

"Finding an Accessible Home"

By Carol L. Edic

Do you or a loved one have a mobility impairment? Before you answer, think about how you define this term. Most people would agree that someone who cannot walk at all has a mobility impairment. But what about someone who has trouble with their balance or stamina, or has pain when they walk? I think these people also have a mobility impairment. Anyone who has difficulty walking up stairs, getting in and out of a bathtub, or using the toilet has a mobility impairment and needs an accessible home.

If a member of your family has a mobility impairment, are you living in an accessible home? Very few families can say yes. There are many reasons people needing an accessible home don't live in one.

First - they are hard to find! Apartments and condos with 4 or more units, and an elevator, must BY LAW make ALL units usable to people with mobility impairments. In buildings without an elevator, the units on the lowest floor must be usable for persons with mobility impairments. This is called the Fair Housing Act, as amended, and applies to buildings constructed since 1991. Unfortunately, some builders are still ignoring this law. There is no law requiring single family homes, duplexes, triplexes, or multi-story town homes to meet any standard of accessibility.

Another reason people don't have the home they need is: they don't ask! Sadly, many people either don't know they can ask for (and get) an accessible home, are too timid (or polite) to do so, or are resigned to lifting and carrying, falling, pain, being out of breath, etc.

Some people are concerned about the perceived extra cost of getting an accessible home. If you are living in an apartment or condo that is accessible, the cost should be the same as other units. If you want to buy a new home, there should be no cost (or very minimal cost) in having a home built to the design criteria at the end of this article. These are the same design criteria as the Fair Housing Act, and are also known as Universal Design (so anyone can use the home). There will be some extra cost if you request a roll-in shower, changes in kitchen and bathroom cabinets, a ceiling track lift system, an elevator, chair lift, or other custom features, or additional square footage to the home.

There are big differences among new home builders in what they will do and what price they will charge. It is up to you, the buying public, to ASK for accessible features and comparison shop among builders to get the best buy. It is also up to you to question your lender or mortgage broker about tax incentives or rebates (to the builder) and special funding, lower interest loans, etc. to buy an accessible home or remodel an existing home.

There are several agencies that can help you find and afford an accessible home. One of them is the Accessible Homes Foundation, <http://www.accesshomes.org/>. Our goal is to help everyone, at every income level, live in a home that meets their needs. We encourage new home builders who meet our design criteria to list with us. We work with many different agencies that have programs to help our clients. If you are considering remodeling your home, or looking for another home that is accessible, we may have information that will help you. Please fill out the Accessible Homes Foundation Consumer Application form that can be found on our website on the Forms page. Then, mail it to us so we will know your needs, and have a record of those we have served.

The Accessible Homes Foundation is relatively new (started in 2002), not well known, and is run by a handful of volunteers. If you have an interest in promoting accessible housing and can volunteer at least four hours per month for a year, please contact us so we can match your skills with our needs. We especially need people with a business background to be on our Board of Directors.

Remember, it is up to you to ASK for what you need. We need homes that will meet our needs. We also need to be able to visit the homes of family, friends, and neighbors. When you go to Home Shows, visit model homes, or talk with builders, give them a copy of our design criteria. Make as many copies as you want, and distribute them to others. Ask builders to make their model homes "visitable" to people with mobility impairments. (When was the last time you saw a model home that a person in a wheelchair, or a child in a stroller, could visit? A person with a heart condition, Chronic Fatigue, or other disability may not be able to climb the stairs to a model home.) Ask builders, city halls, town councils, legislators, and others to build most single family homes Universal Design and to Accessible Homes Foundation Design Criteria. Approximately 20% of the U.S. population has mobility impairments. It is up to you to ASK that these needs be met!

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Accessible Homes Foundation Design Criteria

- A. At least one no-step entry with a slope no greater than 1 in 12. Door threshold $\frac{1}{2}$ " high maximum, or $\frac{3}{4}$ " high with bevels no steeper than 1 in 2. All doors on the main level will have a minimum 32" clear opening, preferably 36" doors with a 34" clear opening.
- B. Halls at least 36" wide.
- C. All controls, switches, and electrical outlets to be a maximum of 48" and minimum of 15" above the floor. Above counters, switches should be 44" above the floor. A 30"x48" clear floor space should be provided for forward or parallel approach at each control.
- D. All bathrooms on the main floor will have reinforced walls to allow future installation of grab bars. Bathrooms will have a 30"x48" clear floor space by each fixture. Spaces can overlap each other, except spaces cannot overlap the door swing. Showers will be a minimum of 36"x36". Toilet will be a minimum of 18" from the centerline to one sidewall or fixture, and 15" from the centerline to the other side.
- E. Kitchens will provide a 30"x48" clear floor space by each appliance or fixture. The minimum clearance between opposing base cabinets is 40". The minimum clearance for a U-shaped kitchen is 60" between base cabinets.