

# Increasing Independent Living Opportunities for Adults with Disabilities via Policy Change in a Rural State

Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities, University of Montana | Missoula

*Telling the story of how change occurs, and the impact felt, from many, varied participants.*

## Goals and Activities

In 2012 Montana was the first state to extend visitability requirements (zero-step entrance, wide hall/doorways, accessible half bath) to all affordable housing ground-floor units, including units not covered by the Fair Housing Act such as single-family homes and townhouses. This project will explore the resulting impacts of this policy change; including unintended or naturally occurring outcomes of the policy change. This story will be told by those that initiated this change, those who had to change and those who benefited from this new design option for affordable homes. The evaluation of this policy change will determine what more can be done. There are many truths that are coming into focus for the majority of people, concerning the need for affordable, accessible housing for those who wish to live independently. People deserve to live in the least restricting environment. Housing that is visitable and accessible supports people to stay in the community as they age and to return home sooner following health events that may cause short- or long-term functional limitation. Being at home affords one a greater sense of autonomy and control while institutional settings like nursing homes and skilled nursing facilities limit options in daily living, isolate individuals from their support network, and negatively affect the mental health of residents. Community based housing with appropriate supports is the goal. This policy was implemented to provide more accessible and affordable housing options to people with disability and to increase housing supports for anyone who might become disabled in the future. We will discuss how the increased housing options for people with disabilities can be promoted and understood in terms of what options are still needed such as accessible active transportation options and connectivity to healthy community assets (healthy foods, trails, parks, schools, and employment opportunities).

## Populations Served

This project will review statewide data, looking at homes developed with federal housing programs.

## Major Partners and Funders

Montana Department of Commerce; the CDC-funded Montana Disability and Health Program—a partnership of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, the University of Montana Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities, and Montana Centers for Independent Living

## Major Outcomes

We will use mixed methods to demonstrate the results of the visitability policy. We will share testimonies from people with disabilities and developers and will present; 1) photos of housing projects with example of visitable features resulting from the visitability requirements in Montana affordable housing policy; and 2) preliminary descriptions on the increase in visitable housing options since 2012 beyond what options would have been developed under the Fair Housing Act.

## Advice for Others

We began with collecting public health data on the rate of visitable housing, share results at regional forums designed to stimulate information sharing among attendees who included local architects, developers, real estate agents, affordable housing administrators, centers for independent living, senior and aging organizations, and people with disabilities. Once we had a shared experience with visitability and local examples from developers and organizations like Habitat for Humanity, centers for independent living developed recommendations to be included in the affordable housing policy (e.g., Low Income Housing Tax Credits). Centers for Independent Living (CIL) staff have maintained their involvement in policy work through the state Community Living Task Force Committee and state housing conferences and events. As CILs, have become more involved in healthy communities' coalitions and walk audits, there has been interest in locating walk audit routes and planning focus on connecting affordable, accessible housing to healthy community assets.

## Questions?

Contact Research Associate Professor and Project Director,  
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## Impacts Under the Big Sky

2020 Montana Housing Partnership Conference