

By Susan Salters, Advocate and Community Inclusion Coordinator at Independence Unlimited and Faciliator of the NorthCentral Area Disability Advocacy Network

Good Afternoon, Chairman Green, members of the General Assembly Committee on Housing and distinguished guests. My name is Susan Salters. I am a resident of Coventry but I work as an advocate and community inclusion specialist at a Center for Independent Living here in Hartford called Independence Unlimited where we help people with disabilities to remain living independently in the community. I am here today to speak to you about Raised Bill No. 5372 ; An Act Concerning Accessible Housing, and why I am in favor of this legislation as a concrete step towards true community inclusion for people with disabilities into mainstream American life. First, I want to thank State Representative Kenneth Green for bringing this bill before this committee for your consideration and for suggesting creative incentives for private contractors to build homes with increased accessibility from now on. Rep. Green contacted me, as facilitator of the NorthCentral Area Disability Advocacy Network, a chapter of the regionwide Connecticut Disability Collaborative, when he became aware that NCADAN has been working diligently towards encouraging accessibility in housing. For the past couple of years, our group has been working on bringing the idea of Visitability to the people of Connecticut. Visitability is the vision that all newly constructed single family homes will be built with three simple design features that will tremendously increase accessibility. These features are; one zero step entrance, doorways with a full 32" clearance and wider hallways, as well as a bath on the main floor large enough for someone in a wheelchair to use the facility AND CLOSE THE DOOR. Visitability is a social movement that has spread nationwide and even overseas as people discover the advantages of designing and building homes with everyone in mind. The British Parliament enacted nationwide legislation back in 1998 mandating accessibility and before our own Congress is H.B. 1408 that also considers accessibility as necessary to the welfare of American citizens. Considering the aging Baby Boom population of the U.S. along with veterans returning from war with permanent injuries and the frail elderly isolated from their families in nursing facilities, making accessibility essential in residential construction JUST MAKES SENSE.

In my research on the subject of Visitability, opponents have declared that adding these three features to new homes is costly and that there isn't a market for these types of houses. But, I feel, there are many costs, both tangible and intangible, to NOT building with accessibility that needs to be weighed into this argument. Figured in should be the cost in time, money, materials and aggravation involved in remodeling a home after someone becomes disabled or elderly which, it is agreed, is greater than installing accessibility features to start with. There is also, the cost to our environment of adding

used building materials to our landfills when this dumping could have been avoided. Then there are the substantial federal healthcare costs of individuals taking up premature residence in nursing facilities due to structural barriers in their home. But more than material costs is the impact on our society and neighborhoods where stability, diversity and civic engagement are decreased proportionate to the numbers of individuals that leave or are left out of daily life. Inaccessible housing, also creates costly risks to individuals when First Responders answering emergency calls can't get equipment to the victim or out of the door. We know that the elderly are at greater risk of falling in their homes. Could it be because the doorway was too narrow for their walker, scooter or wheelchair to fit through so they opted for going it alone? Consider too the cost to quality of life and the increase in depression experienced by people isolated from others because of inaccessible home design.

But public policy should not be based solely on financial gain or polarized debate. It should be decided on by careful consideration of the overall benefit to the citizens of our state, all the citizens of our state not singularly the young, strong or able bodied. In your deliberations about this bill consider who, in your own family, may need safe passageway into their home or may need the use of assistive technology to get around. If not NOW, perhaps in the near future. Will that family member be able to join in Thanksgiving dinner or will there be an empty place setting because your house was not accessible?

Thank you for your time today and I hope you ponder this proposal carefully. Please feel free to ask me questions.

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