

“It doesn't matter if you're a person with disabilities, a caregiver, a person aging in place, an active family that's on the go, or a person who enjoys the ease of carrying groceries into a house with a zero step entrance – access is for everyone, it's that simple. Bringing EasyLiving Home certification to Virginia will change how homes are designed and built for years to come.”

- Teri Barker, Virginia Board for People with Disabilities

1. Brief Description of VHDA's EasyLiving Home Program

EasyLiving Home^{cm} is a voluntary certification program that provides builders with specific requirements to make homes easier to live in by eliminating steps at the entry way, providing a master bath and bedroom on the main floor and by encouraging open designs with ample room to move around. Whether you are a person in a wheelchair or just planning on growing old in your home, the EasyLiving Home program makes a welcoming, comfortable place to live in. Builders register with EasyLiving Home and guarantee the finished house will meet the EasyLiving Home program's standards. Following registration and completion, the EasyLiving Home certification seal is placed in the home. This seal provides the buyer with the comfort of knowing that the home has met the rigorous standards of the EasyLiving Home program, assuring that people of all abilities will be able to visit and enjoy the home.



VHDA's first Easy Living Home, constructed in March 2008.

2. Why it was Undertaken

To increase the number of single family homes accommodating the needs of people at all ability levels, including the increasing number of seniors downsizing and “aging in place,” this voluntary program was instituted as a collaborative effort of the Home Builders Association of Virginia (HBAV), VHDA, AARP and the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities. The group became the EasyLiving Home Coalition, and its goals include educating the community about how and where people with disabilities choose to live, promoting the construction of homes using Universal Design, and developing non-traditional partnerships with the disabled community.

3. What VHDA's EasyLiving Home Program Has Accomplished

With the participation of VHDA, the EasyLiving Home^{cm} Program is Virginia's first viable accessibility program that works to increase the production of single family homes in Virginia. Since Virginia's first EasyLiving home was certified in March 2008, approximately 25 homes have applied for certification and are pending final review. The Coalition projects that approximately 200 homes will be certified as EasyLiving homes in Virginia this fiscal year. Moreover, if early indications are accurate, the program promises to certify hundreds of homes every year for the foreseeable future. In addition, VHDA gives extra points to developers participating in its SPARC program who voluntarily including Universal Design concepts like EasyLiving Homes in their developments. VHDA's SPARC program provides below market rate loans for first time homebuyers to address critical housing needs facing communities.

4. Why VHDA's EasyLiving Home Program is Meritorious and Meets NCSHA Judging Criteria

Innovative

VHDA is the first state finance agency to start an EasyLiving Coalition. EasyLiving Home^{cm} is a voluntary certification program addressing an emerging market. This is the first program of its kind to build a

collaborative relationship among such diverse groups as the Home Builders Association of Virginia, AARP, the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities, Centers for Independent Living and the Area Agencies on Aging. This innovative program results in new single family homes that are accessible to everyone – people with and without disabilities.

Replicable

The EasyLiving Home^{cm} program can easily be replicated. VHDA was the first HFA to initiate a statewide coalition, serving as the catalyst to bring the alliance together. By forming a coalition as VHDA has done, other HFAs can be successful in forming EasyLiving Home^{cm} partnerships in their state.

Respond to an important state housing need

As our state and national population ages, the AARP reports that some 85 percent of people between the ages of 55 and 65 report a strong desire to remain in their current home, yet 90 percent of these homes cannot support the activities of daily living those people require. Single family homes have never been that user friendly to people with differing abilities. So the EasyLiving Home^{cm} voluntary certification program answers the pressing social question: “How can I live in my home when I grow old or become unexpectedly disabled?” Virginia’s EasyLiving Home^{cm} program begins to build community relationships by providing a proven way to meet the needs of ever more diverse communities. In the past, the elderly and people with disabilities have been socially isolated by physical barriers. Now, the EasyLiving Home^{cm} program builds opportunities to invite everyone to live in interesting, affordable, and accessible homes.



An EasyLiving home's accessible kitchen.

Demonstrate measurable benefits to HFA targeted customers

Since Virginia’s first EasyLiving home was certified in March 2008, approximately 25 homes have applied for certification and are pending final review. And, the Coalition projects that approximately 200 homes will be certified as EasyLiving homes in Virginia this fiscal year. This is a great start toward helping Virginia’s disabled and senior populations, and the program promises to certify hundreds of homes every year for the foreseeable future.

Proven track record of success in the marketplace

EasyLiving Home^{cm} certified its first Virginia home in March of 2008. Since then, interest from all segments of the building community has been strong. Centers for Independent Living and Area Agencies on Aging staff are being trained about EasyLiving homes, and the Home Builders Association of Virginia is sponsoring “Getting Acquainted Training” in each of its regional chapters to sign builders up for the program. And, Virginia’s latest EasyLiving home recently won a design award in the Home Builders Association of Virginia’s Parade of Homes.

Bringing EasyLiving Home^{cm} certification to the Commonwealth truly demonstrates that significant strides have been achieved in educating the public about accessible housing. More and more Virginians are realizing that accessible homes can work for everyone in everyday life.

Provide benefits that outweigh costs

When an EasyLiving Home is designed and built, the cost differential is less than two percent more of the original building cost. If the increased accessibility allows the homeowner to avoid a nursing home (at about \$70,000 a year), for even one more year, the cost differential is significant.

And as important as the cost may be, consider the benefits to a person who sustains a disability but is still able to leave their home and visit with family because they were able to buy an EasyLiving Home^{cm}. Increasing the numbers of EasyLiving Homes helps to decrease isolation. The cost benefit in human capital is immeasurable – as it always is when people consider the quality of human life.

Demonstrate effective use of resources

VHDA contributed \$5,000 to the Coalition's initial start up fund and will contribute another \$5,000 this year. All of our partners have done the same. From this fund, the Coalition will hire Habitat Virginia as its administrative agent to take calls and dispatch Centers for Independent Living inspectors from across the state. By year two, the cost of running the Coalition will come from the builders' registration fee and the certification fee for each home. The return on investment is the creation of a voluntary program that will create homes that can be visited by – and lived in by – people with disabilities. There are no laws or regulations compelling builders to build single family homes that are accessible or adaptable. EasyLiving homes are an easy solution that does not involve government oversight or regulation.

Effectively employ partnerships

The collaborative effort of the Home Builders Association, AARP, the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities and VHDA is significant and unprecedented. Through their combined efforts, they have been able to create accessible, affordable single family homes. But perhaps more importantly, with help from VHDA these groups have come together to build trust and confidence in one another. They have worked together in an atmosphere of compromise to accomplish something that could not have been achieved alone. This is the true legacy of EasyLiving Home; people working together for the mutual benefit of one another.

Achieve strategic objectives

VHDA has a goal to create 200 EasyLiving Homes. To accomplish this objective, VHDA plans to make presentations and trainings to 16 home developers. Through the EasyLiving Home program, VHDA's goal is to increase the number of homes that are accessible to everyone and eventually occupy five percent of the market share with EasyLiving homes.



EasyLiving homes offer accessible showers.

Conclusion

For disabled and senior Virginians, the importance of affordable, accessible housing is tremendous – it can enable them to live successfully and with dignity in the community of their choice, while receiving services to prevent unwanted institutionalization. In addition, statistics from the Virginia Department of Aging indicate that within the next 30 years, people over 60 will account for more than 25 percent of Virginia's population. And, research shows that today more seniors want to "age in place."

Against such a backdrop, the need for affordable, accessible housing is more pronounced than ever. Bringing the EasyLiving Home^{cm} certification program to Virginia helps VHDA meet these long-standing and increasing challenges head-on by enabling both the disabled and aging communities break into the mainstream housing market. In fact, the Coalition projects that approximately 200 homes will be certified as EasyLiving homes in Virginia this fiscal year, and promises to certify hundreds of homes every year for the foreseeable future.

Once builders construct an EasyLiving home, they realize they can build a home that meets the needs of any age group at a low cost. Thus, the program also has a long-term influence on how architects and builders design and construct new single family homes. The end result is homes with substantial benefits today, as well as tomorrow.