

Home Accessibility Remodeling Series

Chapter 1: Design and Contractor Guidelines

The Minnesota Housing Finance Agency developed this information series to show how single-family homes can be modified for persons with a disability. Other chapters in this series address the following topics:

Chapter 2:	Movement
Chapter 3:	Ramps
Chapter 4:	Stairs
Chapter 5:	Lifting Equipment
Chapter 6:	Bathrooms
Chapter 7:	Kitchens
Chapter 8:	Grab Bars and Handrails
Chapter 9:	Controls
Chapter 10:	Reading

As you think about how a home could be improved for accessibility, remember that a “handicap” occurs when a task can't be performed because the environment presents barriers a person's physical ability can't overcome. Handicapping situations can be reduced or eliminated by modifying the task, the individual's capabilities (with personal assistance/mechanical aids) or the environment.

This series focuses on the most permanent and usually most expensive option -- structural changes. The topics in this series highlight why, when and how to install accessibility improvements to increase a disabled person's safety and independence.

The following issues are important ones anyone considering a home accessibility project should ad-

dress. Included are an introduction to home remodeling activities in general and a perspective on the planning process.

Design Codes

Making a home more accessible requires modifications that fit both the unique needs of a disabled person, and the unique design, layout, hardware and fixtures found in a particular home. Because the mix of these factors is never the same, no single set design standards can be developed to fit all situations.

The existing federal and state accessibility codes are intended for application in public/commercial settings, and their design standards combine the needs of many disabling conditions. As a result, they frequently aren't flexible or responsive enough to meet the needs of a particular person in his/her home. This is a key reason why single-family homes are exempt from a building code's provisions for accessibility, as is the case with the Minnesota State Building Code's Chapter 1341, which defines public/commercial accessibility standards.

Although single-family homes don't have to comply with Chapter 1341 or similar codes, the design criteria and dimensions they contain may serve as a starting point in your considerations. The chapters in this information series will identify key code standards, indicate their importance and explain how they may require tailoring for particular situations.

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Personal/Household Factors

The starting point in planning for any home access modifications should be a review of the important tasks the disabled individual needs to perform. Break these activities down into stages and think about how disability impairs independence at each stage:

- How high and low can the person reach to the front and side? What is a comfortable work height? What is the person's ability to reach over/around obstructions (like counters)?
- How much upper body strength and mobility is there for holding/carrying objects, strength for push/pull/lateral movements, finger/hand control?
- How much lower body mobility is there for bending, walking/climbing, weight support for transfers?
- What are the dimensions and profile of aids (e.g., wheelchair, walker, crutches, etc.) the person relies on, and the space required when in use?
- Will the person's situation change over time (e.g., growth of a child, an improving/worsening condition)? When change can be predicted, modifications should be designed to fit or adjust to current and future needs.

If cost is an important factor, arrange activities in priority order so modifications can be evaluated in both cost and benefit terms. Also check if any portable equipment may adequately and safely respond to needs so permanent modifications aren't required.

Evaluate if personal assistance could take the place of modifications, too. Major changes may not be required if family members, friends, neighbors or in-home services can provide help long term. Weigh the dollar value on volunteers' time/capabilities or service fees against modification costs.

If you've determined that home access modifications are appropriate, you'll need to think about the following:

- Consider how modifications may affect other household members - plans may require adjusting to balance among competing needs.
- When making decisions about type/quality of materials and sturdiness of construction, factor in how intensely a modification may be used, frequency of use over time and effort needed for general maintenance and cleaning.
- Check on whether part or all of the work's cost may be eligible for the federal personal income tax deduction available for medically related capital expenses. For more information, contact the U.S. Internal Revenue Service and request Publication 507, "Medical and Dental Expenses."

Working with a Contractor

Some accessibility modifications can be successfully completed by a good do-it-yourselfer, but many others require a contractor skilled in home improvements and remodeling. If you decide to hire a contractor, keep in mind the following points:

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Working with a Contractor continued

- Look for experienced, reputable firms and individuals. Ask relatives, friends and neighbors for referrals from successful projects. Local lenders and building and trade councils may be another good source. Agencies like housing and redevelopment authorities and community action programs can sometimes identify firms that have done acceptable work for them.
- Explain clearly what your needs are or provide a written work description to several contractors and ask them to submit a proposal and bid for the job. Look for persons or firms willing to take time to acquaint themselves with your home, your disabled family member's and the household's needs.
- Don't expect a contractor to know any more about accessibility than you do – familiarity with improvement and remodeling doesn't guarantee an understanding of home accessibility remodeling. Even if the person or firm has done some projects, what "worked" on the last job likely won't be exactly right for your home and disabled household member. Avoid a contractor who wants to "go by the book" and use federal or state accessibility standards exactly as they are published.
- When you do select an individual/firm, make sure a written contract is prepared. It should clearly outline issues including:
 - The work to be performed
 - Quality, quantity, styles and types of materials to be used
 - Project time period
 - Itemized costs
 - How cleanup will be handled

- Payment terms

If fairly extensive construction or remodeling is involved, make sure to obtain "working drawings" showing how finished improvements will appear. Any drawings should become part of the written contract, and if there are differences between the two, both parties must agree beforehand which document has the final authority.

The Minnesota Dept. of Labor and Industry distributes a useful publication that anyone planning to build or modify a home should review. It's called "Hiring a Residential Building Contractor," and it covers choosing a contractor, writing a home improvement contract and understanding what mechanics' liens are and how they can affect a property. Copies of the brochure are available at: http://www.dli.mn.gov/CCLD/PDF/rbc_consumer_contractor.pdf or by calling the Dept. at 651.284.5000 or the TTY at 651.297.4198.

The Minnesota Attorney General's Office also provides publications on the contracting process. You can check for them at: www.ag.state.mn.us or by calling 1.800.657.3787 or the TTY at 1.800.366.4812.