

Securing legally appropriate housing for persons with disabilities, particularly senior citizens, often proves to be challenging. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that the percentage of Americans aged 65+ will continue to increase through 2050. The Texas population of individuals aged 65 and over is expected to increase at an even greater rate during that time as evidenced in the following chart:

PROJECTED POPULATION BASED ON AGES (in thousands)			
United States	2015	2035	2050
Total	321,369	370,338	398,328
65+	47,830	79,233	87,996
%	15%	21%	22%
85+	6,304	11,909	18,972
%	2%	3%	5%
Texas			
Total	27,695	40,892	54,369
65+	3,226	6,737	9,443
%	12%	16%	17%
85+	352	818	1,591
%	1%	2%	3%
Bandera County			
Total	23	30	32
65+	6	12	11
%	26%	40%	34%
85+	0.4	1.3	2.2
%	2%	4%	7%
Bexar County			
Total	1,883	2,626	3,180
65+	213	410	523
%	11%	16%	16%
85+	25	48	83.6
%	1%	2%	3%

Comal County	2015	2035	2050
Total	128	226	306
65+	24	66	91
%	19%	29%	30%
85+	2.3	7.2	15.4
%	2%	3%	5%
Kendall County			
Total	39	66	89
65+	8	20	25
%	21%	30%	28%
85+	0.9	2.6	5.1
%	2%	4%	6%

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2014; Texas State Data Center, Office of the State Demographer, n.d.)

“Many adults wish to remain in their home as they grow older. Most existing homes, however, have structural barriers that can make it difficult for older adults and people with physical limitations to address their daily needs without assistance” (AARP Public Policy Institute, 2010). The need for housing and home modifications is especially apparent in Texas, Bexar County, and surrounding counties, where people with disabilities rank at or higher than the national average:

2010-2014 Population with Disabilities			
	Total Population	Disabilities	%
United States	309,082,258	37,874,571	12.3%
Texas	25,613,334	2,969,042	11.6%
Bandera County	20,459	3,732	18.2%
Bexar County	1,754,705	232,814	13.3%
Comal County	114,779	15,529	13.5%
Kendall County	35,583	4,570	12.8%

(U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.)

2010-2014 Population with Disabilities 65 years and older			
	Total Population	Disabilities	%
United States	41,871,333	15,180,137	36.3
Texas	2,765,462	1,103,018	39.9
Bandera County	4,474	1,886	42.7
Bexar County	187,692	80,104	42.9
Comal County	18,659	6,555	35.1
Kendall County	6,172	2,018	32.7
(U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.)			

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 assist people with disabilities in locating 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 for different types of homes such as universal design elements in all newly constructed multi-family housing of four or more units.
- **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 Gov. Code 2306.514** 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 Department of Public Works, 2014; Law Server, 2014; United Cerebral Palsy, 2015)

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” (U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], 2008, p6).

HOME MODIFICATION

Home modification improves disabled persons’ living space by adhering to the law, improving safety, and increasing 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, p34).

The law allows for a person with a disability to request a *reasonable modification* of an existing dwelling such as widening doorways, installing grab bars, or adding a ramp for wheelchair access, but it also “provides that while the housing provider must permit the modification, the tenant is responsible for paying the cost of the modification (DOJ, 2008, p3).

When attempting home modification, accessible housing and universal housing are two distinct design approaches typically implemented. Visitability is another approach that provides some basic accessibility features which a person with limitations can use in the short term and allows for easy adaptation for later, long-term use (Maisel, Smith, & Steinfeld, 2008).

Accessible Housing

Accessible homes are created when adaptive technology and design is applied to existing housing, which is usually necessary because a resident of the home requires the use of a wheelchair. 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. The Fair Housing Act created the following seven requirements to achieve accessibility:

- Accessible building entrance on an accessible route
- Accessible common and public use areas
- Usable doors (usable by a person in a wheelchair)
- Accessible route into and through the dwelling unit
- Light switches, electrical outlets, thermostats and other environmental controls in accessible locations
- Reinforced walls for grab bars
- Usable kitchens and bathrooms

(U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.)

Universal Housing

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. 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 for safety, aesthetic, efficiency, 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:

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
- (Nasar & Evans-Cowley, 2007)

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

- One zero-step entrance on an accessible path of travel to the building
- A minimum of 32-inch clearances in doorways and 36-inch clearances in hallways
- 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., 2016).

San Antonio Region

The City of San Antonio's Department of Planning & Community Development offers housing rehabilitation programs to assist low-to-moderate income homeowners with housing modifications. "Owner Occupied Rehabilitation and/or Reconstruction programs may be implemented by the City and/or sub-recipient partners. Emergency Repair programs may be operated by non-profit partners using CDBG [Community Development Block Grants] funds

(City of San Antonio REnewSA, 2016). In addition, several non-profit organizations offer housing and home modification services.

Merced Housing Texas offers a home modification program called Serve Our Seniors (SOS) Emergency Repair Program. This program aids low-income disabled persons and seniors aged 56 and older. Since 2002, approximately 520 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, 2015).

Rebuilding Together San Antonio is a network of volunteers that provide hope repair and modification services to elderly, low-income, and disabled homeowners. All repairs and renovations are done free of charge. Since 1994 Rebuilding Together San Antonio has rehabilitated over 475 homes and completed renovations worth over \$2.5 million (Rebuilding Together San Antonio, n.d.).

The *Texas Ramp Project* builds wheelchair ramps for disabled elderly who are too young or do not qualify for state or federal funding. The Texas Ramp Program is supported by volunteers and provides wheelchair ramps to individuals for no cost. Since incorporating in 2006, the Texas Ramp Project has built more than 7,258 safe, durable ramps across the state including 1,138 in the San Antonio area (The Texas Ramp Project, 2015).

REFERENCES

- Accessible Space, Inc. (2016). *Accessible housing*. Retrieved from <http://www.accessiblespace.org/texas-accessible-housing/>
- AARP Public Policy Institute. (2010). *Fact Sheet: Home modifications to promote independent living*. Retrieved from <http://www.aarp.org/home-garden/housing/info-03-2010/fs168.html>
- City of San Antonio RNewsA. (2016). *Owner occupied housing rehabilitation*. Retrieved from <http://www.renewsa.com/ProgramsServices/FindAllPrograms/TabId/1845/ArtMID/11523/ArticleID/1297/Owner-Occupied-Housing-Rehabilitation.aspx>
- City of San Antonio. (2016). *Universal housing design*. Retrieved from <http://www.sanantonio.gov/DAO/ADADesign/UniversalHousingDesign.aspx>
- Maisel, J., Smith, E., & Steinfeld, E. (2008). *Increasing home access: Designing for visitability*. Retrieved from http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/il/2008_14_access.pdf
- Merced Housing Texas. (2015). *What we do: Owner-occupied repair program: Serve our seniors*. Retrieved from <http://www.mercedhousingtexas.org/serveourseniors.html>
- Nasar, J., & Evans-Cowley, J. (2007). *Universal design and visitability: From accessibility to zoning*. Retrieved from <https://kb.osu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/1811/24833/UniversalDesign&Visitability2007.pdf;jsessionid=29C114A5C87D93785D2A075A0EB629F6?sequence=2>
- Rebuilding Together San Antonio. (n.d.). *About RTSA*. Retrieved February 12, 2016, from <http://www.rebuildingtogether-sa.org/#!about-rtsa/ci8a>
- The Texas Ramp Project. (2015). *Building freedom for the homebound*. Retrieved <http://www.texasramps.org/>
- Texas State Data Center, Office of the State Demographer. (n.d.). *2014 Texas population projections by migration scenario data tool*. Retrieved February 12, 2016, from <http://osd.texas.gov/Data/TPEPP/Projections/Tool?fid=170730D540FC45349B572AF649329369>
- United Cerebral Palsy. (2015). *Landmark legislation*. Retrieved from <http://ucp.org/what-we-do/public-policy/landmark-legislation/>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2014). *Projection of the population by sex and selected age groups for the United States: 2015 to 2016 (table 3)*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/population/projections/data/national/2014/summarytables.html>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Selected social characteristics in the United States: 2010-2014 American community survey 5-year estimates: table DP02*. Retrieved February 12, 2016, from http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_14_5YR_DP02&prodType=table
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (n.d.). *Questions and answers about the guidelines*. Retrieved February 12, 2016, from http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/disabilities/fhefhasp
- U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2008). *Joint Statement of the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Justice: Reasonable modifications under the Fair Housing Act*. Retrieved from http://www.hud.gov/offices/fheo/disabilities/reasonable_modifications_mar08.pdf