own legislation mimicking that of Atlanta. The specifications of the ordinance follow that of Atlanta, save for the specification regarding the entrance to the home: the statewide requirement is a 36” opening (Nishita et al., 2007). In 2000, Georgia advocates declared a “circle of mutual help” between Texas and Georgia, and invited other states to join, increasing the circle (Concrete Change, 2008).

In 2000, Urbana, Illinois, amended their 1989 One- and Two-Family Dwelling Code. Adopting “Visitability Standards”, Urbana mandated visitability for those homes funded with financial assistance originating from or flowing through the City of Urbana. The Visitability Standards applied through this amendment include: a no-step entrance that is served by walks and/or ramps, walks and/or ramps with a specified grade, a route with a clearance of 36”, landings not less than 36”x36”, non-slip surfaces, cross slope drainage, door clearance of 32”,

reinforced bathroom doors, corridors of 36” widths, and environmental controls no higher than 48” above the finished floor (Concrete Change, 2008).

In 2000, Vermont passed a law requiring that new single-family homes built on speculation or receiving state or federal funds are built with certain visitability features. Many people do not consider the Vermont law a visitability success because while it requires a 36” exterior door, it does not require a zero-step entrance. The law does require 32” clearance in internal doors and one half-bath on the main level (Nishita et al., 2007). The other major criticism is that there is no enforcement or penalty provision, making this law an “educational measure” but not really a measure to guarantee the production of visitable homes (Vermont Fair Housing News, 2007).

Minnesota followed suit, amending the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency (MHFA) Law of 1971. Authored by the Minnesota State Council on Disability, visitability language passed through the 2001 Legislative Session. The visitability amendment required the basic three features: a no-step entrance (but no width requirement), a half-bath on the main level, and 32” clear doorways throughout the dwelling. The language applies to new construction of single-family homes, duplexes, triplexes, and multilevel townhouses that are financed in whole or in part by the MHFA (MHFA, 2002).

In 2002, Kansas passed a law requiring visitability when state or federal funds are used. This law requires a zero-step entrance with a 32” opening, 32” interior door clearance, a 36” wide level route through the main floor, reinforced bathroom walls, and environmental controls in an accessible location.

The same year, Iowa City, Iowa and San Antonio, Texas required visitability for city, state, or federally funded building. Iowa City required a zero-step entrance at least 32” wide, 32” wide interior doors, reinforced bathroom walls, and accessible environmental controls (Nishita et al., 2007). San Antonio required a 36” wide zero-step entrance, 32” wide interior doors, a 36” wide level route through the main floor, reinforced bathroom walls, accessible environmental controls, and lever handles on plumbing and doors (Concrete Change, 2008).

Ordinances passed in 2002 in Naperville, Illinois, and Pima County, Arizona require visitability in all future housing, not just publicly funded housing. Naperville doesn’t have any requirements regarding the entrance to the home, but does require 32” wide internal doors on the main floor, reinforced bathroom walls on the main floor, and accessible environmental controls. Pima County requires a 32” wide zero-step entrance to the home, 30” wide interior doors, a 36” wide level route through the main floor, reinforced bathroom walls, and environmental controls in an accessible location (Nishita et al., 2007).

In 2003, Bolingbrook, Illinois enacted a visitability ordinance applied to all housing, financed publicly or privately. While initially the visitability standards were only suggested, in 2003 they were signed into municipal building code by the mayor after he discovered the practicality and social sustainability of the visitable homes built voluntarily. Bolingbrook requires a zero-step entrance with 32” of clearance, reinforced bathroom walls, 32” wide interior doors, 42” wide hallways, accessible environmental controls, and a bathroom on the main floor of the home. The Bolingbrook ordinance is the single most successful visitability program to date, having built more than 4,000 visitable homes by 2007 (Concrete Change, 2008).

In 2005, Toledo, Ohio enacted a new municipal code on an emergency basis requiring visitability features in all subsidized single-family building. The code specifies a zero-step entrance, 32” wide doorways, a main floor bathroom with reinforced walls, 36” wide hallways, and accessible environmental controls.

Many of the state and local visitability requirements contain language allowing for a waiver of some or all of the visitability features. The most common waiver is due to prohibitive cost. When lot conditions drive the costs of visitability above the forecasted amount, exceptions are commonly granted. Some enforcement agencies have reported granting many waivers, others have granted none.

Not all enforcement agencies have tracked the number of homes built under their visitability legislation. Concrete Change has aggregated the data from those agencies who have tracked their success, and reports that by the end of 2007, over 30,000 visitable houses have been built, regardless of the age or ability of the first occupants (Concrete Change, 2008).

National Efforts

Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Andrew Cuomo, invited members of the disability community to his office, beginning in 1997, to discuss needs and concerns. Cuomo assured the assembled group that he was encouraging visitability, among other agendas. Cuomo advised all applicants competing for federal grants to incorporate visitability standards in their proposals. Advocates were extremely encouraged by this news, calling it a “big step forward.” Cuomo also invited those present to be unashamed in filing complaints of alleged wrongdoing and noncompliance of visitability laws to HUD (HUD, 1998).

In 1999, Cuomo, on behalf of HUD Office of Public and Indian Housing (OPIH), published and distributed a 16 page Accessibility Notice, reminding recipients of Federal funds of their obligation to comply with pertinent laws and implementing regulations. Visitability was strongly encouraged in the HOPE VI Program, a national initiative to eradicate severely distressed public housing through physical rehabilitation and new public housing development. Visitability became part of the language of the HOPE VI Application kit and the Notice of Funding Availability, (HUD OPIH, 1999).

In 2000, HUD's Office of Public Housing Investments' Public and Indian Housing issued a document, "Strategies for Providing Accessibility & Visitability for HOPE VI and Mixed Finance Homeownership". In his Foreward, Andrew Cuomo summarized the intent:

We are demonstrating commitment to communities of opportunity by using HUD's HOPE VI program to develop mixed-income neighborhoods where accessibility is built-in to the physical design of the community. For our communities to be truly inclusive, we must also work toward a modest—but universal—standard of access. To help reach that goal, HUD encourages HOPE VI grantees to ensure that as many units as possible have doorways and bathrooms which are "visitabile" for people with disabilities. In this publication, you will find design features that are inexpensive and unobtrusive. Housing that is accessible, attractive, affordable, and which welcomes disabled and aging Americans is an integral part of the healthy, sustainable communities that HUD is working to create.

In June 2005, the United States Conference of Mayors passed Resolution 28. Resolution 28 strongly supports "the independence of persons with disabilities and seniors by promoting...visitability standards to increase access to the homes of friends, family and neighbors." Citing statistics of an aging population and the value of good quality of life for all

people, Resolution 28 supports state and local efforts to promote visitability (Concrete Change, 2008).

The Inclusive Home Design Act of 2009 was introduced to the United States House of Representatives on March 10, 2009 by Rep. Janice Schakowsky, a Democrat from the 9th District of Illinois. This bill proposes to require newly constructed single-family homes using federal assistance to include an accessible entrance, accessible interior doors, accessible environmental controls, an accessible bathroom, and an accessible habitable space. Failure to follow these requirements would result in civil action in a U.S. district court or state court and would permit the Attorney General to commence or participate in these. The Inclusive Home Design Act of 2009 was referred to the House Committee on Financial Services for deliberation, investigation, and revision (Congressional Research Service, 2009).

International Efforts

The great British front doorstep, beloved of sitcoms, scrubbed by generations of housewives, and a staple of urban architecture, is set to disappear under changes to housebuilding regulations (Rachel Kelly, 1997).

In March of 1998, British Parliament passed a mandate creating access to all new homes throughout England and Wales: Section M of the Building Regulations. Public buildings, shops, and offices already have to provide level thresholds, and all is the work of a decade of lobbying and educating by organizations representing disabled and elderly people. The legislation affects 150,000 homes built annually. The idea of visitability was first suggested in Britain by the concept of a “Lifetime Home”—one that would last from cradle to grave.

The British specifications were implemented in 1999. Again, the three basic elements apply: downstairs lavatory accessible to the disabled, wider internal and external doors and corridors, and less steep footpaths and approaches. More detailed instructions accompany the legislation, describing differing doorway widths depending upon point of entry, specific handrail guidelines, and different approach options (Concrete Change, 2002).

Feasibility

While remodeling for access features can be cost-prohibitive, the cost of designing for these features is small. Conservatively, adding a level entrance to an existing home is around \$1,000. Widening one existing doorway averages \$700 (National Association of Home Builders, 1996). In constructing a zero-step entrance during construction it has been found that extremely easy, low-cost level entrances can be made on at least 90% of lots. Lots must be graded for development, and the key to keeping costs low is in the positioning of the house and doors with a zero-step entrance in mind.

Among the 41% of single-family homes in the US built on a concrete slab, \$25 is the average additional cost for a level entrance. It averages approximately \$500 for a zero-step entrance over a crawl space or basement. \$50 per home is a generous average estimate for doors that are wide enough to accommodate mobility aides during new construction. In most cases, a doorway is simply cut wider, with no architectural consultation necessary. Adding square footage is not necessary. The average cost of visitability as a whole is \$98 for homes built on a concrete slab, and \$573 for homes built over a crawl space or basement (Concrete Change, 2008).

Disability advocates say that those in the public opposing visitability are largely unaware of the easy, low-cost possibilities, and are ignorant of the larger issues. Early in their fight for visitability, advocacy groups like Concrete Change cited cost estimates that were disregarded by builders as artificially low in order to advance their agenda. A decade of visitability legislation and targeted research has validated the estimates of the advocates. The American Association of Retired People (AARP), the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (IDEA Center) at SUNY Buffalo, and other scholarship have supported the cost estimates made by Concrete Change.

Stakeholder Response

The building community has a solid stake in the issue of visitability. The official policy of the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) is to “urge voluntary rather than mandatory initiatives promoting single family accessibility.” The NAHB asserts that visitability is costly and impractical in many cases. The NAHB suggests that visitability laws “impose design and construction requirements beyond the scope and purpose of building codes”, restrict consumer choice, and reduce housing affordability. The NAHB does support voluntary programs to promote visitability (NAHB, 2009).

“The New American Home” was debuted on February 8, 2002, at the National Association of Home Builders’ International Builders’ Show in Atlanta, Georgia. “The New American Home” shines a spotlight on the very latest market-driven trends to one day dominate residential design. “The New American Home” includes visitability standards by “seamlessly accommodating a physically challenged person, in or out of a wheelchair, throughout the entire main-level living area” (NAHB, 2002).

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) says it is sustainable to design for access and eliminate most future adaptation needs. By incorporating visitability elements into the design of new residences, a home will be able to “serve people of different abilities over many years.” Experts from the AIA agree that a zero-step entrance is typically easy to achieve in suburban areas with larger lot sizes that allow for gentle ramps, and in urban areas it is usually feasible to change the grade at the rear of the home to allow a zero-step entrance. The design community has answered many of the concerns of the building community in plans that include water damage protection at zero-step entrances and termite protection at walls near grade (Reeder, 2009).

An October, 2009 article in REALTOR Magazine discusses the need for educated real estate practitioners to assist buyers with disabilities. The article gives an overview of accessibility considerations and encourages realtors to market visitability features as prominent amenities in properties (Christoffer, 2009).

The United States Green Building Council (USGBC) is an internationally recognized nonprofit organization with a mission to transform the way buildings are designed and built, resulting in an environmental and social sustainability and an improved quality of life. USGBC developed the LEED system where buildings earn points toward certification that they were designed and built with strategies to improve performance across a variety of metrics. One of the metrics is Innovation in Design, and a point can be earned for visitability. The visitability standard includes a zero-step entrance at least 32” wide, a 36” wide path through the main level of the home, 32” wide internal doorways, and a main level bathroom with reinforced walls and a clear floor space of 30” x 48” (USGBC, 2009).

Perhaps an unlikely stakeholder, the courts have been called upon to respond to visitability. Visitability legislation has been sued and survived. In 2002, a group of builders sued Pima County, Arizona, challenging the constitutionality of the visitability ordinance and claiming it violated personal freedoms and property rights. The court denied an injunction and the builders began to built homes incorporating the visitability features. However, the builders appealed the suit to the State Superior Court and the Arizona Court of Appeals. The Court unanimously voted in favor of the visitability ordinance (Concrete Change, 2008).

Finally, the public good of visitability can't be overstated. People with disabilities are often isolated by inaccessible homes. Social capital is compromised when a person with a disability can't attend a card club gathering. Civic engagement is reduced when a person with a disability can't attend a local political caucus held in the home of the caucus chair. Neighborhood sustainability is diminished when a person with a disability can't attend the neighborhood watch meeting at the home of a neighbor.

Minnesota Specifics

Visitability came to Minnesota when one policy entrepreneur, Eleanor Smith, gave a conference presentation attended by another policy entrepreneur, Margot Imdieke-Cross (Kochera, 2002). Smith's presentation made a big impression on Imdieke-Cross, the Accessibility Specialist at the Minnesota State Council on Disability (MSCOD). Margot recalls that when Julie Sabo was elected to the Minnesota Senate (DFL, District 62) in 2000, Sabo called MSCOD looking for a "disability issue" to work on. Margot pitched visitability; Sabo immediately liked it, drafted legislation, and got it passed quickly (personal interview with Imdieke-Cross, 8/27/2009).

The Minnesota visitability legislation was implemented by the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency (MHFA). Diane Sprague was the MHFA expert on aging, disability, and accessibility at the time the visitability legislation was passed into law. Sprague reports that while MHFA was supportive of visitability initiatives, they found them cumbersome to implement. Sprague recalls that MHFA was not invited to offer input on the drafted legislation, and so had no opportunity to discuss ways to make visitability more feasible given the funding structures in place at MHFA. Particularly thorny is MHFA's use of a secondary market: the borrower works with a private lender until the deal is nearly done, then the mortgage is sold to MHFA at the back end. With this structure, there is no opportunity to proactively influence design, making implementation very difficult (personal interview with Sprague, 10/27/2009).

Indieke-Cross recalls that MHFA was a somewhat reluctant partner in visitability. Tonya Orr, the Assistant Commissioner of MHFA, was very concerned about the socio-economic impact of visitability legislation: she was unwilling to support a program that raised costs to an already low-income population without also increasing market share. MHFA and MSCOD found a compromise: MHFA could waive the any or all visitability requirements if they reduced affordability for the targeted population of the agency program from which it was funded (Kochera, 2002). To date, MHFA has not granted a single waiver to visitability (personal interview with Indieke-Cross, 8/27/2009).

Next Steps

Minnesota city and county governments could theoretically adopt visitable building codes, but ultimately every code has to comply with state building code which specifies that there is no regulation regarding access in single family homes. Visitability will not move

forward in any real way in Minnesota until state building code is changed. Interested in advancing visitability in this way, Imdieke-Cross and Sprague each report frequent communication with Minnesota legislators in order to monitor for a policy window where the opportunity for passage is maximized through a combination of ideal political, economic, and social circumstances (Kingdon, 1995).

In anticipation of a future policy window for such a code change, there is much to do to make ready. Education is the first key. Realtors could be educated about the common benefits of visitability to all in order to market access as an amenity. Able-bodied residents often report surprise at the ways in which visitability makes their lives easier: easier to use a stroller, easier to carry groceries into the home, easier to roll luggage. A simple campaign could be designed to target trade groups and educate them about accessibility, universal design, and visitability.

Architects could be educated about the benefits of visitability. In the creation of home plans, architects have the biggest and best ability to implement visitability on the supply-side. If more home designs were created with visitability in mind, builders and buyers would have more options. Minnesota State Council on Disability and Minnesota Housing Finance Agency could work together to create an exciting opportunity for architecture students: a contest to design visitable and cost-effective alternatives to the popular but inaccessible split-entry homes common in suburban Minnesota. The result would be a pool of future architects versed in visitability and possible innovation in design for visitability.

City planners could be educated on the incredible neighborhood sustainability wrought by visitability. Visitability allows people to stay in their homes when acquired mobility impairment might otherwise force them to relocate to a setting more accessible to them, creating

troubling turnover in aging neighborhoods. Perhaps this has begun in Minnesota: the Carver County Office of Aging recently hired Diane Sprague to develop a training program on visitability for their community planners.

Finally, a media campaign targeting consumers could incite the demand for visitability that builders report is lacking. First, consumers are largely unaware of the concept or tenets of visitability. Second, consumers have unrealistic expectations about aging. A 2003 AARP study found that 75% of respondents thought it was at least somewhat likely that they would be able to remain in their current homes for the remainder of their lives. Perhaps more realistic expectations would result in better planning; this, coupled with education about visitability, could have a significant impact on the marketplace (Maisel, Smith, and Steinfeld, 2008).

Builders could be incentivized to incorporate visitability into their construction practices. Sunset provisions are a good approach to using incentives as they have a limited negative financial impact while stimulating adoption of the concept (Truesdale and Steinfeld, 2002). While mandates are the most effective strategy to increase the diffusion of visitability, incentives are more likely to encourage collaboration and cooperation with builders (Nishita, Liebig, Pynoos, Perelman, and Spegal, 2007).

There is also work to be done in refining the current visitability law. While visitability legislation was initially introduced and passed by advocates, the most probable next step is refinement done by internal operators steeped in the knowledge of state housing funding. It's time, as Diane Sprague says, for some "unsexy work": marrying management and knowledge of systems with the current law.

Bundling is another option to increase visibility for and diffusion of visitability. Promoting visitability alongside sustainable design or mixed-income design gives them all a boost, increasing the constituency of each design concept to allow quicker and broader application (Maisel, Smith, and Steinfeld, 2008). Habitat for Humanity is a strong and vibrant program in Minnesota with a significant body of supporters. The national body of Habitat for Humanity endorses visitability while the Minnesota chapter does not practice visitability—is there an opportunity to change this and introduce a new audience to visitability?

It's time to learn more about opportunities to expand visitability. Questions remain unanswered, unasked even—and the answers could spur visitability. Minnesota's Home and Community Based Service (HCBS) waivers pay for home modifications for people with disabilities at risk of institutionalization. How much money does Minnesota spend on home modification? What potential savings could Minnesota find if more homes were visitable in the first place, reducing the need for costly remodeling? How often does visitability prevent institutionalization? The HCBS waivers also pay for supportive housing services like adult foster care and assisted living, many of which are located in structures completely inaccessible to someone with a mobility impairment. What if the Department of Human Services and the Department of Health required visitability in all newly built settings for the provision of Adult Foster Care or Housing with Services? The questions are worth considering.

Conclusions

Visitability is a concept and a practice that is gaining momentum: regionally, statewide, nationally, and internationally. Different from accessibility legislation, visitability assures a basic level of opportunity to everyone: people with mobility impairments and people currently

able-bodied, those young and those aged. Visitability goes hand-in-hand with the economy of the housing market as well as changing demographic trends in populations. Forecasters in planning, architecture, housing trades, aging, and disability advocacy predict a bigger, wider push for visitability. New laws are being proposed and enacted with varying scope. Reforms are being made in overseeing and enforcing visitability mandates, and lessons are being shared. Perhaps this design principle will really become universal, eliminating the need for special laws and regulations guaranteeing visitability.

Chart of Local and State Efforts

Location	Year	Applies to what kind of funding?	Entrance to the home	Interior doors	Accessible route	Bathroom	Controls
Florida	1989	any	none	none	none	required on main floor, 29" opening	none
Atlanta, GA	1992	city subsidy	zero-step, 32" opening	32" openings	36" wide level route	reinforced walls	accessible
Austin, TX	1998	city subsidy	zero-step, 32" opening	30" openings	36" wide level route	reinforced walls	accessible
Texas	1999	state or federal subsidy	zero-step, 32" opening	32" openings	36" wide level route	reinforced walls	accessible
Georgia	2000	state or federal subsidy	zero-step, 36" opening	32" openings	36" wide level route	reinforced walls	accessible
Urbana, IL	2000	city subsidy	zero-step, 36" nonslip route, landings 36"x36"	32" openings	36" wide level route	reinforced walls	accessible
Vermont	2000	state or federal subsidy, private "spec" homes	36" opening	32" openings	36" wide level route	reinforced walls	accessible
Minnesota	2001	MHFA funds	zero-step	32" openings	none	half bathroom required on main level	none
Kansas	2002	state or federal subsidy	zero-step, 32" opening	32" openings	36" wide level route	reinforced walls	accessible
Iowa City, IA	2002	city, state, or federal subsidy	zero-step, 32" opening	32" openings	none	reinforced walls	accessible
San Antonio, TX	2002	city, state, or federal subsidy	zero-step, 36" opening	32" openings	36" wide level route	reinforced walls	accessible
Naperville, IL	2002	any	none	32" openings	none	reinforced walls	accessible
Pima County, AZ	2002	any	zero-step, 32" opening	30" openings	36" wide level route	reinforced walls	accessible
Bolingbrook, IL	2003	any	zero-step, 32" opening	32" openings	42" wide hallways	bathroom required on main level	accessible
Toledo, OH	2005	city subsidy	zero-step	32" openings	36" wide level route	bathroom required on main level, reinforced walls	accessible

References

- Bjelland, M.J., Erickson, W.A., Lee, C.G. (2008, November 8). Disability Statistics from the American Community Survey (ACS). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Demographics and Statistics (StatsRRTC). Retrieved November 3, 2009 from <http://www.disabilitystatistics.org>
- Casselmann, Joel. (2009, October 12). Visitability: A New Direction for Changing Demographics. American Planning Association, archived at <http://myapa.planning.org/affordablereader/pracplanner/visitabilityvol2no4.htm>
- Center for Universal Design. (2009). www.design.nscu.edu
- Christoffer, Erica. (2009, October 10). Guiding Your Clients Through Home Modifications. *REALTOR Magazine [Online]*. Retrieved October 31, 2009, from <http://styledstagedsold.blogs.realtor.org/2009/10/10/>
- Coleman, Michael. (2005, June 6). Community Development and Housing Committee. *U.S. Mayor Newspaper*. Retrieved November 16, 2009 from http://usmayors.org/usmayornewspaper/documents/06_06_05/resol_community.asp
- Concrete Change. (2008). www.concretechange.com
- Jones, M. and Sanford, J. (1996). People with mobility impairments in the United States today and in 2010. *Assistive Technology*, 8.1, 43-53.
- Kelly, Rachel. (1997). Doorsteps to be swept away in new rules for builders. *The Times of London*. 5 Dec.

- Kochera, Andrew. (2002). *Accessibility and Visitability Features in Single-family Homes: A Review of State and Local Activity*. Washington, DC: AARP.
- Maisel, J., Smith, E. & Steinfeld, E. (2008). *Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability*. Washington, DC: AARP Public Policy Institute.
- Martino, Lisa. (2002). *Visitability housing movement gains strides*. I Can. 22 Feb.
- McNeil, J.M. (1997). *Americans with disabilities: 1994-1995*. US Bureau of the Census *Current Population Reports*, P70-61. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.
- Nishita, C., Liebig, P., Pynoos, J., Perelman, L., & Spegal, K. (2007). *Promoting Basic Accessibility in the Home*. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* 18(1): 2-13.
- Minnesota Housing Finance Agency. (2009). www.mnhousing.gov
- National Association of Homebuilders. (2009). www.nahb.com
- Reeder, Linda. (2009, October 29). *Visitability: Access in New Houses*. The American Institute of Architects, archived at <http://www.aia.org/practicing/akr/AIAB079702?dvid=&recspec=AIAB079702>
- Shapiro, J.P. (1994). *No pity: People with disabilities forging a new civil rights movement*. New York, NY: Times Books (Random House).
- Truesdale, S. and Steinfeld, E. (2002). *Visit-Ability: An Approach to Universal Design in Housing*. Buffalo, New York: Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access.
- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. (1998). www.hud.gov
- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Public and Indian

Housing. (1999). Accessibility notice. 15 Dec.

United States Green Building Council. (2009). Green Home Guide. [Online].

Retrieved October 12, 2009 from <http://greenhomeguide.com>

Urban Design Associates. (2002). Strategies for providing accessibility & visitability for HOPE

VI and mixed finance homeownership. HUD's Office of Public Housing Investments,

Public and Indian Housing. Jan.