

Visitability

Visitability means:

- A friend or family member with a physical disability can easily visit you in your home.
- All newly built, single-family housing integrates basic affordable and sustainable accessibility features.
- Emphasis is on the most essential access features, such as exterior entries and interior doors.
- Widespread construction change can happen more quickly.

Visitability does **not** include a long list of desirable access features or adhere to a comprehensive full-accessibility construction standard.

What makes a home visitable?

A visitable home has three features:



- ☒ **One zero step entrance on an accessible path of travel from the street, sidewalk or driveway.** A zero step entrance has no step or threshold to block a wheelchair or trip a person with limited mobility. An accessible path of travel is a walkway or ramp, 36 inches wide or wider and without steps. Walkways should be no steeper than one foot of rise per 20 feet of length (1:20/5% grade). Ramps should be no steeper than one foot of rise per 12 feet of length (1:12/8.3% grade).
- ☒ **Doorways that provide 32 inches clear space throughout the home's main floor and hallways that provide 36 inches of clear width.**
- ☒ **Basic access to a half or (preferably) full bath on the main floor.** A bathroom with basic access is long and wide enough for a person using a wheelchair to enter and close the door.

The visitability movement grew from Eleanor Smith's conviction that basic architectural access to **all** new homes is a civil and human right and improves livability for everyone. Smith founded the Concrete Change organization in 1986, and by 2003 she and her colleagues had worked with Habitat for Humanity to make 300 Atlanta homes visitable. Thanks to Smith's vision, visitability was designed into all 67 homes in the housing development where she lives in Decatur, Georgia.

How many homes are visitable in your state or community? A recent study projected that at some point during their lifespans, a quarter of all homes built today will house someone with a long-term, severe mobility impairment. We've begun to calculate the number of visitable homes in Montana. The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, conducts an annual *Behavioral Risk Factor Survey* (BRFS: <http://www.cdc.gov/brfss/>). In 2004, we added a question on visitability and asked 5,005 Montanans, **"If a person who uses special equipment such as a wheelchair came to visit you, could they get into your house without being carried up steps or over other obstacles?"**. From their responses, we estimated that 19.3% of Montana homes are visitable, and we use this number as a baseline for measuring progress toward making the state's communities visitable. Compared to respondents with disabilities who didn't live in visitable homes, respondents with disabilities who lived in visitable homes reported fewer days of poor mental health in the past month.

How can visitability increase safety? Falls are the most common cause of injuries to older adults. Each year, more than a third of adults aged 65 or older fall, and 20-30% of those who fall suffer moderate to severe injuries that decrease their mobility and independence. Seniors spend a great deal of their time at home, and half to two-thirds of all falls occur there. Injury prevention strategies are effective in keeping older adults healthy and safe; removing household hazards that might cause tripping is a simple way to reduce older Americans' falls and fractures.

National model building codes currently require a zero-step entrance in all new buildings **except** private homes. In order to promote this feature in private homes, the American Public Health Association encourages the National Fire Protection Association and other organizations to create codes and standards that will promote safety from falls in residences and improve their general utility "for the largest range of people, including elderly persons or those of any age with disabilities" (Public Policy 2000019, 2001). The policy specifically names the zero-step entrance as a desirable component of any home building codes and standards.

How does visitability relate to the health of persons with disabilities? Many Americans with disabilities experience depression, a significant *secondary condition* that limits their participation in daily activities. Older adults with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and social isolation. The disability supplement to Washington State's 2001 BRFS included sixteen questions on common secondary conditions. Compared to respondents without disabilities, nearly three times as many people with disabilities reported periods of depression and feelings of isolation. The daily barriers to social support and companionship which they encounter may contribute to this health disparity. Visitable homes might eliminate some of these barriers and reduce the rates of depression and sense of isolation experienced by individuals with disabilities.

Is visitability required by law? People often assume that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and/or other laws mandate that all newly-constructed U.S. housing be accessible to people with disabilities. Although laws mandate accessibility for some construction, most newly-constructed, single-family housing is exempt. Federal Fair Housing Act Accessibility Guidelines include seven basic access requirements for multi-family dwelling units in elevator-equipped apartment buildings and ground floor units in walk-up apartment buildings, but these requirements don't apply to single-family detached homes and townhouses. The Architectural Barriers Act (Section 504 of the

Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 29 USC sec 794), Title II of the ADA and many state laws require that housing built with public funding be accessible. However, this usually only applies to a minimum of five percent of the units in a building or project. Accessibility laws do not apply to dwelling units financed by federally-insured mortgage programs.

However, mandated visitability is possible – the United Kingdom instituted national building regulations (Part M) in 1999 requiring new homes to be visitable. In the US, the introduced H.R. 1408: *Inclusive Home Design Act of 2009* would require all newly constructed, federally assisted, single-family houses and town houses to meet minimum standards of visitability for persons with disabilities.

Could a visitable home be more valuable than a conventional home? *Aging in place* means living in your own home or other non-institutional setting as you age. There are products, services and conveniences available to allow or enable you to function as your circumstances change (www.seniorresource.com/ageinpl.htm). A home with visitable or accessible features adapts to the needs of aging family members and/or those with a disability. It accommodates common age-related conditions, such as poor balance, as well as more severe disabilities requiring use of a motorized scooter or wheelchair. A person with an acquired mobility impairment will have a greater sense of well-being if he or she continues to live at home. Visitable homes may also be more desirable to the growing number of American retirees seeking suitable single-family homes for aging in place. Future real estate market research should explore the desirability and value of visitable homes.

Are there financial incentives for making a home visitable? There are federal income tax deductions for making an existing home visitable. Costs of certain home improvements are deductible as a medical expense if they accommodate a taxpayer, spouse or dependent with a disability and allow that person to continue living at home. Improvements include, but are not limited to: grading a home's site to improve access, constructing ramps, modifying entrance areas, widening exterior doorways, widening/modifying interior doorways, installing railings and support bars, and modifying bathrooms. Each of these improvements is an element of a visitable home.

The Internal Revenue Service publishes details of allowable expenses in *Publication 502: Medical and Dental Expenses*. Only the amount of medical expenses that exceeds 7.5% of adjusted gross income is allowable. For example, if adjusted gross income is \$20,000, the allowable amount is \$1,500 ($.075 \times \$20,000$). If medical expenses for home modifications are \$800, the expense is not deductible. If adjusted gross income is \$20,000 and the homeowner makes \$2,000 in medically necessary modifications for self, spouse or a dependent, the deductible expense is \$500 ($\$2,000 - \$1,500 = \500, IRS, 2008). States may also offer tax incentives, such as the Kansas Disabled Access Credit and the Illinois Accessible Housing Demonstration Grant Program.

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Resources:

AARP: <http://www.aarp.org/family/housing/>

Accessible Housing Specialists:
<http://www.accessiblehousing.net>

Center for Universal Design:
<http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/>

Concrete Change: <http://www.concretechange.org/>

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Kansas Dept. of Revenue:
<http://www.ksrevenue.org/taxcredits-disabled.htm>

Illinois Housing Development Authority:
<http://www.ihda.org/admin/Upload/Files/e28feee7-8614-4a9a-afe1-f38c38224397.pdf>

Rehabilitation Engineering and Research Center on Universal Design: <http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/lercud>

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