



## The Profound Benefits of Visitable Homes

### THE NEED

Tim Ashley has a self-deprecating sense of humor, a quick wit, and listens well. He's someone who's easy to hang out with, the kind of guy with whom you'd enjoy having a beer or a meal.

Unfortunately, you probably couldn't have him at your place, because Ashley uses a wheelchair. And if your home is like the vast majority of American homes, it does not have the three simple features that would make it "visitable":

- one zero-step entrance;
- at least 32 inches of clear passage space in all exterior and interior doors;
- and one main-floor half bathroom.

Ashley, 59, has grown to expect that he won't be able to visit friends or family — or at least, not for more than an hour or two. "My sister and my brother both live in houses that were built in the '90s," he says, "and neither one of them has an accessible restroom. They have stairs, they have no lifts. They don't have a way for me to get in the house except for a makeshift piece of plywood."

Tim's issue today could be any one of ours tomorrow. As we — and our parents, or siblings, and friends — age, we become more likely to face mobility issues. Prioritizing visitability is key to ensuring that we and others can thrive at home for years to come.

### THE BACKGROUND

In the 1980s, an Atlanta-based nonprofit called Concrete Change first articulated the concept of visitability. In 1992, Concrete Change helped convince Atlanta's city council to pass the nation's first law requiring zero-step entrances and wide doors in select newly built, private, single-family houses.

Today, AARP estimates that about 60 governments have passed and adhere to visitability ordinances. (Colorado Springs and El Paso County aren't among them.) Over time, it has become clear that this isn't just a quality-of-life issue for those with disabilities, but a public health issue for all of us.

In the 2000 National Organization on Disability/Harris survey, 46 percent of people with disabilities reported feeling isolated from their communities — twice the percentage of people without disabilities. Social isolation has been found to be a significant risk factor for increased mortality and poor health status. In fact, in one study of 1100 seniors done by the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center, those with little social activity experienced 70 percent greater cognitive decline than those enjoying frequent social activity.

In five years as a peer mentor with The Independence Center, Ashley worked with consumers with disabilities all over El Paso County. Their most common goal? To become less isolated. “People get cut off from their own family,” he says, “because they can’t get in their family members’ homes.”

Among all age demographics, seniors are the most likely to need visitable environments. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 40 percent of people 65 or older have some sort of disability. Two-thirds of them have a mobility disability.

Given how fast the senior population is growing, you would think that the stock of visitable homes would be growing quickly, too. However, popular demand for visitability isn’t yet strong. Many people have still never heard of the concept. Even people who are familiar don’t necessarily recognize how a visitable home could help them.

On a relatively pedestrian level, wider doors and zero-step entrances are useful to anyone who’s bringing home a load of groceries. A first-floor bathroom can be a lifesaver when a young child really has to go. And these features can also allow for an earlier homecoming if someone’s hospitalized with an injury or illness that temporarily restricts their mobility.

On a more profound level, Ashley’s own story illustrates that all of us are a single bad break away from permanently needing a more accessible home. At age 42, he became disabled in a freak accident at a construction site.

Worst-case scenarios aside, all of us face the physical limitations that come with aging. If we’re like 87 percent of all of today’s seniors, according to AARP, we will want to “age in place” — which affords us greater comfort, allows us to keep social networks intact, and spares us the cost of assisted living arrangements (more than \$3,600 per month, on average, in 2016).

Having a visitable home today is one of the best ways to prepare for tomorrow. Once a home is visitable, adding grab bars or installing easily reachable light switches are relatively inexpensive measures that can help move it toward being fully accessible — the kind of home where aging in place is truly possible.

“Why should it be so damn hard when you get old to get around in your own home,” Ashley asks, “when you could make it easier if you start thinking about it now?”

## THE CALL TO ACTION

There are a number of things you can do to best position yourself and your family for the future:

**Ask for visitability features when building a home.** It is of course cheapest to add a first-floor bathroom, wider doorways and a zero-step entrance during the building process, rather than to retrofit a home later. Marla Novak of the Colorado Springs Housing and

Building Association points out that while you can ask any builder to pursue these installations, some builders hold a Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS) designation, having completed a three-day course that addresses accessibility in design, construction, and marketing. Consider seeking builders with a CAPS designation, or calling the HBA at (719) 592-1800 for recommendations.

**Prioritize visitability features when buying an existing home.** When looking for a new home, you can search nar.realtor for Realtors with “At Home with Diversity” certification. These Realtors have learned basic competencies for working with diverse clients, including those with disabilities. Local RE/MAX Properties Realtor Tyra Sandoval advocates going one step further and asking Realtor candidates how they might research housing with accessibility features.

It’s possible within local MLS listings to search for homes with accessible bathrooms and ramps — but Sandoval notes that not all listing agents check those boxes appropriately. Your Realtor should be willing to call ahead to ask about the specs of any home that catches your interest.

**Consider retrofitting your existing home.** While some retrofits can be prohibitively expensive, many are not — and there are public funds available. Colorado Springs residents who have low incomes and mobility disabilities, and who are struggling to live independently, are encouraged to apply to the city’s Urban Redevelopment Division’s Architectural Barrier Removal Program. Emergency projects can include installing ramps or widening doorways, and are handled by Brothers Redevelopment, a nonprofit housing organization. Call (719) 385-5912 for an application.

Brothers also administers a separate, federally funded program covering similar projects. Qualifying applicants must earn less than 50 percent of the area’s median income; for a household of two in 2018, that meant a \$31,100 limit. (A loan option exists for those who earn slightly more and live outside of city limits in El Paso County.) Modifications are made on a first-qualified, first-served basis. Those interested may contact Brothers at (719) 666-7181.

Meanwhile, anyone with an annual household income of under \$150,000 can apply for an

“Income Tax Credit for Retrofitting Homes for Health,” which was passed by the Colorado Legislature in 2018. Eligible applicants can earn up to \$5,000 in state tax credits per year, through 2023. You can find out more, and investigate your eligibility, at <http://bit.ly/homemodcredit>.

Even if you don’t choose to stay put for the long term, a visitable home is a more marketable home. According to the 2016 American Community Survey, 6.6 percent of people in the U.S. have an ambulatory disability. And yet a Harvard University study has found that only 1 percent of homes in the U.S. have five important accessibility features. (Those include the three features listed above, plus switches and outlets at easily reachable heights and lever door handles and faucets.)

**Finally, spread the word on visitability.** To keep up with news you can share, regularly check in on [visitability.org](http://visitability.org), a National Council on Independent Living site; [idea.ap.buffalo.edu](http://idea.ap.buffalo.edu), site of the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access at the University at Buffalo; and [aarp.org](http://aarp.org). Also, The Independence Center has created an issue brief on this topic specifically for local policymakers, since they have the power to encourage or even mandate greater accessibility in homebuilding. Feel free to download it from [theindependencecenter.org](http://theindependencecenter.org) and share it with your representatives.

# WHO

## DOES THE IC HELP?

For people with disabilities who want more independence, The Independence Center (The IC) can walk with them on their journey to achieve their goals.

We serve people with disabilities in El Paso, Cheyenne, Kit Carson, Lincoln, Park and Teller counties. Services vary from county to county.

# WHAT

## TYPES OF DISABILITIES?



# ABOUT THE IC

Started in 1987, The Independence Center is a local nonprofit organization that provides traditional and self-directed home health care, independent living, and veterans' and advocacy services for people with disabilities. These services range from providing peer support, skills classes, and employment assistance to individual and systems advocacy. In addition, The IC runs a Certified Nurse Aide training program to equip the area with qualified CNAs.

The IC has over 300 employees today, with over 51% of their Center for Independent Living staff and board having a disability.



## HOME HEALTH CARE

The IC offers home health care that is skilled and unskilled, self directed or physician-directed, for all ages, and with the caregiver of your choice or an employee of The IC.

## CNA TRAINING

The Independence Center's CNA Training Program offers day and evening classes to become a qualified Certified Nurse Aide.

People with disabilities  
building community

**THE INDEPENDENCE CENTER**