

Housing for the Disabled

BY CATHY McPHERSON



Many people with disabilities are familiar with the person in planning or policy who asks plaintively, after a rigorous meeting with disabled consumers on housing and accommodation issues, “But what is the solution?”

The answer is not one *solution*, but a range of alternatives. In short, when we look at housing for people with disabilities, and factor in the special needs of women with disabilities, the operational word is “choices.”

Women with disabilities are not a uniform group. All people with disabilities come from a variety of backgrounds and have a variety of needs depending on the nature of their disability. They may be born with a disability, or acquire it through age. They may be physically disabled, labelled “mentally handicapped” or have an “invisible disability” such as epilepsy, a learning disability or diabetes. They may be deaf or hard of hearing; be blind or have low vision.

Each situation requires a different type of accommodation to allow the individual to live in the community. Some people may require more support than others. Some with changing conditions such as multiple sclerosis (MS), sometimes walk and other times use a wheelchair. Yet now that even respirator-dependent people are moving out of institutions, it is becoming clear that with the right type of accommodation, almost anyone with a disability can potentially live in the community.

Times have changed since the early days of de-institutionalization. Some of those disabled folks who moved out at the beginning are falling in love and starting families! Although common sense tells us that having children is a natural course of events for most members of our communities, many planners have been taken aback by this unforeseen turn of events. They had been labouring under the illusion that women with disabilities would be so grateful for the opportunity to live outside of an

institution that they would continue to live the nun-like lifestyle they assumed every disabled woman experienced living inside an institution. (Wrong!)

The one-bedroom wheelchair accessible apartments that were thought to be adequate for a physically disabled women have become woefully inadequate for those who now have a partner and kids (which they aren’t willing to give up without a fight).

Attendant care programs that focus on assisting one individual with dressing, eating and toiletry are now facing tough questions when a baby comes into the picture. Should attendants help the disabled mother with the baby or should they draw the line at assisting the woman with the disability? How much can and should be demanded of the partner of a woman with a disability?

Women with other disabilities who are forced to have a roommate to qualify to live in apartments provided with attendant care are demanding privacy, and the right to pick the person they share their space with — if they share at all.

Where people with disabilities in the past would be grateful for the smallest favour, women with disabilities today are saying, “Is that all there is? Why can’t I have what non-disabled women have? Why can’t I have access to good day care? I have the right to equal treatment.”

In response to these changing attitudes some exciting new concepts are being developed that recognize the real needs of community living and the normalization of disabled people’s lives. In the past, community services such as attendant care was often attached to special housing projects. Women needing assistance would have to stay in their housing to get it. Today, there is a move away from segregated units with services attached to the housing for people with disabilities.

Instead, services are being attached to the people, allowing them to access a wider range of housing situations. Some innovative programs allow people with disabilities to receive

money directly to hire their own attendants, while others offer a roving team of homecare workers to serve several disabled people in a small geographical area, including the workplace setting.

The concept of universal access is getting growing, albeit slow, acceptance in the architectural community. Why make one apartment or housing unit accessible when you can make all of the basic functional dimensions accessible to all people with disabilities? Some examples are wide doorframes and reinforced bathroom walls that can hold grab bars where necessary, braille and large print buttons on the elevators, and flashing alarms. Once these are in place then it is possible to make adaptations to suit individual needs.

But the situation is not all rosy. Some serious barriers still remain, preventing all people with disabilities from getting access to affordable, accessible housing. Chief among these is the failure of major decision-makers to recognize the low incomes of most people with disabilities. Women with disabilities are the lowest income earners in Canada.

Programs and policies that put the

majority of their funding into private housing are doomed to failure, because most people with disabilities do not have the income to compete in the private housing market. The development of new low-income housing stock is an essential part of any housing strategy that must provide for the poorer members of our communities, including the disabled.

Not only do people with disabilities have difficulty getting the money together to afford housing, but many of them have the additional barrier of discrimination to deal with when they look for shelter. This may mean having the door slammed in their face by a potential landlord because they have psychiatric problems or are blind, for example. Or it may be the more insidious discrimination by municipalities that forbid group homes and supportive housing in their areas. But it all amounts to the same thing.

City building requirements could be streamlined to allow renovations to be made expeditiously to housing when a family member becomes disabled. It is scandalous in this day and age for people to have to crawl or be carried up and down

stairs in family homes while city planners wrangle over building permits for ramps or impose high fees preventing people from making urgent renovations.

As one of the most highly institutionalized countries in the industrial world, it is essential that more emphasis be put on developing appropriate housing for people with disabilities. By embracing new concepts that recognize people with disabilities as equal participants in our communities with special needs, we reinforce our own needs.

Accessible design concepts benefit even the non-disabled — witness the use of ramps by women with children in strollers. But most importantly, good design in housing is sensible planning for the future. After all, we are only an accident or illness away from disability. And a great many of us may find ourselves disabled as we all grow older.

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