



Housing Series:

Universal Design and Accessible Housing

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Universal design is a framework for the design of places, objects, information, communication, and policy to be usable by the widest range of people in the widest range of situations without special or separate design. Most simply, universal design is the human-centered design of everything with everyone in mind. The [Federal Fair Housing Act](#) requires seven universal design features in residential buildings built after 1991 that have four or more units. In buildings with elevators, 100 percent of the dwelling units must include these seven features, while in non-elevator buildings all ground floor units must include them.

The Seven Features of Universal Design

1. Accessible Building Entrance on an Accessible Route

Each residential building must have at least one accessible entrance. An “accessible route” is a continuous, unobstructed path through sites and buildings. The route must connect the accessible entrance with public transportation stops, accessible parking spaces, accessible passenger loading zones, and public streets and sidewalks.

2. Accessible and Usable Public and Common Use Areas

Examples of public and common use areas include mailboxes, laundry rooms, community rooms, on-site walkways, parking, lobbies, corridors, drinking fountains, playgrounds, and rental offices. “Accessible and Usable” mean that:

- Public and common use areas must be located on the ground floor if the building has no elevator.
- Corridors must remain free of both temporary and permanent obstructions.
- Accessible parking is located on the shortest possible accessible circulation route to an accessible building entrance.

- If a building has washing machines and dryers, public toilets, bathing facilities, and lockers, one of each must be accessible.

3. *Usable Doors*

Accessibility requirements apply to all doors—doors into the building, doors connecting corridors, and doors into and throughout the apartment. Doors must provide at least 32 inches of clearance. Many localities increased the clearance to 36 inches for building entrance doors. Door hardware must also be usable. For example, for someone with arthritis in the hands, doorknobs are not usable. Lever handles and push plates are examples of usable door hardware.

4. *Accessible Route Into and Through the Dwelling Unit*

The accessible route must pass through the main entry door and continue through all the rooms in the unit. The accessible route must go to the required floor spaces, lead to all kitchen appliances and to all bathroom fixtures making these spaces and fixtures accessible. The route must also connect with all secondary exterior doors. The accessible route must be sufficiently wide without any abrupt changes in level so residents with disabilities, and their guests with disabilities, can safely use all rooms and spaces. These spaces include the storage areas and, under most circumstances, exterior balconies and patios that may be part of the dwelling unit.

5. *Accessible Locations for Environmental Controls*

Environmental controls include light switches, electrical outlets, and thermostats. These controls must be from 15–48 inches above the floor.

6. *Reinforced Bathroom Walls to Attach Grab Bars*

The builder is not required to install grab bars, but the builder must reinforce the bathroom walls so that the resident can mount grab bars safely to walls around the toilet, bathtub, and shower.

7. *Usable Kitchens and Bathrooms*

Usable kitchens and bathrooms are not necessarily required to provide wheelchair-turning space, but must provide sufficient maneuvering space for wheelchair users to approach, operate most appliances and fixtures, and exit.

Fully Accessible Units (“504 Units”)

In all residential buildings that receive Federal funding for construction, rehabilitation, rental subsidies, or other purposes, at least 5 percent of the dwelling units must be fully accessible for residents with mobility disabilities. In addition, at least 2 percent must include sensory aides for residents with visual or hearing disabilities. Fully accessible units are sometimes called “504 units” because Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act regulations applies the accessibility requirements to housing created or maintained using Federal funds.

Federally assisted housing includes—but is not limited to—Supportive Housing Programs (SHP), Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA), and Shelter Plus Care (S+C).

“Housing” describes single-family homes, apartment buildings, shelters, single-room occupancy (SRO) buildings, motels, and residential hotels.

Unlike Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Fair Housing Act’s universal design features apply to private *and* subsidized housing. Kitchens and bathrooms reflect the primary differences between the seven features of universal design and full accessibility requirements of Section 504 for new construction. Section 504 requires access modifications in existing subsidized housing built before 1988. Kitchens and bathrooms that do provide wheelchair-turning space are required only in residential buildings built with or receiving any type of Federal subsidy.

The Fair Housing Act protects people with mental and physical disabilities. This law, like all civil rights laws, makes it illegal to treat people with disabilities differently if the treatment results in a poor housing situation or denial of housing. The [Fair Housing Accessibility Guidelines](#) provide guidance to housing developers and builders on the seven principles of universal design. With the implementation of universal design, people with disabilities have the opportunity to live in communities independently.

Sources:

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) [Fair Housing Design Manual](#)

Also see, www.fairhousingfirst.org; [Institute for Human Centered Design, Adaptive Environments](#).

About the Housing Series: Access to affordable housing is essential to prevent and end homelessness. Locating housing resources is a daunting task, even without the stereotypes and generalizations that result in discrimination against people experiencing homelessness and mental illness. PATH providers know firsthand the scarcity of housing for individuals with limited incomes. To assist PATH providers in finding affordable housing, the PATH Technical Assistance Center created the Housing Series. The Housing Series consists of information, resources, and tools to help providers obtain housing for the people with whom they work. The Housing Series is available on the PATH website <http://pathprogram.samhsa.gov> under “Topics.” Additional resources and tools will be added periodically. Please send comments on the Housing Series and suggestions for additional resources to path@samhsa.hhs.gov.