

# VISIT-ABILITY (Inclusive Home Design)

(1) A focus on *homes*, not government buildings, restaurants, etc...(important as they are)

(2) *ALL homes*-- not just "special" homes; being at the party, the meeting, the reunion--*not isolation*.

(3) Narrowing the emphasis from a long list of possible or desirable access features to the *most essential features*: entering a home and fitting through the interior doors. So that widespread construction change is more likely to happen quickly.

People who use wheelchairs or walkers, or are impaired by stiffness, weakness or balance problems are blocked by steps at every entrance of a home. Wheelchair users are stopped by inches from fitting through the bathroom door in a friend or relative's home.

And basic access goes beyond visiting. It's also about the home of a person who develops a disability. Without basic access in place, architecture forces severe choices: the disruption and grief of moving out of one's community; expensive renovation – if the home is even amenable to renovation; or existing as a virtual prisoner in an unsafe, unhealthy house.

To change that reality, three essentials can become routine:

- \* One ZERO-STEP entrance
- \* All main floor interior doors--including bathrooms-- with 32 inches of clear passage space
- \* At least a half bath, preferably a full bath, on the main floor

In other words, *get in and out of the house and be able to use the bathroom*--the essentials for visiting, and for surviving in your house with a temporary or long-term disability.

Constructing homes with these features is *inexpensive* and *easy*. But advocates are needed to initiate and sustain the work required to change the status quo.

Visitability is a movement to change home construction practices so that virtually all new homes-- whether or not designated for residents who currently have disabilities--offer a few specific features that make the home easier for people who develop a mobility impairment to live in and visit. Several people have asked for a more detailed definition, noting that the list of required features has not been identical in all Visitability legislation, handouts and other materials, and in some voluntary programs.

While the concept of Visitability is very simple, the definition has several interactive layers: spirit, features, scope, and moment in history.

The spirit of Visitability is as important as the list of features. That spirit says, it's not just unwise, but unacceptable that new homes continue to be built with gross barriers--- unacceptable, given how easy it is to build basic access in the great majority of new homes, and given the harsh effects major barriers have on so many people's lives. They cause daily, draining drudgery; physically unsafe conditions; social isolation; and forced institutionalization. The appropriate ways to further basic access in virtually all new homes are, all actions short of violence-- handing out information; working to pass legislation; incentives (so long as they are moderate and don't undermine a tax base, impede general affordable housing, or damage other Visitability efforts); voluntary efforts (so long as they are not programs that produce few houses and exist mainly to forestall legislation); street theater; advertising campaigns; civil disobedience; ...and others.

Second, the features list must be partly rigid and partly flexible. The inflexible Visitability features are:

- Wide passage doors
- At least a half bath/powder room on the main floor
- At least one zero-step entrance

No arguments are accepted that "We'll build the house so a ramp could be added later."

At least a half bath on the main floor also now belongs as a non-negotiable feature, but it did not when the first Visitability legislation was passed in Atlanta in 1992. Back then, in the absence of precedents, passing a bill with a zero-step and a door width requirement was just barely possible even without the bathroom requirement. Advocates balanced the obvious need for a bathroom on the main floor with the law of averages that the large majority of new dwellings already include that feature.

Several additional features are sometimes included in Visitability laws or other Visitability initiatives (for example, reinforcement in bathroom walls and accessible placement of electrical controls.) If very low cost, they are good and appropriate. However, these additions must be flexible according to circumstance because they are so much less essential for survival than the three basic features, and each added feature brings up its own set of objections to be overcome. If the circumstance involves enforceable legislation—which is the means through which the great majority of Visitable homes have been created to date-- the list of prioritized features must be short; otherwise, passing a Visitability law is currently impossible. In voluntary efforts, more features can be included. For instance, the Georgia EasyLiving Home© voluntary certification program for private, open market homes requires, besides the zero step entry and the wide interior passage doors, also a full bathroom with maneuvering space and a bedroom on the main floor.

If people add to their own definition of Visitability advanced features such as a five-foot turning diameter in bathrooms, parking space requirements, a roll-in shower and so on, they are going beyond the scope of what is currently possible for rapid, broad application of Visitability, and we hope they will not use the term Visitability for their initiatives. We are not at all averse to pushing for those advanced features per se. Rather, we are against using the term Visitability in those cases because it works against the reason the Visitability movement has had some success--its extreme simplicity of content, rigorous prioritization, and insistence on application not just cogitation, speculative homes not special homes.

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