
News Releases

For more information, contact us:

Joel Fosha

Indiana Institute on Disability and Community

812-855-6508

foshaj@indiana.edu

Visitability: Twenty-First Century Homes Designed for 21st Century Lifestyles

[Indiana University Media Relations Active for Life Feature \(April 8, 2010\)](#)

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New housing construction has yet to catch up with 21st century lifestyles, where more people want to stay in their homes as they age, young parents juggle strollers and groceries and people of all ages live with various disabilities.

Visitability, a nationwide movement, asks people without disabilities to think about how features such as wider doors, a stepless entry and a bathroom on the main floor can make their day-to-day lives easier now, not to mention when they're older. These features also make homes more welcoming for older relatives and friends who might have disabilities.

"Visitability is a home construction and design approach that incorporates basic accessibility into newly-built homes and housing. Simply put, it makes life easier and makes a home more welcoming for those with disabilities," says Sharon Hauss, research associate at the Indiana Institute on Disability and Community. "It's a terrible feeling when you realize you can't have friends in your own home."

Having a broken leg or joint replacement can make a person's own home seem unwelcoming. Car accidents, military service, illnesses and other situations can leave people unexpectedly injured or with a disability.

"Our physical abilities change over time," says Hauss. "As a result, our homes may have to change as well, but think of how beneficial it would be if those features had been included from the beginning."

Including visitability features in new construction is estimated to cost an additional 1 percent, which is less than it would cost to retrofit a house. The following are the defining features of a visitable home:

- **Stepless Entrance.** An entrance either at the front, side, rear of the house, or from the garage that does not have any steps.
- **Wide Doorways.** Doors on the main level that are 36 inches wide, allowing 34 inches clear

passage. The typical 30 inch door found in the majority of homes is not accessible for most wheelchair access and other modes of mobility.

- Bathroom on Main Level. At least a half-bath on the main level with reinforced walls for grab bars as well as space for a wheelchair to maneuver.

Here are some of the benefits of visitability features:

- Convenience. Activities such as bringing in groceries, rolling in the stroller, hauling in the new refrigerator, or struggling with luggage, are easier. Dealing with a sprained ankle, using a wheelchair or crutches is less difficult. "Steps also get harder when you get older," says Hauss.
- Flexibility/Planning for Future. Be ready for all of life's seasons and realize that aging should not have to mean moving. "Most older people want to age in place and stay in their homes," says Jane Harlan-Simmons, research associate also at the Institute.
- Hospitality. Excluding friends and family with mobility limitations from visiting your home will no longer be an issue.
- Marketability. "You can make a stepless entrance look attractive and enhance the resale value of the house," says Harlan-Simmons.

According to Hauss and Harlan-Simmons, mandatory and voluntary visitability initiatives have been put into practice in parts of Arizona, Texas, Illinois and Georgia. For example, in Bolingbrook, IL, it was mandated that all new homes be visitable. Harlan-Simmons and Hauss say contractors might have a lack of experience or knowledge of various visitability features, so people interested in such a home should be prepared to explain what they want. They also encourage home shoppers to mention the desire for such features to their realtors.

"Builders and realtors need to know that there is a market for houses that accommodate the needs of aging baby boomers," says Harlan-Simmons.

To learn more about visitability, talk to your building professional about constructing a visitable home or call the Indiana Builders Association at (317) 236-6334. The following are helpful resources about visitability:

- [Concrete Change](#)
- [National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modification](#)
- [National Association of Home Builders](#)

- Build a Home to Welcome All Your Guests ([consumer brochure](#))

Contact Jane Harlan Simmons for more information at jeharlan@indiana.edu.

About the IIDC:

The Indiana Institute on Disability and Community, Indiana's University Center for Excellence on Disabilities, works to increase community capacity in disability through academic instruction, research, dissemination and training, and technical assistance. Visit the Institute on the Web at www.iidc.indiana.edu

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