
NEWS ON TAP

The NEWS ON TAP Newsletter is part of OHCD's Housing and Disability Technical Assistance Program (TAP) concerning issues related to housing for persons with disabilities in the City of Philadelphia. August 2007

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A Step Towards Visitability in the Commonwealth

By Peggy Robertson

Visitability promotes a no-step entrance into a home, doorways with at least 32 inch clear space and a first floor powder room large enough to accommodate a person in a wheelchair. In October of 2006, Pennsylvania passed legislation that will provide incentive by way of tax credits to make the option available to local municipalities to make residential improvements for accessibility.

Senate Bill 1158, known as the Residential Visitability Tax Credit Act (the Act), was sponsored by Senator James Rhodes of Schuylkill County and Senator Jim Ferlo of Pittsburgh. The Act provides for a tax credit to encourage property owners to include Visitability design features in their properties. Visitability design features are defined in the Act which can be found at www.legis.state.pa.us.

Inside this edition...

Home Finder 3
Transitioning Into The Community 4

Paul O'Hanlon, Esq., Staff Attorney for the Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania, spoke at a Forum sponsored by the Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development in October 2006. He informed the audience that "the ordinance in Pittsburgh was modeled after the Atlanta Ordinance that was championed by Eleanor Smith, founder of Concrete Change." In Pittsburgh, there was a commitment to creating a public process to hear all points of view about Visitability. Several meetings were held to educate the public and dispel myths that were perpetuated as fact. Invitees to these meetings included developers, architects, contractors, realtors, government officials, community members and consumers. The workshops focused on designing the Pittsburgh of the future and addressed the challenges to making houses Visitable from the perspective of architects, developers and builders. In addition, Eleanor Smith was the guest speaker, making a special presentation on

(Continued on page 2)

(Visitability continued from page 1)

“Visitability: The Why and the How”.

After months of education and advocacy, the Pittsburgh City Council proposed that a Committee be formed to come up with a plan for action. Fifteen individuals representing disability agencies, developers, architects, government officials, and other groups met and came up with a compromise that was the basis for the Act.

The Act paves the way for local taxing authorities in Pennsylvania that levy a tax on a residential property to authorize tax credits if:

- The uniform design standards contained in the Act are provided within the eligible residential units.
- The tax credit authorized is limited to any new or renovated dwelling that contains Visitability design features that enhance the usability of the dwelling for persons with significant mobility impairment and which minimize the

cost of full accessibility modifications, if necessary, at a later time.

- The amount of the tax credit is determined by the governing body and does not exceed \$2,500, or the total amount of the increased amount of property taxes owed during the first five years from the time the tax credit is approved, whichever is less.
- The governing body determines the form in which any eligible property owner shall apply for the credit and may adopt rules and regulations for the approval and disapproval of applications.

Press release issued by Senator Jim Ferlo:

FERLO ANNOUNCES UNANIMOUS PASSAGE OF VISITABILITY BILL

Harrisburg, Oct. 18, 2006

State Senator Jim Ferlo (D-Pittsburgh) announced today that his legislation to encourage forward-thinking Visitability home improvements by way of a tax credit, had passed the Legislature unanimously.

“I would like to thank the

leadership in the Senate and House and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle for their unanimous support in moving the bill to the Governor’s desk,” Ferlo said. “This is an important piece of legislation that will serve the needs of those with mobility impairments, the future needs of the elderly, and all who hope to age in their own homes.”

Senator Ferlo sponsored Senate Bill 1158 with Senator James J. Rhoades (R-Schuylkill) as local enabling legislation. The intent of the bill is to make the option available to local municipalities that can determine whether or not to incentivize residential improvements for accessibility by granting a tax credit.

“A diverse coalition of groups advocating for this bill deserves praise for their yeoman effort,” Ferlo said. “The PA Builders Association, the Builders Association of Metropolitan Pittsburgh, the PA Association of Medical Suppliers, United Cerebral Palsy of Pittsburgh, and Three Rivers Center for

(Continued on page 3)

(Visitability continued from page 2)

Independent Living have done the heavy-lifting to get unanimous approval for this measure.”

As a City of Pittsburgh Councilman, Senator Ferlo led the citywide Visitability tax credit initiative. It passed City Council shortly after his move to the Senate, only to be held up due to the absence of local enabling legislation at the State level.

“For decades, we’ve built without giving full thought to our future needs or the mobility needs of our neighbors,” Senator Ferlo said. “We urge the Governor to

sign Senate Bill 1158, which encourages residential home construction and renovation that truly lays out a “Welcome” mat for all Pennsylvanians.”

Governor Rendell signed the bill on October 28th, 2006. He stated in his press release, “By signing this bill into law, local governments will be able to provide some tax relief to people who need to renovate their homes to make them more accessible – or build new homes with handicapped accessible features.

“This means seniors, people who are in wheelchairs and people who are not able to get around the way most people are used to getting around will be able to enjoy a better quality of life because obstacles in their own homes will be removed.”

Some of the features that help makes homes more accessible include wider entrances and doorways for wheelchairs, first-floor powder rooms with room to maneuver wheelchairs, lever handles on fixtures and doors, and reinforced walls for the installation of grab bars.

The Home Finder

The Home Finder is an interactive feature of www.phillyhomefinder.org that allows developers/managers of OHCD-funded housing to directly post the availability of accessible units. Individuals with disabilities, case workers, advocacy and service organizations can access the Home Finder to look for available accessible units.

The Home Finder can help with the following:

- **Are you looking for accessible housing?**
[View a list of vacant accessible housing units in Philadelphia](#)
- **Are you a property manager or developer?**
[Add new units, edit a current listing, or delete a listing.](#)
- **Need Help Using the Home Finder?**
[Learn all about the Home Finder and how it works.](#)

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Transitioning Into the Community

By Peggy Robertson

Many people take for granted their right to choose where they want to live. However, there are many people living in nursing facilities who don't have a choice. Many of these individuals would prefer living in an alternative community setting if they had the proper supports.

Nursing Home Transition (NHT) is a statewide program that was initiated in order to restore housing choice and options for people living in nursing homes. The project has been a collaborative effort across state and local systems, including the Long Term Living Council, the Governor's Office of Health Care Reform, the PA Department of Public Welfare (DPW) and Department of Aging (PDA) and provider agencies. Funding for the project is provided through PDA and DPW.

Jessica Mack, Program Manager of the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging Nursing Home Transition (NHT) program made a

presentation at the Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD) Forum in October 2006 about Philadelphia's role in moving people out of long term care facilities into community-based living.

NHT in Philadelphia is a collaboration between the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging (PCA) and Liberty Resources, Inc. PCA provides NHT services to individuals ages 60 and above, and Liberty Resources provides services to individuals under age 60. NHT provides support to eligible residents of Philadelphia long term care facilities who are interested in returning to the community.

The goal of the program is to first identify residents of long term care facilities who desire to live independently. Ms. Mack said, "An advantage of identifying people early on when they first get admitted to the nursing home is that they may have more

options to get back into the community at that time. We visit newly admitted nursing home residents and provide them Long Term Living Counseling, which provides them the information and education needed to make an informed choice for themselves."

The staff works closely with the resident and other community agencies to coordinate services to support the individual when he or she moves into the community. Individuals may be eligible for a variety of home and community-based services to help them live safely and comfortably in the community. Supports may include: assistance in finding and establishing housing; making current homes accessible through home modifications; connection to services, such as medical, adult day care or home health care; and training for independent living.

Ms. Mack, along with the

(Continued on page 5)

(Transitioning continued from page 4)

six fulltime program transition coordinators that she supervises, are responsible for helping people in nursing homes to make the transition into the community. Ms. Mack said, "The nursing facility resident works with a transition coordinator, chooses a transition team, and develops a transition plan. The program offers a number of services to make it possible for individuals to live a more independent life. Once we help them to find appropriate housing, we connect people with the support services they need. There is some funding available (up to \$4,000) for security deposits, to purchase furniture, household supplies and durable medical equipment that might include hospital beds or wheelchairs."

Since the program began, 235 people in nursing homes were identified to be moved out and to date 133 people have been transitioned into the community. More than one half of the identified individuals need accessible housing and unfortunately, the most

prevalent barrier to assisting people returning to the community is the lack of affordable, accessible housing.

Ms. Mack said, "Once a person is identified for transition, we find out where in the city they are interested in living and then we look at the stock of housing that is available in that area. If the housing is available, and if minimal or no modifications are needed, NHT can usually assist individuals to return home quickly. However, finding affordable housing is a serious challenge. Further, once housing is located, home modifications are frequently needed to make the house accessible. We have been working with the Philadelphia Housing Authority and we are also building relationships with private landlords, who in some cases have been helpful in finding units that are accessible or can easily be modified. Finding units that can be easily modified is important, since some people don't need completely

accessible units. Most often the people we move are not able to walk up steps or they need a roll in shower. One individual returned to his own home and only needed a first floor bathroom. We were able to fund this because the individual was eligible and the cost fell within the NHT limit of \$4,000 for home and community-based waiver services. On the other hand, if a person needs accessible housing and there is none available, their main option is to be placed on waiting lists for various apartments throughout the city."

One woman who moved from a nursing home as part of the NHT program shared her experience. Mary S. had an accident and broke both her ankle and knee. She couldn't walk and was admitted to a nursing home in Philadelphia where she could receive therapy. Mary is also legally blind. While she was in the nursing home, she fell and broke her hip. Although she could not walk, she let it be known that she did not want to stay in the nursing home and requested someone to help her find housing.

(Continued on page 6)

(Transitioning continued from page 5)

Amelia, a Nursing Home Transition Coordinator with PCA, came out and met with Mary.

Mary explained that because her credit rating was “in the basement”, her applications for Section 8 housing kept getting sent back to her. Finally, with Amelia’s help, an opening came through and she received conventional housing in a Philadelphia Housing Authority building. Mary moved into an efficiency garden apartment on Dickinson Street on May 3rd, 2006. The apartment is on the first floor but had a step up to the entrance. Because Mary is in a wheelchair most of the time, a ramp was installed as part of the NHT program a month and a half after she moved in.

Amelia got furniture and a refrigerator for the apartment and arranged for an aide to help Mary four times a week. She also helped set Mary up with CCT Connect, SEPTA’s Customized Community Transportation, which provides free paratransit to individuals with disabilities and senior citizens for medical appointments. Mary noted, “Amelia has been real helpful, she’s a real sweetheart.”

Mary has been satisfied with the NHT program. She explained, “Living in my apartment is one million percent better than living in the nursing home. You aren’t always free to do what you want in a nursing home. I live very independently. I take the CCT for free to go to medical appointments and have to pay a fee to use it for shopping. If I have someone to go with me – my aide – then I can use

regular transportation. I would like to apply for a one bedroom apartment and if something opens up I will be able to do this because the Section 8 Voucher is attached to me and not the apartment.”

Mary said that she stays in regular contact with Amelia and thinks that the NHT program is extremely important. “I think that there are an awful lot of people who want to get out of the nursing homes. And those that are able to need as much help as they can get to find housing in order to live as independently as possible.”

For more information or to make an application to the Nursing Home Transition program, please call PCA’s Helpline at 215-765-9040 or Liberty Resources at 215-643-2000.

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