

Renovating for Accessibility

The right renovations can dramatically change quality of life for the physically disabled.

BY MATTHEW CLAXTON, LANGLEY ADVANCE MAY 28, 2011

Zosia Ettenberg is thinking about renovating her kitchen. She's not worried about granite countertops or new sink fixtures, she just wants to make the whole room accessible.

Ettenberg uses a powered wheelchair to get around, and that puts her arms and shoulders below the level of most kitchen fixtures. "I'm really in a bad position to wash dishes ... because it's too high for me," Ettenberg said.

For people with physical disabilities, finding the right home isn't just a matter of haggling with sellers or landlords.

There are almost always renovations that can make it easier for them to do chores that fully able-bodied people take for granted.

Ettenberg is looking into getting a sink that can be lowered and raised -- a recent innovation on the North American market.

There are a hundred other renovations, from major to minor, that might be needed to make a home accessible. And those renovations are often unique to each person and their own circumstances, Ettenberg said. "You need to do your own planning," she said.

While municipal governments mandate that some units in new developments be built to flex-housing or accessibility standards, that usually means a number of minor changes. It might mean having extra supports in a bathroom wall so that bars can be added later. It might mean installing wall sockets at 18 inches high, or light switches lower, to make them easier to reach.

But it typically doesn't include modifications such as ramps, lifts, or major changes to a kitchen or bathroom. Once disabled homeowners know what they want done, they have to find funding.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) does provide some funding for homeowners. If their homes are below a certain value, they can qualify for up to \$16,000 in the Lower Mainland.

The funding from the Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP) is considered a form of loan, but it is forgiven over 15 years. If the homeowner sells their home before that time period, they will have to pay back a portion of the funding. "So long as they're occupying their home, they're fine," said Jabeen Janmohamed of the CMHC.

A similar program called Home Adaptations for Seniors Independence provides grants for those over the age of 65 living on a low income.

Finding contractors who have the special skills to create an accessible home is another problem.

