

Making It Accessible

The HUD Requirement and Beyond

by Wendy Talarico

Making a house or apartment more accessible for an elderly or disabled client requires balancing federal or local guidelines with the needs of the particular client. Only the client can tell you his or her needs. The federal guidelines, however, come in somewhat vague form from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and its recent amendments to the Fair Housing Act.

HUD's Regulations

HUD's recent amendments to the Fair Housing Act require that in new construction (any to be occupied after March 13, 1991), the following types of projects must meet certain accessibility standards:

- Four or more attached, one-story townhouses or multi-story townhouses with elevators.
- All units in an elevator rental or condominium building with four or more units.
- Ground-floor units in a garden-style rental and condominium buildings having four or more units. (Ground-floor units are defined as those "on an accessible route," which means that a grade of 5% or less must be available to build ramps on from the parking area to the door.)

What does "accessibility" mean? At present, HUD is going with the guidelines established by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI A117.1-1986). These standards define an accessible unit as one in which:

- Wheelchairs can pass freely into and through the unit. This means no barriers between the parking lot and the front door, a flush breezeway, and no more than a 1/2-inch beveled threshold at the entrance or anywhere within.
- Kitchens and bathrooms allow free entry and movement. This means no angled entries or L-shaped plans. Space for a full, 360-degree turnaround is not required.
- Environmental controls, such as light switches, thermostats, and electrical outlets, are between 15 and 54 inches from the floor.
- Walls adjacent to toilets, shower stalls, tubs, and shower seats have backing for grab bars.

In addition, all common-use areas in and around the project (such as social areas or swimming pools) must have at least one regular entrance that is wheelchair-accessible.

Beyond HUD

The HUD/ANSI requirements establish a sort of minimum on top of which state or local zoning regulators, designers, or builders may add their own contributions to senior and disabled accessibility. It is especially worth checking local and state requirements, many of which are

changing these days. Such changes are the essence of retrofitting for seniors. They include the following:

Floors. The best type of flooring is low-pile carpeting glued directly to the subfloor, says Richard Bulat, spokesman for the Hartford Insurance Group. This is the kind of flooring used in the company's Hartford House, a 900-square-foot, four-room traveling model specifically designed for elderly people (see Figure A).

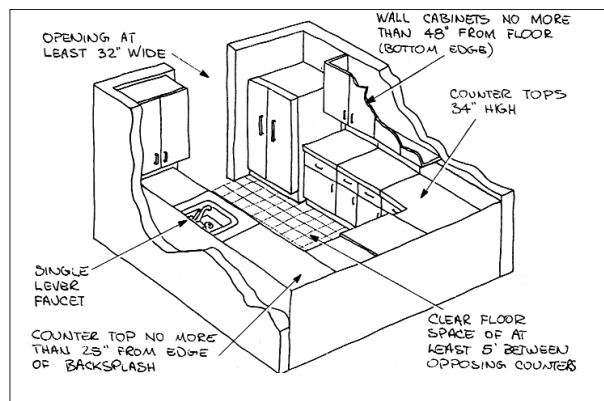
In addition, reducing or eliminating raised thresholds and single steps will ease access and reduce the chances of tripping and falling. Contrasting flooring should be used to highlight any remaining changes in elevation. Step edges should be lined with high visibility rubber strips. Stairs should be free of carpet.

Kitchens. One of the most important rooms in the home, the kitchen often requires the most extensive renovation to make it suitable for elderly occupants (see Figure B). One of the first changes should be lowering countertops from 36 to 32 inches. This is essential for those in wheelchairs. For the non-disabled, or for a house in which both disabled and nondisabled



Figure A. Unpadding, low-pile carpet, wide traffic areas, flush thresholds, and nonglare lighting (note the shades on chandelier) make the dining room easily negotiable for both ambulatory and wheelchair-bound elderly. The room is part of the "Hartford House," a traveling model home sponsored by the Hartford Insurance Group.

Figure B. This kitchen prototype is suitable for both disabled and nondisabled elderly. Generous floor space makes it wheelchair-compatible, while low cabinets and shallow counters keep long reaches at a minimum.



live, adjustable countertops allow comfort when both standing and sitting. Countertops should be no more than 25 inches deep.

To prevent scalding, mixers should be installed at faucets throughout the house. Single-lever controls are easier to use and adjust than are dual hot and cold knobs.

Several appliance manufacturers offer refrigerators, ovens, microwaves, and washers and dryers suitable for the elderly and disabled (see Figure C). Features include extra-large lettering and numbers on controls, easy cleaning, lowered units for wheelchair accessibility, and controls located at the front of the unit instead of the rear.

Cabinets and shelving should be low enough for easy access, but not so low that they require a lot of bending.

Figure C. This Whirlpool dishwasher is designed for ease of use with a removable, easy-to-reach silverware basket and roll-out racks. The area under the adjacent sink is open to allow wheelchair users to get close to counter and sink area.

Pantries make useful supplements to cabinet space. Drawers and cabinet doors should be easy to open and close. Oversized C-shaped handles will help.

Bathrooms. For many elderly persons—especially the disabled—small, crowded baths with slippery floors and walls can be not only inconvenient but life-threatening. Several modifications can make them easier and safer to use.

Nonslip rubber flooring is recommended for the bathroom and kitchen.

Lighting. An 85-year-old needs almost three times as much light as a 15-year-old. Techniques for improving visibility include pale wall coverings, matte finishes to reduce glare, night lighting between bedroom and bath areas, and extra lighting in hazard areas such as tubs and stairways. A nice extra touch is hallway lighting activated by sonic sensors.

To begin with, doors that swing out instead of in save space and make it easier for others to get inside in case of an emergency. In addition, the toilet, sink, and tub should be arranged to provide accessibility and adequate floor space. A squarish room is easiest to negotiate (Figure D). Toilets should be placed next to a wall so that grab bars can be easily installed. Soap dishes, cabinets, and other fixtures should be recessed into the walls if possible. Long, deep tubs are difficult to get into and out of. Grab bars or a pole installed



Figure E. This barrier-free roll-in shower with non-slip flooring and a low shower head and controls makes showering in a wheelchair much easier. Such a shower can often be fit in the space of a standard tub.

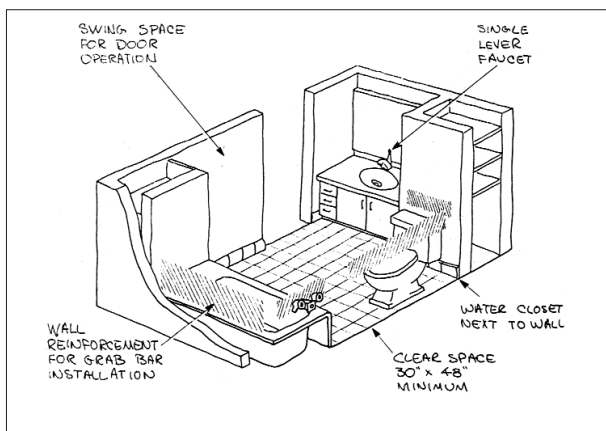


Figure D. The bathroom, like the kitchen, should have broad floor space. Walls beside tub, shower, and toilet should have reinforcements for attaching grab bars.

at one end of the tub can help. If possible, deep tubs should be replaced with shallow ones. A horizontal handrail should be installed about 24 inches from the floor of the tub and securely fastened to framing members or other solid support in the wall. (Depending on the size of the occupants, the grab bar may have to bear up to 300 pounds of weight.) The edge of the tub may be an ideal spot for a seat to use while bathing. Such a seat should be hinged to the wall so it can be folded down when needed. A handshower will make

bathing easier in all cases.

For showers, an especially useful design is one without a threshold; this allows easy wheelchair access (see Figure E). Here again a handshower is helpful.

Toilet seats should be approximately 15 inches above the floor. Disabled persons may opt for higher seats with handrails at either side for support. Alternatively, a handrail may be installed at an incline on an adjacent wall. Toilet paper dispensers should be easy to reach.

Other handrails and grab bars. All stairwells should have railings along both sides. Be sure they run the full length of the stairs and are securely fastened. Turning the ends of the rails into or toward the walls is a good way to prevent them from catching clothing articles, handbags, etc.

For more information:

The NAHB (15th & M Streets NW, Washington, DC 20005; 800/368-5242) is a good place to start if you are looking for general information. Other

sources include:

- The "Remodeling for Accessibility Sourcebook" is packed with good, usable information. It is available from the Housing Resource Center, 1820 W. 48th St., Cleveland, OH 44102. It costs \$35. A videotape is also available.
- "The Do-Able Renewable Home" is free from the American Association of Retired People (AARP). Write their Publications Department, 1909 K St., NW, Washington, DC 20049.
- The Whirlpool Corporation, which manufactures many appliances for the disabled, also offers their booklets "Designs" and "Tools for Independent Living." P.O. Box 5551, Kalamazoo, MI 49003.
- For information on the products and specifications used at Hartford House, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: Hartford House, Hartford Plaza, Hartford, CT 06115.
- The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) 1430 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, 212/354-3300, publishes standards for barrier-free housing (ANSI A117.1-1986); it costs \$9. The publication, which is suggested by HUD for compliance with the 1988 Fair Housing Amendments Act, is also available at local libraries.
- A free booklet on universal housing is available from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, Room 10140, Washington, DC 20410-0050.
- A different HUD office also offers Housing Special Populations—A Resource Guide, and Adaptable Housing, showing accessible floor plans based on the Fair Housing Act, both \$3. Write HUD, P.O. Box 6091, Rockville, MD 20850; 800/245-2691.
- The National Association for Senior Living Industries (NASLI) in an industry group providing information on senior markets, products, building guidelines, and other information on catering to this market. NASLI, 184 Duke of Gloucester St., Annapolis, MD 21401.
- The Community Association Institute has prepared news clippings, local contacts, and general background regarding the 1988 Fair Housing Act amendments. The package is free if you send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: CAI, 1432 Powhatan Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. Specify "Fair Housing Act."
- The American Society of Aging, 833 Market Street, Suite 512, San Francisco, CA 94103, 415/543-2617, is a general resource center for topics related to aging. They recently sponsored a conference on "Rethinking Senior Housing."

Wendy Talarico is a freelance writer in Fredericksburg, Va.