

## IN BRIEF: ACCESSIBILITY AND VISITABILITY FEATURES IN SINGLE-FAMILY HOMES: A REVIEW OF STATE AND LOCAL ACTIVITY

According to a 2000 AARP survey, more than 90 percent of persons age 65 and older would prefer to stay in their current residence as long as possible. But for those persons who develop a disability that limits their activities, meeting this expectation may be difficult or impossible. In fact, a recent Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) report shows that more than 1 million households with a disabled older resident have unmet structural housing needs (e.g., the resident needs but does not have a ramp or accessibility features in the bathroom). One key method to promote continuing independence in the home is to modify the existing house. But in the long run it may be easier and less expensive to incorporate a number of architecturally friendly design features into new homes as they are being built. Together with other strategies for independence, such accessible design elements may play an important role in enabling older persons to age-in-place.

“Accessibility and Visitability Features in Single-family Homes: A Review of State and Local Activity”<sup>1</sup> reviews the methods that various state and local jurisdictions are using to promote accessibility features in new single-family homes, and identifies important issues related to cost as well as consumer attitude.

### Summary of Findings

There are four categories of existing state and local policy that address accessibility and visitability features in single-family homes:

- 1) Builder requirements for housing built with a public subsidy
- 2) Builder requirements or incentives for unsubsidized housing
- 3) Tax or fee incentives to the consumer
- 4) Consumer awareness campaigns

To date, the first category, builder requirements for subsidized housing, has garnered the most public attention. Typically these requirements encompass the concept of “visitability,” that is, a no-step entrance to the home, widened doors and hallways on the first floor, accessible climate controls and electrical outlets, etc. Local areas that have applied visitability requirements for single-family homes subsidized with local funds include Atlanta and Austin. Georgia, Minnesota, and Texas have applied visitability requirements for single-family homes built with state subsidies. Vermont went further to require certain visitability elements in both subsidized and most unsubsidized single-family construction.

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<sup>1</sup> AARP Public Policy Institute report #2002-03, by Andrew Kochera.

Some states and local areas have adopted incentives rather than requirements. For instance, Irvine, California, developed a list of 32 universal design features that builders provide to homebuyers as an effort in public awareness; the builder discloses to the buyer whether the features are included in the home, available as an option, or not available. Georgia provides a tax credit toward the cost of selected accessibility features for persons with disabilities, and officials in Freehold Borough, New Jersey have the discretion to reduce building permit fees when construction includes accessibility features.

It is not yet clear which approach is most effective in promoting independence for single-family residents. Experts and policymakers still debate the types of architectural guidelines that should be included, the costs associated with various features, and the appropriate balance between consumer awareness initiatives and public incentives or requirements. In fact, most state and local jurisdictions currently have no policy to encourage accessibility or visitability features in single-family homes. But the situation is far different from what it was only 10 years ago. At that time, there was no legislative activity other than recently implemented Fair Housing Laws for multifamily housing activity. The new laws that have been enacted are expected to gradually increase production and consumer awareness, leading to more reliable information about the marginal costs of various accessibility and visitability requirements. If feedback from consumers is favorable, more state and local jurisdictions are likely to add similar policy, especially as the baby boomers age in the next few decades. Nonetheless, most efforts are still facing considerable opposition because of concerns about cost and consumer perception.