

The Accessible Housing Network (AHN) represents more than 85 non-profit organizations across Canada advocating for mandatory accessibility—through Universal Design—in all new housing.

AHN speaks for seniors and people of all ages with disabilities. The lack of accessible housing affects everyone: if we do not yet have a disability, many of us will in time.

The cancellation of federal and provincial co-op and non-profit housing programs roughly 35 years ago contributed to rising homelessness and the financialization of housing. These trends have disproportionately harmed seniors and people with disabilities.

1. Vision for Accessible Housing in Canada

All new housing—of any type—must be built using Universal Design so it is accessible or adaptable for people of all ages and abilities. This must be mandated through the National and provincial building codes.

Key elements of this vision:

- Universal Design as a legal requirement
- Access to support services at home at no or affordable cost
- The ability to age in place
- Prevention of institutionalization and homelessness
- No additional cost when accessibility is included at the design stage
- Mandatory accessibility improvements in renovations

Despite 27% of Canadians (ages 15–65) having disabilities—excluding children and seniors—there is no law requiring accessible housing.

Current standards are inadequate. For example, Ontario requires only 15% of units to be “visitable,” which is insufficient for daily living.

This vision also includes:

- Large-scale development of non-profit and co-op housing
- Expansion of community land trusts
- Ending the financialization of housing, including preferential tax treatment for REITs
- Restoring robust non-profit housing programs

There is also an urgent need for safe, fully accessible housing—with clean water, sanitation, and fire safety—in Indigenous communities.

Accessible housing is a legal and human rights obligation under Canadian and international law. These obligations are not being met.

2. Impacts of the Lack of Accessible Housing

Canada's housing crisis is also an accessibility crisis.

- Many people with disabilities and seniors cannot find housing they can live in
- Institutional care is widely feared; most people want to remain in their communities
- Families of children with disabilities face severe physical and financial strain
- Tenants face unsafe and inaccessible living conditions
- Fear of eviction prevents requests for accommodations

Accessible housing is scarce and often more expensive.

Current development patterns—such as multi-level housing—exclude people with mobility needs. Even units that could be accessible are not built that way.

In extreme cases, lack of housing and supports has contributed to people considering or pursuing medical assistance in dying. This reflects a profound systemic failure.

Disproportionate impacts:

- Seniors and people with disabilities
- Indigenous communities
- Racialized individuals

Broader impacts:

- Increased hospitalizations and healthcare costs
- Greater demand for long-term care
- Caregiver burnout
- Poorer health outcomes
- Reduced workforce participation

Accessible housing reduces these costs and improves quality of life.

3. Systemic Barriers and Government Failures

The primary barrier is lack of political accountability.

- Governments defer responsibility across jurisdictions
- Building codes remain outdated
- Developers build only to minimum standards
- Accessibility is treated as optional

Additional gaps:

- Affordable housing policies ignore accessibility
- Accessibility laws often exclude private housing
- Tribunals are underfunded, limiting access to justice
- Programs supporting accessible housing have been cut

Accessible housing is effectively unavailable, regardless of income.

4. Actions and Solutions

Immediate priorities:

- Mandate Universal Design in all new housing
- Prohibit public funding for inaccessible housing
- Require accessibility in renovations
- Expand non-profit and co-op housing
- Restore effective housing programs

System-wide changes:

- Educate developers on demand
- Require Universal Design training in architecture programs
- Align building codes with human rights laws
- Invest in home-based support services

Accessible housing must be treated as essential infrastructure.

5. Examples of Effective Approaches

Other jurisdictions have implemented:

- National accessibility requirements in building codes
- Financial incentives for Universal Design
- Enforceable legal standards
- Municipal accessibility policies
- Data-driven housing planning

Canada can adopt and scale these approaches.

6. Conclusion

Accessible housing is fundamental to dignity, equality, and sustainability.

An affordable home that is not accessible is not a home for many Canadians.

Universal Design is a practical, cost-effective solution that must be implemented without delay to ensure housing works for everyone

Please share any research, reports or links that support your submission.

WHAT IS UNIVERSAL DESIGN?

Universal Design is a set principles that are integrated through the design process to help create a built environment that can be used by as many people as possible regardless of age and ability.

7 Principles of Universal Design

1 Equitable Use - The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.

2 Flexibility in Use - The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.

3 Simple, and Intuitive Use - Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.

4 Perceptible Information - The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.

5 Tolerance for Error - The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.

6 Low Physical Effort - The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.

7 Size and Space for Approach and Use

Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user's body size, posture, or mobility.

- Resources: IDEA Center: Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access.

<http://idea.ap.buffalo.edu/>

Institute for Human Centered Design. <http://www.adaptenv.org/>

and

The Center for Universal Design, "The Principles of Universal Design" NC State University AccessAbility Advantage www.AccessAbilityAdvantage.ca

CMHC Costs of Accessibility.pdf NEW

https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2016/schl-cmhc/NH18-23-2015-6-eng.pdf

RENO **CMHC** research-insight-cost-adaptability-accessibility-features-existing-modest-house-69611-en.pdf

2002 report from the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

Submission of the Ontario Human Rights Commission Concerning barrier-free access requirements in the Ontario Building Code

<http://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/submission-ontario-human-rights-commission-concerning-barrier-free-access-requirements-ontario>

Nov 2020: http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/ohrc-statement-national-housing-day-november-22-accessible-housing-makes-social-economic-sense

Dec. 14, 2020 Letter from Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing on the importance of accessible housing
http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/letter-minister-municipal-affairs-and-housing-importance-accessible-housing

University of Melbourne:

REPORT - AUSTRALIA - Lived experience of inaccessible housing.pdf

Australian Construction Code:

Australia - livable-housing-design-20221219_0.pdf

https://angusreid.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/2022.03.29.Rise_Arch_Final.pdf

Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context

Leilani Farha - Report A_HRC_43_43_E.pdf

Edmonton AB, Making Our Houses Lifelong Homes: Accessible Housing for Seniors
Edmonton - AccessibleHousingSeniors.pdf

Disability Rights Coalition v. Nova Scotia (Attorney General), 2021 NSCA 70 (CanLII)

<https://www.canlii.org/en/ns/nsca/doc/2021/2021nsca70/2021nsca70.html?autocompleteStr=Disability%20Coalition%20Nova%20Scotia&autocompletePos=1&searchUrlHash=AAAAAQAJanVzdGlmaWVkAAAAAAE&offset=66049.6015625&highlightEdited=true>

Kingston ON - The State of Tenant Displacement Among People with Disabilities in Kingston

Queens Univ - SPCK&D State of Tenant Displacement Among People with Disabilities in Kingston Report - Visualized.pdf

Webinar: **DEMANDING JUST CARE: Fighting Governments' Medical and Social Abuse of Disabled Children and their Families** Learn about their plight, and hear their calls for compassion and justice. <https://cusj.org/2025-10-18-demanding-just-care/>