

VISITABILITY ISSUES

Marketability

According to the publication "Residential Remodeling and Universal Design Making Homes More Comfortable and Accessible," prepared for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Policy Development and Research and [available as a pdf download](#), research indicates that the market for homes with universal features that would allow older people to remain at home and independent, will likely increase.

HUD's projections are consistent with the findings of the AARP Public Policy Institute (PPI). According to a 2000 AARP survey, more than 90 percent of persons age 65 and older would prefer to stay in their current residence as long as possible. "But for those persons who develop a disability that limits their activities, meeting this expectation may be difficult or impossible," says AARP.

Visitability makes sense for everyone, not just for people with disabilities. "Evidence at Washington, DC's Wheeler Creek HOPE VI development suggests that non-disabled homebuyers are indeed interested in the visitability features of affordable units." In one case, a non-disabled family purchased a unit so that a close relative who uses a wheelchair could visit them. The majority of the other visitable units have been sold to people 'planning to age in place,' "says the Housing Research Foundation.

Buying a visitable house will soon be like buying a car with seat belts. Why would you buy a car without seat belts these days?

Costs

Evidence suggests that when visitable units are planned for at the outset, costs are minimal. In researching the costs associated with visitability, Concrete Change, a national education and advocacy organization, found that as little as \$200 is needed to provide basic access. When planned in advance, a zero-step entrance averages an estimated \$150. The key to keeping costs down is to grade the site with zero-step entrances in mind. Wider interior doors can cost just \$50 per home.

"What is most noteworthy about the experiences of those who have built visitable housing is how truly un-noteworthy they thought it was," says Paul Pierce, Executive Director of the DeKalb/Decatur Housing Authority in Georgia, who was involved in the development of Peachcrest Trace, a 156-home subdivision of single-family homes built without federal subsidy. Approximately 110 units are visitable. Pierce says, "What we did was not remarkable, but a simple act that we thought was a good idea...Certainly from the development standpoint, [building visitable units] had no impact on us."

And, Jack Morse, developer of Atlanta's East Lake Commons, puts it succinctly when he said, "There was just no reason not to do it". All 67 units in this private townhouse development are visitable.

But even the \$200 figure is high, according to those who have built visitable units. When asked about the cost of visitability at Eastlake Commons, Morse says, "I consider the cost negligible. It couldn't be more than roughly \$25 per unit." He says they would normally put in a 2' 4" door so there was a little added cost for a wider door. Some grading work was also done, but "overall it was not a big deal to include these things. We planned for it up front."

Pierce's cost estimate was identical. "The cost was probably less than \$25 per unit, though we didn't specifically track it," he says. Hiscox concurs: "There is virtually no cost when you plan for visitability from the outset."

While it is true that topography plays a role in both the feasibility and the cost of building visitable units, hilly terrain does not prohibit them. In fact, in some cases it is actually advantageous.

The costs of building visitable housing from the start are much lower than retrofitting existing housing. Concrete Change estimates that retrofitting costs an average of \$1700 (\$1000 to add a zero-step entrance and \$700 to widen an existing doorway).

Even worse, we simply can't keep up with the demands for retrofitting existing housing. A recent Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) report shows that more than 1 million households with a disabled older resident have unmet structural housing needs (e.g., the resident needs but does not have a ramp or accessibility features in the bathroom). One key method to promote continuing independence in the home is to modify the existing house. But in the long run, the report states, "it may be easier and less expensive to incorporate a number of architecturally friendly design features into new homes as they are being built." Together with other strategies for independence, such accessible design elements may play an important role in enabling older persons to age-in-place.