

HAWAII NEWS

State bills aim to make homes for disabled user-friendly

By [Andrew Gomes](#)

Posted March 05, 2018

Updated March 5, 2018 6:11pm



CRAIG T. KOJIMA / CKOJIMA@STARADVERTISER.COM

While Roger Vesuelo's Waikale town home has some disabled-friendly features, his kitchen does not. He plans to remodel it by lowering shelving and countertops.

State researchers addressing issues faced by people with disabilities want every new home in Hawaii built with six basic features they say will benefit a disadvantaged group that includes an approaching "silver tsunami" of seniors.

Yet one recent effort seen as a major start toward the goal isn't going well at the state Legislature.

The University of Hawaii Center on Disability Studies crafted bills that would require several of the six standards — including doorways wide enough for wheelchairs, light switches within

comfortable reach and no steps for at least one entryway — for new or renovated homes developed through two state agencies that help produce affordable housing.

6 BASIC FEATURES TO MAKE HOMES USABLE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES:

(Homes with these features are often termed “visitable” because they allow the disabled to visit someone else’s home.)

1. One no-step entrance
 2. Interior doorways at least 32 inches wide
 3. Half bath or preferably full bath on main floor
 4. Bathroom walls that can support grab bars
 5. Adequate space to use a wheelchair in food preparation areas
 6. Light switches and electrical outlets within comfortable reach
-

The bills aim to increase the supply of usable homes for people who have disabilities and low incomes, which the center identified in a 2016 report as a severe need that plays into Hawaii’s homeless problem.

House Bill 1919, along with companion Senate Bill 2594, would mandate basic accessibility features for new or renovated homes produced through the Hawaii Public Housing Authority and the Hawaii Housing Finance and Development Corp., agencies with several thousand new homes planned.

“These are very modest things,” said Patricia Morrissey, director of the UH center. “They’re not overwhelming.”

However, HB 1919 has already been eviscerated by the House Consumer Protection Committee, which on Feb. 13 amended the bill so that instead of requiring the features, it merely allows them as options in the state building code for new homes built through the two agencies.

The Senate version of the bill passed two committees without a similar amendment but will face consideration in the House if it advances far enough.

Both bills are viewed as a big early step to implement recommendations in the 2016 Center on Disability Studies report, which eight Hawaii housing agencies (state and county) sought to satisfy a federal Department of Housing and Urban Development requirement to report impediments to fair-housing choices.

The 133-page analysis said the primary impediment is a lack of housing for rent or purchase that is both affordable and accessible to the disabled. The report also noted that most complaints alleging housing discrimination are based on a person’s disability as opposed to race, sex or other factors under federal fair-housing law.

Much of this problem exists because most affordable homes in Hawaii are old, such as low-rise apartment buildings that lack elevators in urban Honolulu and single-family homes raised off the ground in rural areas. But new homes generally aren’t being built with minimum accessibility features, either.

The UH report notes that prime opportunities to correct the problem are approaching, including housing development near city rail stations, amid the condo tower building boom in Kakaako and at two master-planned communities slated for 17,000 homes in Leeward and Central Oahu, Ho'opili and Koa Ridge, in early stages of construction.

Morrissey said the UH center would like to have counties adopt requirements for all new home construction to feature basic accessibility features.

"I think it needs to be done now, not two or three years from now," she said. "It doesn't impinge in any negative way on anyone else."

The center's report said incorporating the six basic features into new homes adds no cost.

Besides doorway width, a no-step entryway and convenient light switch and electrical outlet positioning, the other features are space to maneuver a wheelchair in the kitchen, at least a half bath on the main floor and bathroom walls that can support grab bars. (The two bills feature a different list that excludes the kitchen space and grab bar support requirements but includes a full bath and bedroom on the main floor as well as smoke detectors that can be seen and heard.)

Morrissey said benefits for such features go beyond making a home livable for the disabled and include allowing able-bodied owners or renters to age in place longer alone or in multigenerational households, eliminating a need for expensive renovations when occupants lose mobility, and allowing the disabled to visit homes of friends and family. The features also make it easier to move furniture and use baby strollers, she added.

The UH report cites Vermont as one state that requires the six features for all new single-family homes except for homes built by an owner or for an owner, while Minnesota only requires accessibility in new housing financed by its housing finance agency. In Pima County, Ariz., a requirement passed in 2002 led to more than 21,000 accessible new homes in eight years, the report said.

Otherwise, housing accessibility mandates are rare and usually less stringent, the report added.

Some other states or counties have adopted voluntary programs that include incentives such as tax breaks or fee waivers, but the report said voluntary programs rarely result in significantly more accessible housing.

The Center on Disability Studies authored two bills to provide tax credits, House Bill 1920 and Senate Bill 2595, and those are pending. The bills targeting affordable housing are a bigger objective for the center, which said making existing homes accessible is often too expensive for people with low and moderate incomes given that it can cost \$8,000 to \$20,000 to convert a bathroom and \$3,000 to \$10,000 to add a wheelchair ramp.

The affordable-housing accessibility bills drew support from the Hawaii Housing Finance and Development Corp. The Hawaii Public Housing Authority expressed support and concern. The concern was that even minor renovations could trigger a requirement to make dramatic changes to homes at an overwhelming cost and displacement of tenants.

Morrissey said she understands this concern and is fine with the bills applying only to new construction. However, she said the bills need to require the accessible features — not make them discretionary — to be effective.

"Providing living space for people with disabilities is a big deal," she said. "There's just not enough of it."

THE GRAPHIC BELOW WAS ON THE FRONT PAGE OF THE PRINT EDITION
TO ILLUSTRATE THE SIX FEATURES OF VISITABLE HOUSING:

Star Ad

Bills aim to make for disabled user

1 Interior doorways at least 32 inches wide

2 Light switches and electrical outlets within comfortable reach

3 One no-step entrance

4 Space to use a wheelchair in food preparation areas

5 Half bath or preferably full bath on main floor

6 Bathroom walls that can support grab bars

SIX BASIC FEATURES TO MAKE HOMES USABLE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

While Rog Vesuelo's Waikale town home has some disabled friendly features, kitchen not. He plans to remodel by lowering shelving and countertop

Homes with these features are often called "visitable" because they allow the disabled to visit someone else's home.