

**TESTIMONY ON RAISED BILL 5372: AN ACT
CONCERNING ACCESSIBLE HOUSING
MARCH 4, 2010**

Good Morning Representative Green, Housing Committee Members and other interested parties. My name is Candace Low, Executive Director of Independence Unlimited, a one stop disability resource center for people with disabilities. Thank you for coming to hear about this very important issue: Building accessible and visit-able housing to create inclusive communities. Along with my comments, I will be including comments from a fellow director of a sister center, Tony LaCava from Disability Resource Center of Fairfield County.

For many years disability advocates have sought to make communities friendlier to people with disabilities, people who are 60 and over and more inclusive in general to all people. Many homes are "off-limits" or inaccessible to a large segment of the population. Statistics show that nationwide, one in five people have some type of disability; at least 5% of the population use some kind of mobility aid; 3% of Americans live in homes with any kind of accessibility features although almost 30% of the families contain at least one member with a disability; and over one million households that have a person with a disability have unmet housing needs. The impact of basic barriers on people with mobility disabilities can include isolation, compromised health and safety and institutionalization. As we age, live longer, and veterans continue to come home with injuries, the need for more accessible and visit-able housing will increase to meet the needs of the aging and disability populations.

I am here today in support of Raised Bill 5372, An Act for Accessible Housing. I am also here to promote another solution to housing that people with mobility disabilities can use and that is the concept of visit-ability. Visit-ability is an affordable, sustainable and inclusive (Universal) design approach for integrating basic accessibility features into all newly built single and two family homes. Visit-ability incorporates three main features to make housing more welcoming: one no step entrance on an accessible path of travel, 32" clear opening at doorways and accessible circulation throughout the plan and basic access to one bathroom on the ground floor. Inclusive communities allow neighbors with all kinds of abilities to interact or visit each other and participate in community activities. The visit-ability

initiative is based on the conviction that social participation and the inclusion of basic architectural access features in new homes is a civil and basic human right and improves livability for all. Visit-ability and the use of universal design on a community level permits full access to social participation in community affairs and interaction with neighbors. Visit-ability is a very important step in making universal access to community life a reality for those who are currently consistently excluded.

Rep. Green's bill goes a long way to making more inclusive communities happen. The idea that homes may be open to neighbors, friends and family with disabilities means that persons with any mobility disability can live in their own home and invite persons with mobility issues to visit with a degree of naturalness. Rep. Green's bill will provide an opportunity for developers, builders, community leaders, family members and people who need accessible or visit-able homes to embrace full inclusion for everyone by supporting inclusive communities.

Connecticut has a wonderful program called Money Follows the Person where the state has committed a large amount of resources to transition people out of nursing homes into community based living. One huge barrier to this program is the lack of accessible and visit-able housing. How can we transition from institutions or help people remain in the community if there is no place to live? Rep. Green's bill will provide a decrease in state Medicaid spending as funds used for home modifications are not needed and can be allotted elsewhere. Rep. Green's bill also embraces the idea that going to a nursing home when you can no longer live in your own home due to access issues is not the only choice.

I want to thank Representative Green for his forward thinking in introducing bill 5372. Providing incentives for voluntary development of inclusive communities through building accessible or visit-able homes is the next step in helping people stay in their own homes where they can remain participating members of the community.

Thank you.

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Visitability

An Idea Whose Time Has Come!



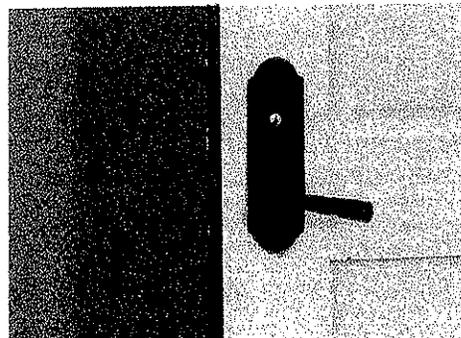
Visitability is a movement to change home construction practices so that virtually all new homes - not merely those custom-built for occupants who currently have disabilities - offer a few specific features that make the home easier for people who develop mobility disabilities to live in, and to make it possible for them to visit family and friends.

The spirit of Visitability is as important as the list of features. That spirit says it's not just unwise but unacceptable that new homes continue to be built with barriers - unacceptable, given how easy it is to build basic access in the great majority of new homes, and unacceptable given the harsh effects major barriers have on so many people's lives, especially the ever-increasing population of those who are aging in place. These easily-avoided barriers cause unsafe living conditions, social isolation, and forced institutionalization.

Second, the features list must be partly rigid and partly flexible. The inflexible features are:

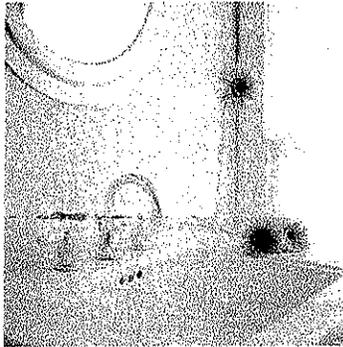
- Wide passage doors (32" clear space)
- At least a half bath/powder room on the main floor
- At least one zero-step entrance approached by an accessible route on a firm surface no steeper than 1:12, proceeding from a driveway or public sidewalk

Several additional features sometimes may be included in Visitability initiatives (for example, reinforcement in bathroom walls and accessible placement of electrical controls). If very low cost, they are good and appropriate. However, these additions must be flexible according to circumstance because they are so much less essential for survival than the three basic features, and each added feature elicits a set of objections and/or misconceptions to be addressed. If people



add to their own definition of Visitability advanced features such as a five-foot turning diameter in bathrooms, parking space requirements, a roll-in shower and so on, they are going beyond the scope of what is currently possible for rapid, broad application of Visitability, and the term Visitability should not be used for these initiatives.

The scope of the dwellings covered and the time in history of a Visitability initiative, whether voluntary or legislative, are also relevant to defining the flexible, evolving Visitability movement. For instance, a legislative effort that required some access in even a small percent of private, single-family houses pushed the borders far in an ordinance passed in Atlanta in 1992, whereas ordinances in Arizona in 2000 and Illinois in 2003 expanded the borders in a major new way by covering ALL new houses, not just those with some sort of public perk. Passing local ordinances is a major challenge, not to be minimized by advocates.



Over thirty-five localities country wide have adopted some form of a Visitability ordinance. Many are limited to state and federally funded housing, some are mandatory, some voluntary, and some have incentives built in.

On a smaller scale, any action as small as one person giving a Visitability handout to a builder, or advocating Visitability to a friend buying a new house, is a valuable part of the movement. The actions, large and small, of many thousands of participants are gradually reshaping how homes are built.

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