

Committee Secretary - Dr Margot Kerley  
Standing Committee on Ageing  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA

8 August 2002

Dear Dr Kerley,

On behalf of the SA Coalition for Adaptable Housing I am pleased to submit the attached documents to your inquiry into ageing of the Australian population. These documents are:

- Attachment 1 - *Position Paper on Access to Public and Private Housing* (2 pg)
- Attachment 2 - *A home does not need to be a horror chamber* (1 page)
- Attachment 3 - *Adaptable Housing – Proposed Policy Initiatives* (1 page)

The thrust of these documents is that allowing the construction of poorly designed homes is bad public policy. The cost of retrofitting these homes to accommodate people who are frail aged or who have disability is unnecessarily expensive.

A colleague in the SA Housing Trust costed a project in 2001. He found that for a new \$85-90,000 home, the costs of providing moderate levels of access, and features that were easy to adapt, if and when, needed was in the vicinity of \$3,000. He believes the costs are dropping because the features are not having a great deal of influence on tender price. The modifications included in the project conformed to Level C of the Code:

- stepless entry to front and rear doors
- 920mm clear doorways
- stepless shower alcove
- trims for grabrails
- flexible pipework to allow for adjustable height for sinks & tapware
- non-slip tiles in wet areas.
- allowing circulation space in the bathroom
- power points at mid-height
- in 2-bedroom units, 1 bedroom (only) permits wheelchair access to both sides of the bed

If these features were standard in all new homes it would enable many more people to “age in place”. The benefits are listed on attachment three.

The Department of Veteran’s Affairs recognises this as such an important issue that they recently sponsored the development of a web page ([www.adaptablehousing.com.au](http://www.adaptablehousing.com.au)) which it expected to be launch in September 2002.

We would be delighted to address your committee on this issue.

Yours Sincerely,

Jeff Heath  
Director

## Background

Hundreds of thousands of people with long term disability, people who are frail elderly, and tens of thousands of people who become severely or profoundly disabled each year are forced to live in family homes that are totally inadequate for their needs. Housing design faults impact heavily and result in

- ◆ **increased social isolation** – children with a disability are unable to visit, let alone stay over night in the inaccessible homes of their school friends; grandparents are unable to baby sit in the homes of their grandchildren; adults with a disability and the frail elderly are house bound, or so tired from coping with life in an inaccessible house that they have little energy to venture far from home.
- ◆ **increased dependence on disability or HACC services** – poorly designed homes prevent people from independently using toilets, bathrooms and kitchens. As a result, they need to be provided with expensive taxpayer funded services.
- ◆ **greater dependence on family and friends** – even with funded services, people have greater reliance on family, friends and neighbours. This creates strain and unacceptable situations – young children are robbed of their childhood as they have to assist parents with toileting and bathing as funds are not available to modify inaccessible facilities.
- ◆ **increased risk of self-injury, or injury to a carer** – poor access to homes is a major factor in the high level of injuries caused by falls. This is not only inconvenient for those involved, but an additional cost to the community.
- ◆ **higher than necessary costs of modification** – because the builders of 99% of homes give no thought to future users, the majority of barriers are nothing more than poor design – fixtures or features that could be eliminated at the time of construction without any noticeable impact on other users. The cost of modifications are often an unbudgeted expense for families or a high cost to the community (the Department of Veteran Affairs is just one of many government agencies that spends millions of dollars a year retrofitting poorly designed homes).
- ◆ **A growing problem** – every ten minutes another Australian becomes severely or profoundly disabled. By the year 2050 (when most of the homes built today are still in use) 26 percent of the population will be over the age of 65 years. We can't not build enough nursing homes, hostels and retirement villages for a quarter of the population – they will need to live in the community.

## Policy Initiatives

1. **Public Housing** – all public housing and all retirement villages built to Adaptable Housing principles
2. **Star Rating** – Development of a “star” rating system for adaptable housing
3. **First Home Buyer Grants** – Restricting grants to first home buyers to those people who purchase, or build homes to an agreed minimum star level of adaptability
4. **Rent Subsidy** – Providing higher levels of “rent subsidy” to people who rent homes that are designed to an agreed minimum star level of adaptability
5. **Commercial Developments** – Only provide tax funded infrastructure, financial or other support to commercial developments where all homes within the development are built to a minimum star level of adaptability (individual home owners who wish to build outside the star rating are to pay an “access levy” that is used to modify homes built before a given date)
6. **Home Modification Subsidy** – Provide a home modification subsidy to people with particularly severe or profound disabilities. In part, the modifications are to be funded by an “access levy”. No home built after a given date to be eligible for home modification subsidy.

**It seems that every time people move furniture into a new home you can hear concerned warnings to “watch the step” mixed with muttering, cursing, and grumbling about narrow doors.**

I’m told that the average Australian moves house about once every five years, while uni students, especially if they are your kids, seem to move about every second month.

You would think that with all this experience, we would learn. Why not build new homes without steps and with wider doors? It can’t be hard. After all, when was the last time you saw a step between the driveway and garage?

Sadly, more and more Australians are realising that their home can be more like a horror chamber than a castle.

People who were once independent are finding that as they age, it is harder and harder to use power points located close to the floor, to reach the back of kitchen cupboards, and to use taps with round handles. My father found that once he needed a walking frame, the 4cm ledge outside the sliding door was a major obstacle.

Well-designed housing is an issue that not only affects older Australians.

Every 10 minutes another Australian becomes severely or profoundly disabled, and most are aged 45-64 years. These people are not ready for a nursing home. They want to stay with their families. Yet for many, this is very costly. Australian homes are so badly designed that widening doors, modifying bathrooms and putting in ramps costs on average \$20,000.

Some new paraplegics stay in hospital longer than needed just because families can’t find a house that

has even basic wheelchair access. If beds are short, some patients are discharged to live in hotels until they can find a house.

The frustration is that nearly all new homes could be built with many less barriers, at virtually no

extra cost. It costs no more to install wider doors, have paths ramped to provide flat access to doorways, and to have light switches and power points at easy to reach heights.

There is no extra cost in having a full-length window so that nursing mothers and older people can sit in a comfy chair to watch the world go by. There is only a marginal cost of installing easy to use taps and door handles and to designing toilets and bathrooms so that they could be later modified.

Well designed homes are not only easier for small children and families, but provide more dignified and safer living for the older persons and those with disabilities as well as maximising their independence.

All of this can decrease the demand for government services and reduce the pressure of caring on families.

So next time you help someone move, give a thought to how much easier your life could be, over your

lifetime, if only the house was designed to be adaptable as your needs change.

## Designing adaptability & flexibility

### **Bathroom & Toilet**

Install an easily removable **stud wall** between the bathroom and toilet

Locate **wall studs** so if they are ever needed, handrails can be added

Build a bathroom and toilet on the **ground level** of all homes

### **Doors**

**Toilet doors** that swing out (you may need access if a “party animal” drinks too much, or an elderly visitor has a fall)

**All internal doors** – min 850 clearance

**Hallways** – min 1200mm wide

Use **lever door handles**

### **Easy Grip / Easy Use**

Taps - Use **lever**, or **x-shaped**

Cupboards & drawers – use **“D”** shaped

**Large** light and power switches.

**Night light** in key areas.

**Power points** at a suitable height

### **Pathways**

**Smooth paths** from the street to the front door (and the laundry to the clothes line)

**POSITION PAPER ON ACCESS TO PUBLIC & PRIVATE HOUSING**  
**July 2001**  
**By the Coalition for Adaptable Housing**

**Principle Statement**

People with disabilities have a fundamental Right to access the same range of housing choices as other members of the community. The South Australian Government must ensure this is achieved by adopting housing policy that ensures a sufficient stock of adaptable housing to match present and future needs.

**Legislative Framework**

It is not surprising that some areas of our world are becoming accessible more quickly than others. What is surprising is how far private housing is lagging behind the access we now expect in public buildings. People who use wheelchairs, walkers and other mobility aids are blocked by steps at every entrance of a home. They are stopped by centimetres from fitting through the bathroom door in a friend or relative's home. Constructing homes without these barriers is inexpensive, easy and has wide ranging benefits to those with temporary disabilities, parents with infants in strollers and frail older people. So why is it still happening?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975) both specify the Rights of people with disabilities to equal treatment in relation to housing. Specifically, the latter states that "*No disabled person shall be subjected, as far as his or her residence is concerned, to differential treatment other than that required by his or her condition*" (section 9).

Under the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992), people with disabilities have a Right to access as equitable a range of housing choices as other members of the community. Both the Commonwealth (1986) and South Australian (1993) Disability Services Acts are based on 'Integration and Normalisation' principles with specific mention of accommodation/housing. The State Government has responsibility for accommodation and support services under the 'Commonwealth/State Disability Services Agreement'.

There is a clear expectation and Right that people with a disability should have access to public and private independent living housing options that enable them equivalent choices to that of the general community. However, there is ample evidence that South Australia has failed to meet these commitments and that there is simply inadequate adaptable housing stock in South Australia to accommodate an increasing proportion of the population who need such housing, especially as this state has the highest proportion of ageing citizens in the country. We believe that the failure to address such a need through sensible and practical policies results in unnecessary cost to taxpayers conservatively estimated at \$11 million per year but equally as important, substantial emotional strains to individuals and families as well as putting pressure on a range of Human Services.

**Extent of the Problem**

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) have found that the number of people with severe and profound disability (in Australia) more than doubled between 1981 and 1998, increasing from 452,900 to 954,900. By 2006 the number is expected to be over 1.3 million and is reflective of an ageing population that governments must prepare for. The AIHW forecast that the greatest increase will be among the 45-64 years and older.

In 1998, there were 2.3 million people in Australia aged 65 and over including 976,000 who were aged 75 and over. The vast majority, 91%, lived in private dwellings (public or private housing) with only 9% living in aged care facilities and/or boarding houses<sup>1</sup>.

As the population ages, the rate of disability including those in the severe and profound classifications also increases<sup>2</sup>. The AIHW predict that in 6 years (2001-2006) some 350,000 people will become severely or profoundly disabled. This equates to 58,000 per year nationally and approximately 5,800 people per year in South Australia.

## **Home Modifications**

The ABS research has identified that of all those who report having a disability and who reside in private dwellings in Australia (3,364,500), approximately 10% or 332,100 have had to make home modifications for access reasons<sup>3</sup>. In research into the cost of home modifications for access across Australia, Dr Jack Frisch found that the average cost to modify each home was \$19,434 with the average amount of financial assistance being \$6,604 to individuals from a range of sources.<sup>4</sup>

“In contrast, if houses are designed sensibly during a new construction, the total added cost has been estimated at less than \$200 if a ramp is needed. Wider doors cost nothing extra. Only one entrance needs to be without a step and that can be accomplished at little or no cost on the great majority of building sites. Bathroom wall reinforcement requires a small amount of extra timber, while accessible placement of power outlets and switches costs nothing”<sup>5</sup>.

## **Future Projections in South Australia**

If we conservatively estimate that only 10% of the 5,800 people per year projected to become severely or profoundly disabled will require home modifications<sup>6</sup>, it still equates to a figure of over \$11 million per annum (580 X 19,000 = 11,020,000). The figure of \$11 million per year includes both private and public monies to be spent on home modifications or \$66 million over the next 6 years and that is with the most conservative economic modelling.

This figure does not even take into consideration:

- The cost of removal where individuals quite often have to move to another home and then do modifications and re-establish themselves;
- The cost to the community of premature entry into aged care and nursing homes because of an access requirement that can not be accommodated at home;
- The cost where individuals stay for longer than required in rehabilitation centres, hospitals etc because there is no accessible housing available; (There are numerous instances where these stays have been for several weeks and sometimes months costing \$000's per week and prevents other use of the bed)

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<sup>1</sup> ABS Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of findings. 4430.0. 1998

<sup>2</sup> The rate of severe and profound disability for 5-14 year olds is 4.4% whereas the rate for 75-79 year olds is 22.4% (ABS Disability Ageing and Carers: Summary of findings P 14)

<sup>3</sup> ABS Disability Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings Pp 29.

<sup>4</sup> An analysis of the Additional Cost attributable to Physical Disability. Dr Jack Frisch - Physical Disability Council of Australia. 2001

<sup>5</sup> Universal Design of Future Communities. Seeger BR., Garrett RE. 2001

<sup>6</sup> Remembering that the 10% figure from ABS was on all people with a disability not just those with a severe or profound disability which is probably in the range of 50 – 70% needing home modifications in which case it would amount to \$55,100,000 - \$77,140,000.

- The extra cost due to greater dependence on home-help services because appropriate home modifications have not taken place; and
- The costs associated with other family members such as parents, sons and daughters, friends who also modify their home so that the individual can visit and/or stay for respite.

**Resolution of this issue Requires:**

The South Australian Government, as a demonstration of their commitment to a ‘Whole of Government’ approach to disability, should legislate that:

1. All detached and ground floor public housing be built to Adaptable Housing Standard AS 4299 or better. (Queensland has already adopted this policy); and
2. All private detached and ground floor housing be required to comply with, Adaptable Housing Standard AS 4299 or better, and require an accessible approach to new private dwellings. The Coalition for Adaptable Housing calls for regulations which would include a zero step entrance, bathroom/toilet access<sup>7</sup>, wide halls<sup>8</sup> and doorways<sup>9</sup>, lever and ‘D’ shape handles and accessible heights to all controls, switches and electrical outlets<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Bathroom walls to be constructed strong enough to enable the fitting of grab rails at a later date as outlined in Adaptable Housing Standard, with a similar layout to Fig.4.2.

<sup>8</sup> (minimum of 1200 mm AS1428.2)

<sup>9</sup> (minimum of 850 mm in clear width AS1428.2)

<sup>10</sup> (located between 900 mm and 1100 mm from the finished floor)