The Housing Crisis: An Overview

Housing is a critical step in achieving the major goal of the REAL Project: to enable individuals with disabilities to live as independently as possible. Many individuals with disabilities cannot choose where and how they live for several reasons. The major roadblocks to housing for people with disabilities are affordability, accessibility, and the lack of community-based services.

Affordability
Many individuals with disabilities are not given the supports or opportunities needed to acquire full-time employment. Dan Atkins and Christi Guasti of the Community Legal Aid Society write in, The Confluence of Poverty and Disability, that people with disabilities often work fewer hours and in lower-paying jobs or have limited benefits like social security payments in Delaware. Employment is not an option for many of these individuals because, as income increases, they may have to forgo the benefits needed to live independently. However, SSI alone does not even cover the cost of an individual’s basic needs. The housing wage, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, is the income needed to reasonably afford housing costs; reasonable housing costs are 30% of one’s income or less. To reasonably afford renting a one bedroom apartment in Delaware, an individual needs a housing wage of $11.75 an hour working full time in 2002. Using 2002 statistics, SSI payments translated into an hourly wage averages to only $3.17 an hour. With rents increasing at a higher degree than SSI benefits for the past two years and a high number of people with disabilities receiving SSI or other social security benefits, increased housing costs disproportionately affect people receiving disabilities.

Accessibility
Discrimination
Discrimination originates in prejudice and misinformation often equal to the physical barriers that prevent people with disabilities from living where they choose. While legislation has been enacted to fight blatant discrimination, intolerance and prejudice still prevent many from accessing homes of their own choosing.

Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of dwellings based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Through the Fair Housing Amendments Act in 1988, protections were extended to include discrimination based on disability and familial status (pregnant women and families with children under the age of 18). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, not only prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities by federal or state agencies but also prohibit discrimination in the provision of public housing by state and federal governments. While these regulations are significant in addressing discrimination, many individuals are still prevented from living in the community of their choosing because of the intolerance and prejudice of some members of society.

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Continuing Education Program offers an Introduction to Independent Living and Other Courses

DFRC, Inc., has initiated a pilot adult continuing education program designed for Delawareans with disabilities. The Recreation Enhancement And Learning (REAL) Project began evening classes in February 2005. REAL consists of five tracks: Exploring Employment, Independent Living, Health and Safety, Fine Arts, and Leadership and Advocacy. A six-week curriculum of six courses leads to a Certificate of Mastery in the elected track. Students from each track also participate in one relevant community activity. Examples of community activities include attending a job fair, a housing fair, a theatre production, or a safety information session.

Much of the content of the Independent Living track focuses on housing issues. “In order to have independent living in the truest sense, the natural place to start our classes is with an emphasis on housing options,” stated Cory Nourie, REAL Project Director. The first class in the Independent living track address the variety of housing options available ranging from sole ownership to sharing an apartment with a roommate. Housing costs, insurance, and savings for home ownership are also addressed. Other topics in the Independent living track include managing personal finances; finding, interviewing, and managing personal care attendants; and considering relationships, marriage, and family. Strategies for finding and maintaining community-based employment are part of the Exploring Employment track.

Additional topics include conducting job searches, resume and cover letter writing, interviewing skills, negotiating for success, understanding job expectations, and on-the-job communication. The Health and Safety track focuses on living a healthy lifestyle. Class participants discuss and learn about nutrition, exercise, personal hygiene, and drug/alcohol prevention. Students also learn about safety issues including safety in the community and relationship safety.

The Fine Arts track allows students to have hands-on experience with both visual and performing arts. In addition to drama and interpretative expression, classes in sculpting, drawing, painting, and creative movement are offered.

The Leadership and Advocacy track will cover self-determination, self-advocacy skills, negotiation strategies, communication skills, components of leadership, and advocacy skills.

All classes are taught by instructors from the community. Classes are held on Wednesday evenings. A pizza dinner is provided at 6:30 pm prior to class begins at 7:00 pm. After class, students have a chance to socialize during a coffee hour.

Students interested in future sessions of REAL can contact Cory Nourie at the Center for Disabilities Studies or visit www.udel.edu/REAL for more information. Class attendance is limited to 15 students per track.

Continued efforts to increase the affordability and accessibility of housing will help ensure that all Delawareans have the opportunity to live in safe, affordable housing of their choosing.

The lack of housing for adults with disabilities is one of the barriers that often compromises the pursuit of independent living for many people with disabilities. The need for more accessible housing is particularly critical for aging parents. Many others are living on the streets or at risk of homelessness. The lack of support needed to live independently prevents many of these individuals from accessing community-based housing.

While current laws and regulations aim to protect the rights of people with disabilities in housing, housing costs, and wait for housing options for years before finding an appropriate apartment or house. For someone living in the truest sense, the natural place to start our classes is with an emphasis on housing options. Many years ago, while Robert was still a child, Ms. Edelsohn began to think about her son’s future. Confronted with a lack of housing, Ms. Edelsohn set out to work creating housing options for adults with cognitive disabilities. As a result of her efforts, the Robert Edelsohn Foundation was created in 1989 to raise funds to create housing options for adults with disabilities living in Delaware. Twenty-two houses have been built and furnished in Delaware since Ms. Edelsohn began fundraising. Ms. Edelsohn says, “Home For Life and the University offers promising opportunities for people with disabilities and for the field of disabilities studies. The new endowed professorship will provide opportunities for students to connect with the community through the Homes For Life Foundation, the Center for Disabilities Studies, and other community partners.

The Homes For Life Foundation has been a huge force in Delaware for people with disabilities in need of appropriate housing. By raising money to build homes, as well as advocating for the housing and community-based needs of people with disabilities in Delaware, the Foundation has impacted the lives of Delawareans with disabilities in a positive way. Perhaps most importantly, the homes created by the Homes For Life Foundation have made it possible for some individuals with disabilities to experience life in a place they can call home.
Advocates Promote Accessible Housing Design Features

Steve Tull, a builder from New Castle County, Delaware, first began using universal housing design features out of a desire to ensure that his son was able to access all of the rooms in their house. His efforts have gone far beyond meeting his family’s need to include advocating for accessible housing designs in the construction of new homes throughout Delaware. A pioneer in the area of universal design building in Delaware, Mr. Tull believes that “seeing is believing” for buyers of houses that encompass universal design features.

The intent of universal design is to create products and spaces without barriers that prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in the community. According to the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University, an organization at the forefront of universal design research and education, homes that incorporate universal design features are safer, more convenient, and more comfortable for individuals of all ages and abilities.

Universal design features can be introduced at varying levels of construction, from entire buildings, first floors, rooms, or parts of rooms. Some specific features of universal design include wide doorways, a front entrance with no steps, and an accessible first floor bathroom. Additional features include lever handles for doorknobs, roll-in showers, and lowered kitchen countertops and appliances.

The Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University has developed the Principles of Universal Design, available on their website at www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/

Mr. Tull includes universal design features in all of the homes he builds. He also advocates for the use of universal design features in the homes of the contractors with whom he works. Mr. Tull’s goal is to increase public awareness to shape future construction trends toward including designs that include all people, and he believes the future construction trends in Stuarts County is an important step. An accessible housing coalition, Al Rose of the Delaware Assistive Technology Program, Delaware State University’s Disabilities Council; and other disability advocates stress the need to increase public awareness to shape future construction trends toward including designs that include all people, and he believes the future construction trends in Stuarts County is an important step.

According to Joanne Sassi, Program Coordinator for the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), Ms. Hughes recalls that introducing a new child to the family was a big transition, but her own children adapted to their new brother as their brother has helped them by being their friend and matches caregivers with individuals in their care, the University of Delaware’s Center for Disabilities Studies coordinates a required certificate program for caregivers. Present in a distance-learning format through videos, the course is self-paced by the participants.

The video course focuses primarily on teaching caregivers about the importance of self-determination, empowerment, and independence in the care of persons with developmental disabilities. The courses are also designed to teach caregivers how to identify and access community supports for persons with disabilities. Using worksheets, the caregivers and their care team work together to identify the person’s likes and dislikes, and strive to remove barriers preventing the person with a disability from living a more fulfilling life. Care providers are urged to involve persons in their care in making decisions that affect their lives.

Upon completion of the course, caregivers are interviewed by telephone by staff from the Center for Disabilities Studies. Caregivers have provided positive feedback about the course and their own increased awareness. According to a course evaluation, the course has been described as not just educational but also useful and inspirational. “Through taking the course,” she stated, “the care provider gains a better understanding of how the person in their care might experience their daily environment.”

In some cases, the living situation provided by the Foster Care Program can be temporary, and individuals may live in a home for only a few days to a few months. But in other cases, as with the Hughes family, the client will become a member of the family they are living with. “Some matches don’t last very long,” Joanne Sassi says, “but others have lasted for more than thirty years.” According to Ms. Hughes, Dean has offered her and her children the greatest learning experience. “Some of the most valuable life lessons I’ve learned, I’ve learned from Dean,” she said.

In order to enhance the relationship between foster care providers and the individuals in their care, the University of Delaware’s Center for Disabilities Studies coordinates a required certificate program for caregivers. Present in a distance-learning format through videos, the course is self-paced by the participants.

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Individuals interested in participating in the Foster Care Program can contact the Foster Care Coordinator in their region: 302-369-2186 ext. 249 (New Castle County) or 302-934-8351 (Kent or Sussex Counties).
Finding a Home of Your Own

Living in an apartment was becoming increasingly frustrating for Michele Lombardi, a Newark resident. “I wanted something of my own,” she declared, “not like an apartment where you keep paying rent and have nothing to show for it.” Ms. Lombardi was looking for an opportunity to move into her own space where she could decorate, furnish, and spend time any way she wanted. When The Arc of Delaware’s Home of Your Own program was introduced at a Delaware People First meeting, a self-advocacy group for adults with disabilities, Ms. Lombardi got involved and began the process of becoming a homeowner. Through the Home Of Your Own program, individuals interested in becoming homeowners receive advice and support throughout the process of buying a home.

Participants in the program are connected to volunteer mentors who help guide the entire process. Bob Schulz, a long time volunteer of The Arc of Delaware, became Ms. Lombardi’s mentor and worked with her through buying a home by providing support and assistance with moving and continuing support after she moved. The first step in Ms. Lombardi’s journey to buy her own home was homeownership training through the YWCA of New Castle County. Through her training, she learned about budgeting, applying for a mortgage, and other financial aspects of buying a home.

According to Ms. Lombardi, househunting was the hardest part of the entire process, because she wanted to find the house that fit her needs. She was grateful for her mentor’s assistance when she looked at houses. “Bob always helped me when looking at houses and was very supportive of me. He is a really good mentor,” she said. According to Mr. Schulz, his role was to help Ms. Lombardi find a house that not only fit her needs but was also in the neighborhood of her choosing.

In February, Ms. Lombardi moved into a ranch house in a small Newark community. She chose the neighborhood for the close proximity to shopping centers and public transportation, as well as having friends who live nearby. Her house has plenty of privacy with three bedrooms, a living room, a large kitchen, and a yard she gardened in during the spring and summer. She has met some neighbors and found them to be very nice. Owning a home is not without challenges, she says, and with Mr. Schulz’s support, she has dealt with plumbing and roofing problems since moving in.

According to Vivian Davis, Housing and Development Administrator for The Arc of Delaware, “the post purchase assistance and support is critical to the success of the program.” Ms. Lombardi now educates others on the benefits and challenges of being a homeowner. In October, she presented at the People First Conference in Dover on the process of buying a home with the Home of Your Own program. “Michele did a wonderful job of answering questions that participants had about the classes she took, house hunting, and other aspects of buying a house,” said Deborah Nock, The Arc of Delaware’s Outreach Coordinator. Two individuals signed up for the Home of Your Own program following the conference, and Ms. Nock believes Ms. Lombardi’s straightforward presentation about the struggles and joys of being a homeowner encouraged those interested in the possibility of homeownership to find out more about the program. Other individuals living in apartments, group homes, and with their families have asked Michele about the program at work and have made inquiries with The Arc of Delaware. Michele stated, “I never dreamed I would live in my own home, but I did it! I am sure a lot of people want to get out and live on their own, and I am sure they can do it, too.”

To inquire about the Home of Your Own program, please contact Laurie Jackson at (302) 996-9400 or ljackson@arcde.org.

Michele Lombardi

For more information call Laurie Jackson at 996-9400