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Visitable housing movement gains strides

By **Lisa Martino**
iCan News Service, contributor
February 22, 2002

A movement to make all new housing accessible to people with disabilities made strides in two U.S. cities recently, and one advocate expects more good news on the horizon.

Ordinances passed in February in Naperville, Ill., and Pima County, Ariz., that require all future housing built there to contain fully accessible features are just part of a growing effort around the country to make homes "visitable" for people with disabilities. Visitability advocate Eleanor Smith views these and similar ordinances being discussed around the country as glimmers of hope for people with disabilities who just want to "get in the door and pee."

Visitability is on the table in Santa Monica and Long Beach, Calif., as well as Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Pa., and Cape Cod, Mass. The Kansas state Legislature is also considering a visitability ordinance.

"It's gathering steam," said Smith, 59, who was not actively involved with the efforts in Pima County or Naperville. "I'm hopeful that a lot of other ordinances are springing up unbeknownst to me." Her organization, Concrete Change, is dedicated to raising consciousness about housing issues that affect people with disabilities and working for legislation.

Several cities across the United States -- including Atlanta, Ga.; Austin, Texas; and Urbana, Ill. -- have building codes that require accessibility features in homes built with public funding, but Naperville and Pima County are the first to require all new homes to fit these standards.

As a result, homes built in both communities will feature wider first-floor doorways, reinforced bathroom walls to support grab bars and light switches and outlets at wheelchair accessible heights. Naperville is also discussing an ordinance to require at least one step-free entrance into the house. Builders in Pima County can waive this requirement if lot conditions drive the costs above \$200.

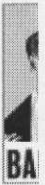
The average cost of these changes, when built in from the beginning, is less than \$300, Smith said. The features work well for the aging baby boomer generation and add to a home's resale value, Smith said.

But try telling that to Naperville residents, who are protesting the new ordinance out of concerns about cost and loss of design control. One Naperville parent even told the Chicago Tribune she was worried that because of the ordinance more families who have children with disabilities would move to the city, driving up education costs.

"The passage of this ordinance would create a disproportionate percentage of people with disabilities" in Naperville, resident Jennifer Streder told the newspaper.

Smith acknowledges that few builders and land owners have embraced visitability voluntarily.

"I've been at this 16 years and I'm somewhat mystified" by the resistance, she said. She credits much of it to builders' unwillingness to vary building templates and people's fear of aging and acquiring a disability.



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Concrete Change has forged an alliance with the Home Builders Association of Georgia to create the Easy Living Home Coalition, a group that Smith hopes may help visibility be embraced as an amenity rather than a stigma. The group will award Easy Living seals of approval to new homes built to visitability specifications.

The coalition met with representatives from the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) earlier this month, requesting support and funding for the Easy Living concept to gather data and further analyze the benefits of visitability. Smith hopes the national organization will see the merit in the project.

"It's a win-win situation. It really harms no one, it helps a lot of people," she said. "I'm very, very hopeful about this."

Leslie Marks, executive director of the NAHB's Seniors Housing Council, would not comment in depth on the Easy Living Home Coalition's requests, but did say the organization was "exploring" the topic of visitability and "there's every indication that we will do something to support" the project.

Smith, who has polio and uses a wheelchair, founded Concrete Change in 1986 after realizing new homes going up in her hometown in Georgia were not accessible. After approaching Atlanta city government, Smith garnered enough support that the council passed the first visibility ordinance in Atlanta, requiring each new home funded by tax dollars to include doorways that were at least 32 inches wide and one accessible entrance. The action has affected more than 700 Atlanta homes to date.

Lisa Martino is a Metro Detroit freelance writer. She is a former staff writer for Detroit's alternative weekly newspaper, Metro Times, and a former editor for Detroit.Citysearch.com.

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