

Visitability Housing: Basic Access that is Practical and Cost Effective



by Evelyn Rusciorelli

The Florida Housing Coalition is developing a Florida-specific, county-by-county, residential resource guide in partnership with the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council (FDDC). This *Guide* will focus on the housing

options for individuals with developmental disabilities, which include Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, Spina Bifida and intellectual disabilities.

Included in the *Guide* will be best practices drawn from Florida and around the country. As part of the research for this *Guide*, Housing Coalition staff attended the recent TASH annual conference in Atlanta, where some of these best practices were on display. TASH (not an acronym) is a leader in disability advocacy with more than 35 years promoting the full inclusion and participation of children and adults with developmental disabilities in every aspect of the community.

A preconference workshop titled “Integrated Housing Options – Challenges and Opportunities” included a tour of accessible housing beginning with East Lake Commons,



Accessible Housing Tour: East Lake Commons in Atlanta, GA



a cohousing community of townhomes whose physical design encourages both social contact and individual space. The “cohousing model” requires future residents to participate in the community’s initial design prior to construction. The initial Lake Commons residents decided that all the homes should have basic accessibility. This was achieved without additional cost even with the varying inclines and terrain of some lots. These homes are both owner and renter occupied, ranging from young families to elderly residents.

The East Lake Commons tour guide was Eleanor Smith, a delightful, energetic and knowledgeable advocate of “visitability” housing. Eleanor defines the term on her network’s website: www.concretechange.org.

Visitability, sometimes called Basic Access, is a campaign for meaningful policy requiring a few essential features in every new home:

- One zero-step entrance;
- Interior doors, including bathrooms, with 32 inches or more of clear passage space; and
- At least a half bath (preferably a full bath) on the main floor.

Visitability makes houses easier to adapt in the future, allowing current residents to remain in their homes as they age.



East Lake Commons tour guide Eleanor Smith addressed housing visitability.



An upscale, barrier-free home by Rawlings Design, Inc. benefits everyone with its accessibility and visitability.

The more we discussed basic access or visitability, the more it made sense that all new homes should be constructed in this manner. Entrance steps and small doors cause problems for all residents at some point, especially in Florida where so many will age in place or become the caregiver of parents at home. Economically, there are no additional design and building costs for a barrier-free home versus a typical retrofit cost of \$7,500 or more. While HUD requires five percent of multifamily and rental units to be fully accessible it is impossible to predict how many households will need accessible units. As Eleanor Smith said, “It’s not possible to predict in which homes someone will develop a disability. It’s kind of like saying, ‘Well, 10% of all vehicles are in a major accident, so we will require 10% of the vehicles to have seat belts.’”

The next stop on the tour was a newly constructed upscale home designed by Rawlings Design, Inc., whose basic design is barrier free. This architect has constructed six upscale

TASH Conference Highlights

A. **“Living At Home,”** a story and accompanying video from Metro Fair Housing Services, addressed the housing options for Shawn Green in Atlanta, Georgia. Because of Cerebral Palsy, Shawn has little mobility and is a person who uses a wheelchair. Metro Fair Housing Services (<http://www.metrofairhousing.com/>) financed mobility assistance equipment for Green’s home, which allows Shawn to remain in his home with family support. Without the equipment to help family members transition him from bed to chair to shower, Shaun’s alternative housing options were a nursing home or institution. The lift equipment and installation cost about \$8000, which came from a fair housing legal settlement. To watch the video visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tNt9Xqapaw>

B. **“Building a Life in the Community... not a Program”** workshop focused on enabling persons with disabilities to live within the community by being a part of the community. Whether the individual shares an apartment, owns a home or lives with family, they are in a community environment that offers opportunity, friends and employment. Persons with disabilities look for opportunities to live on their own, work, have assets and hire their own services. Services are no longer provided at a group center nor is there a service center where all the service providers work. In 2005, for example, the Oregon-based nonprofit Seeking Equality, Empowerment and Community (SEEC) closed its main center; staff is now in the community, using cell phones and computers. Services are provided wherever the clients need them. For more information visit: <http://seeonline.org/>

Most states have implemented the federally funded “Money Follows the Person” (MFP), a Rebalancing Demonstration Program that helps states rebalance their long-term care systems to transition people with Medicaid from institutions to the community. Forty-three states and the District of Columbia have implemented MFP Programs. Florida was awarded \$4.3 million last year with a \$35.7 million commitment through 2016. However, last June, the Florida Joint Legislative Budget Commission voted to reject the \$35.7 million, five-year MFP grant from the federal government.

C. **“Not Home,”** a documentary produced by independent film maker Narcel Reedus, is about young people with disabilities living in nursing facilities and interweaves the stories of a young adult, a child and two parents whose separate lives intersect though institutionalization. The documentary includes interviews from advocates, activists, elected officials and parents facing similar challenges as well as a graphic montage of the condensed history of institutionalization in the U.S.

The federal government requires states to provide services to people in nursing homes but allows states the option to provide home services to people with disabilities. In Florida, this means unless the person can obtain a Medicaid waiver, they must continue to live in a nursing home or institution. Read more about this documentary or watch a trailer at: <http://www.nothomedocumentary.com/home/HNN>



Edgewood Townhomes represents what advocates and builders can do together to increase maneuverability for everyone, including people using wheelchairs or baby strollers.

barrier-free homes in the Atlanta area. The only question that people without disabilities ask is whether the rain can enter under the front door. Once it is explained that the design is no different from local banks or store entrances, people quickly understand and agree it will benefit their daily lives.

The next tour stop, Edgewood Townhomes, represents what can be done to change housing when local advocates get involved. Atlanta-based Columbia Residential was preparing to break ground on these Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP)-funded affordable rental units when the developer was approached by Concrete Change to construct as many barrier-free units as possible. The terrain around the townhomes goes down and then up a very steep incline. As a result of this local advocacy, Columbia Residential construction manager reassessed the completed elevations and architectural plans for the 140 townhomes. The plans were changed to eliminate curbs and steps and increase maneuverability for everyone, including those using wheelchairs or baby strollers. This increased the total number of barrier-free units from the planned 15 percent to 75 percent.

The final stop on the tour was the Oakhurst neighborhood, a cluster of 10 single-family, owner-occupied homes that received down payment assistance from the county for income qualified applicants. Although these homes were built on very steep property, the builders met the county's

requirement that the homes offer entrances that have wide doorways but do not have a step or curb at very low cost.

The most important take-away from this tour was that barrier-free housing has nothing to do with whether or not you have a disability, it simply makes good economic and common sense, because steps and narrow doors are barriers to all homeowners. My daughter learned this lesson the hard way when, after ordering an “elliptical” machine online because they promised free in-home delivery to the first floor, the delivery team refused to take the 250-pound box up the one step through her front door.

Contractors may be leery of building homes with basic accessibility or visitability, fearing the cost will be higher than what they or the market is willing to bear. Christine Fortenberry, a Certified Professional Home Builder, one of only 43 Certified Graduate Builders in Georgia, and a career member of the National Association of Home Builders said, “There is resistance to accessibility in the industry because of the lack of understanding by builders, contractors and designers with respect to the various terms associated with accessibility. For example, basic accessibility to a slab-on-grade residence, when planned for prior to construction, has no associated cost while accessible, universal and other similar terms have some associated cost with implementation to varying degrees. There is significant cost to provide basic accessibility to a residence after construction.”

Some common terms and more information can be found at www.fortenberryconstructionservices.com. Also, The Florida Housing Finance Corporation (FHFC) created the FHFC Universal Design and Visitability Manual, which may be downloaded at <http://www.floridahousing.org/specialneeds/>. Florida Housing Finance Corporation will be requiring Universal Design and Visitability construction features within all funded development units during its next Universal Cycle application period.

During the upcoming Georgia legislative session, a bill with bipartisan sponsorship will be introduced to require all new residential homes built on slabs to be barrier free. Other areas with similar legislation are: Texas; Kansas; Pima County Arizona; Toledo, Ohio; and Bolingbrook, Illinois. Pima County reports that their Inclusive Home Design Ordinance is very successful with no additional cost. **HNN**

Housing Resource Guide Survey



We want *Housing News Network* readers to share information about local groups that offer housing assistance for individuals with development disabilities. Tell us about recent assistance you offered individuals with development disabilities as we identify examples of home purchase, rental housing, living with roommates and rehabilitation assistance to feature in the *Guide*.

Please complete the survey at: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/5H8J2KR>