

HOUSING AND HOME MODIFICATIONS FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Securing legally appropriate housing for persons with disabilities, particularly senior citizens, often proves to be challenging. The National Resource Center on Supportive Housing and Home Modifications estimates that over a million senior citizens are in need of modifications to their aging homes (Pynoos, Mayeda, & Lee, 2003). The need for housing and home modifications is especially apparent in Texas, in Bexar County, and surrounding counties, where people with disabilities rank at or higher than the national average.

2000 Population with Disabilities 5 years and older			
	Total Population	Disabilities	%
United States	253,624,074	39,633,241	16
Texas	18,761,475	3,605,542	19
Bandera County	16,591	3,438	21
Bexar County	1,243,314	261,387	21
Comal County	72,052	12,937	18
Kendall County	21,887	3,587	16

(MapStats, 2008)

2000 Population with Disabilities 65 years and older			
	Total Population	Disabilities	%
United States	33,025,369	13,443,973	41
Texas	1,966,272	879,978	45
Bandera County	2,804	1,054	38
Bexar County	138,157	63,067	46
Comal County	10,903	4,314	40
Kendall County	2,997	1,178	39

(MapStats, 2008)

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2007 Bexar County still surpassed the national averages for disabilities. Of the population 5 years old and over, almost 15.9% have a disability; of the senior population, 46.8% are disabled (compared nationally to 14.9% and

40.6%, respectively) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

HOUSING ISSUES AND THE LAW

Implementing housing and home modifications for disabled persons, particularly senior citizens, not only helps maximize independence, but also meets the requirements of United States law. Over the last few decades, several important laws have been enacted to support the ability of people with disabilities to locate appropriate housing. Some important legislation is highlighted here:

- **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.** Prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities for federally funded housing programs. Though it does not typically apply to the private housing market, it does apply to organizations who receive HUD and other types of funding. It also provides for reasonable accommodations and who is responsible for paying for any necessary changes.
- **Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988.** Prohibits owners and landlords from discriminating against persons with disabilities when selling, buying, or renting homes. It also outlines the necessary reasonable accommodations necessary for different types of homes.
- **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) 1990.** Focuses closely on publicly owned buildings and hotels, model homes, and shelters. This law does not specifically deal with privately owned homes.
- **Texas Senate Bill 623.** Requires single family homes receiving federal and/or state funds from the Texas Department of

Housing and Community Affairs to implement Universal Design

(City of San Antonio Public Works Disability
Access Office, n.d.; United Cerebral Palsy, 2007)

To adhere to the law, any home modifications must fulfill the requirement for a “*reasonable accommodation*,” as stated in the Fair Housing Act. A reasonable accommodation allows for a “change, exception, or adjustment to a rule, policy, practice, or service that may be necessary for a person with a disability to use and enjoy a dwelling” (United States Department of Justice, 2004). Requests for accommodations may be done orally or in written form, though written form is preferable.

HOME MODIFICATION

Home modification improves disabled persons’ living space by not only adhering to the law, but by improving safety and independent living. Accessible homes and buildings are necessary for those with disabilities. “Among people with disabilities who reported that barriers limited or prevented their community participation, 43.1% mentioned problems with building design, such as stairs, bathrooms, or narrow doors” (Hendershot, 2004 as cited by Nasar & Evans-Cowley, 2007). When attempting home modification, accessible housing and universal housing (including visitability) are two distinct design approaches typically implemented.

Accessible Housing

Accessible homes are created when adaptive technology and design is applied to existing housing, usually necessary because a resident of the home requires the use of a wheelchair (Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Universal Design (RERD UD), 2003). Often, the primary goal of creating accessible housing is to ensure compliance with local, city, and state building codes and meet the requirements of the 1988 Fair Housing Amendments Act, rather than a focus on aesthetics.

Some of the adaptations used when creating accessible housing are simple, such as changing the types of handles on cabinets. Other accommodations, like expanding a doorway or adding a wheelchair ramp, require more effort and cost. Examples of potential housing

accommodations to improve accessibility include:

- Widening doorways
- Clearing space
- Lowering countertops
- Lowering light switches/electrical outlets
- Installing grab bars
- Movable cabinets

Universal Housing

Based on a concept by architect Ron Mace, universally designed homes improve use for all potential residents and visitors. These homes not only provide specific adaptations for those with disabilities, but can also accommodate people of different ages, sizes, and capabilities (RERD UD, 2003). A major difference between accessible design and universal design is that adaptations using universal design typically occur before a home is built. Universal design often exceeds the minimum accessibility standards provided by the law by designing not only for safety, but for aesthetic, efficient, and psychologically appealing design. The Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State developed the “Seven Principles of Universal Design,” which are outlined below.

1. **Equitable Use** (Design allows all people to have equal access to the building)
2. **Flexibility in Use** (Design allows for a variety of uses)
3. **Simple and Intuitive Use** (Design is easy to understand, regardless of experience, knowledge, or language skills)
4. **Perceptible Information** (Design is easy to understand, regardless of environmental conditions or sensory abilities)
5. **Tolerance for Error** (Design reduces likelihood of accidents or unintended actions)
6. **Low Physical Effort** (Design allows for efficient and comfortable use)
7. **Size and Shape for Approach and Use** (Design recognizes the limits of the human body when building counters, shelves, appliances, controls, etc.)

(Nasar & Evans-Cowley, 2007).

Visitability

In the late 20th century, Eleanor Smith, a disability advocate, encouraged a new type of universal design, later coined visitability. After analyzing the lack of accessibility in homes built by Habitat for Humanity, Smith advocated for a baseline level of accessibility for all new home construction (Nasar & Evans-Cowley, 2007). Visitability is a more affordable and practical method of universal design that improves access to single family homes for those with special needs. The three major principles of visitability are outlined below (Nasar & Evans-Cowley, 2007):

1. Basic accessible features in all new homes are a civil right and allow all people to live comfortably and productively
2. Basic features of visitability can be provided at minimal cost, especially when implemented during the building phase and not added retroactively
3. Important features should be prioritized

The three most important features typically added when building a visitable home include:

- One zero-step entrance to the building
- A minimum of 32-inch clearances in doorways
- Access to a minimum of a ½ bath on the main floor

In 1992, the first city ordinance requiring basic visitability features was enacted in Atlanta, Georgia. Since that time, several mandatory visitability programs, with mandates tied to public funding, have been enacted in Austin (1998), Texas (1999), Ft. Worth (2000), and San Antonio (2002) (Nasar & Evans-Cowley, 2007).

HOME MODIFICATION PROGRAMS

National Programs

Accessible Space, Inc. (ASI) is a non-profit organization based in Minnesota that provides accessible and affordable housing, supportive services, and rehabilitation to those with special physical needs. ASI has currently helped develop eight accessible housing communities in Texas. Two of those buildings are located in the San Antonio area, including Oak Forest

Heights (25 apartments) in San Antonio and Wagon Crossing (20 apartments) in Universal City. Age, income, and disability requirements determine whether or not a person is eligible to reside in one of these facilities (Accessible Space, Inc., n.d.).

San Antonio Region

In San Antonio, the City of San Antonio Neighborhood Action Department offers housing rehabilitation programs that give loans to low income homeowners for housing modifications (City of San Antonio Neighborhood Action Department, n.d.). *Project H.O.G.A.R.* also provides home repairs to elderly enrolled in their program (San Antonio Kinship Care Collaborative, 2004).

In addition, several non-profit organizations offer housing and home modification services. *Rebuilding Together San Antonio* has provided adaptations to over 297 homes since its inception in 1994. In collaboration with Christmas in April San Antonio in 2005, this organization provided home repairs free of charge to 23 San Antonio families in one day (The Volunteer Center, 2008).

Merced Housing Texas offers a home modification program called Serve Our Seniors (SOS) Emergency Repair Program. Begun in 2002, this program aids low-income disabled persons and seniors 56 and older. Currently, approximately 300 homes in the Denver Heights, Nevada Street, Dignowity Hills, and Harvard Place/Eastlawn neighborhoods have been repaired free of charge to the residents (Merced Housing Texas, 2008).

Focused on the Avenida Guadalupe neighborhood, the *Avenida Guadalupe Association* constructs lower income senior housing and office spaces, manages and revitalizes city facilities, provides housing counseling, and helps first time buyers procure homes. Initiated in 2006, the Asset Preservation and Emergency Repair Program provides funds to elderly and/or disabled low-income homeowners for various types of home repairs (Avenida Guadalupe Association, 2007.).

San Antonio Alternative Housing, Inc. has provided the most extensive home modification

services throughout the San Antonio area. This organization's Repair and Modification Program provides repairs to the homes of low-income elderly and disabled people throughout the city of San Antonio. In 2007, 459 repairs were made at 290 homes. Of those homeowners, 67% lived with a disability, 75% were women, 80% were over the age of 60, 71% were Hispanic, and 84% were at or below fifty percent of the Annual Median Income for San Antonio (Kronkosky Charitable Foundation, 2008b). Unfortunately, this effort has recently been suspended indefinitely due to a lack of management personnel.

In the Canyon Lake area, *Habitat for Safe Seniors* offers a ramp and home repair program that, in 2007, benefited 46 senior citizens and disabled people by building 10 handicap ramps and providing various other home repairs (Kronkosky Charitable Foundation, 2008a).

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