

PROMISING PRACTICES IN HOME AND COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

The Massachusetts Accessible Housing Registry

Issue: Housing Vacancy Information for People with Disabilities

Introduction

Finding accessible housing is often a time consuming, frustrating process for people with disabilities. People may need to contact several service agencies, public housing authorities, individual housing managers, and state agencies for information about accessible housing and existing vacancies that meet their needs. People with disabilities often place their names on waiting lists in several communities waiting for a vacancy.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has addressed this challenge by developing a central registry for accessible housing that includes public housing, privately operated subsidized housing, and private market-rate developments. People with disabilities can access the registry on the Internet and by contacting the state's Centers for Independent Living.

Background

The Commonwealth's legislature mandated the registry's development as part of a law that established a Housing Bill of Rights for Persons with Disabilities. The main focus of the legislation was to ensure that all new housing construction and substantial rehabilitation was adaptable, and the law is similar to the federal Fair Housing Act.

During consideration of the bill, legislators learned that housing owners and managers often had vacant accessible units but were unable to locate people with disabilities who needed the accessible design features. At the same time, people with disabilities, their families and advocates told legislators that finding accessible, affordable housing was difficult.

To help people with disabilities and their families find available housing vacancies, the legislature passed a requirement "to establish a central registry of housing units that are accessible or adaptable." The law requires all property owners, managers and housing authorities to actively market units to people with disabilities. As implemented, the law requires owners with vacant accessible units to:

- Inform anyone who has notified them in the past 12 months that they need an accessible apartment that a vacancy exists; and
- Register vacant units with Mass Access and hold units open for at least fifteen days, during which the apartment may be rented only to a person who has a disability and needs the accessible features of the unit.

Housing Registry Partners

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, the commonwealth's vocational rehabilitation agency, obtained funds to start the registry from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development under the Fair Housing Initiative Program and from the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council. The project became operational in 1995. Since 1995, the Massachusetts legislature has appropriated funds to maintain the registry.

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission contracted with three organizations to design the database and collect information for the registry:

- **Citizens Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA)**, a housing advocacy organization based in

Massachusetts. CHAPA initially assisted with presenting prototypes to focus groups and managing the initial Advisory Committee. CHAPA facilitated coordination with public and private housing organizations across the state, since it had existing relationships with these organizations. This provided connections to the housing community that MRC did not have at the time.

- **New England INDEX**, an information technology program with expertise in information and referral for people with disabilities located at the Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center, now affiliated with the University of Massachusetts Medical School. New England INDEX developed the software for the project and assisted with data collection. New England INDEX worked with CHAPA and the Advisory Board to create an accessible database with features the Advisory Board deemed important.
- **Jon Sanford**, a national access expert working with the Atlanta Veterans Administration and the Center for Universal Design at the University of North Carolina, designed the data collection tools.

These organizations worked with an Advisory Board that included independent living centers, consumers, the state rental housing association, non-profit housing providers, the state housing agency and the state housing finance agency.

Both CHAPA and New England INDEX remain involved in the administration of the database. CHAPA maintains the database listings which are updated daily or as new housing is reported. New England INDEX is responsible for technical management of the registry's information systems, which include the database and a Web site that is now available for people to access the registry.

Registry Content and Use

The registry houses information about vacant accessible housing units, including public

housing, privately owned subsidized units, and market-rate developments. The registry also contains information on non-accessible units to allow people who may have a disability but do not need the features of an accessible unit to conduct a housing search. Property managers can list rental vacancies at no cost on **Mass Access**.

Information about each housing development includes: owner information, development information, unit types, vacancy log entries, and links to the development's Web page. The data base includes the development's location; the number and type of units/bedrooms; access status; proximity to hospitals, supermarkets, pharmacies, and transportation; owner information; contact information; public or private assistance available; and information on the specific design features of the units.

Prior to Internet availability, the data base was accessible at the state's independent living centers. Each center downloaded information updates from a central data base. Web access was added as the Internet developed, which made the registry accessible at all hours. The Web site is accessible to people who use screen readers or non-graphical Web browsers.

People with disabilities and their families can search the database for housing in their region or in their community (i.e., town or county). People can also search according to rental price range, bedroom size, accessibility status, and other desired features. If no vacant accessible units are found, the Web site advises people to contact developments in their preferred area to join the development's waiting list.

Maintaining the Registry

Keeping the registry current requires CHAPA to learn of new developments and to obtain regular updates on the status of existing or expected vacancies. Each year, CHAPA identifies housing sites that have opened in the preceding year using the annual report from the State Housing Finance Agency and newspaper advertisements. Information is compared to the sites listed in the registry. CHAPA contacts sites that are not included in the database and asks

site managers to complete an online survey that requests information about the following:

- Can someone enter the apartment without using stairs;
- Is the development designated only for older adults (age 62 or older);
- Is the building accessible;
- Is the unit wheelchair accessible;
- Is it accessible to a person with hearing impairments;
- Is the kitchen accessible;
- Is at least one bedroom accessible;
- Does the unit have a roll-in shower;
- Is it near hospital or medical center;
- Is the unit near public transportation; and
- Is wheelchair accessible transportation available in the area?

The survey also asks for the manager's name, and contact information, the housing development's name, address, and Web site address; total number of units; vacancies by number of bedrooms and date; rent; the status of the waiting list (if any); and other features.

CHAPA obtains monthly updates from housing developments on the registry to update the status of listed units. Housing managers are asked to update information on vacancies in each project. Projects with previously reported vacancies receive a one page fax each month about the status of vacant units. The manager verifies the description of the unit and checks whether the unit is still vacant, whether the unit has been filled and whether the site is accepting applicants for a waiting list. Expected vacancies and the date of occupancy may also be reported.

Monthly updates can also be submitted online. The update page has a drop down screen that list each development. Managers click on their site and verify the information or enter updated information. The form is emailed to CHAPA where the information is entered in the database. CHAPA prefers to enter the information rather than allow managers to enter it online in order to verify that the fields are completed correctly.

Massachusetts supports the maintenance of the database and Web site with \$100,000 a year in state funds. Initially one full-time staff person was assigned to the project. Now in its fifth year of operation, only one part-time staff position is assigned to the project.

Outreach to the Housing Community

The database project was marketed as a way for owners and housing managers to reduce the time that units remain vacant. CHAPA staff speaks at seminars and conduct trainings for housing managers throughout the state. The presentations describe the purpose of the registry and how it assists property managers in filling vacancies more quickly. It particularly helps developments in rural areas that have more difficulty filling vacant units.

With 35 years of experience with housing developers and managers, CHAPA has well established relationships with owners and operators of affordable and market rate housing. CHAPA has worked with public housing authorities for similar support. In addition, the Massachusetts Housing Finance Agency strongly encouraged managers in their portfolio to participate in the database.

Impact

During 2002, 541 vacant accessible units were reported, tracked and marketed. Studio and one-bedroom units accounted for 53% of the vacancies. The Web site recorded about 2,000 hits per month in 2002. This figure is more than the number of users because people may have used the site more than once. The registry listed available accessible units in all regions of the state, fifty-three percent of which were located in the state's largest metropolitan area, the Greater Boston area. Fifty-three percent of the registered units were subsidized. The other units were market rate.

A 2000 survey of property managers found that the registry reduced vacancy rates and that the number of accessible units leased to people who

needed its accessible features increased.¹ Also, housing advocates reported that the registry improved their ability to help people find appropriate housing.

The state is not able to identify how many people actually locate a unit using the registry because the Web site cannot identify individual users. To identify some of the people using the registry, the Web page has a link for users to complete a brief anonymous survey asking if they found an apartment. There are fields to enter the name of the development, location, number of bedrooms, and a comment field to enter information about where the person lived prior to moving, how long they have been searching for an apartment, whether the **Mass Access** program helped, and how they learned about it.

Future Challenges

Mass Access is an established Web-based housing registry and is now well known and used by housing owners, managers and people with disabilities. However, as with any registry, an important challenge is continually updating of housing information as well as the marketing and outreach to people with disabilities who need the information.

This report was prepared by Robert Mollica, National Academy for State Health Policy, as part of the Rutgers Center for State Health Policy/NASHP Technical Assistance Exchange Collaborative funded by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). Information was obtained during a site visit on April 9, 2003 and material from the "Mass Access" registry Web site. Medstat assisted with this report as part of a project for CMS to identify Promising Practices in Home and Community Based Services.

Replication Issues

The cost of replication would depend on the size of a state, the number of developments to be listed, and the amount of outreach and marketing needed to gain support from housing property managers to list their units. The initial design costs would depend on whether a state creates its own database or adapts the existing design to meet its needs. New England INDEX is available to work with state agencies and local organizations to develop a data base.

Key Contacts

John Chappell
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
john.chappell@mrc.state.ma.us
617-204-3620

Lisa Sloane
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
lisa@adaptiveenvironments.org
413-243-9999

Melissa Quirk
CHAPA
mquirk@chapa.org
617-742-0820

Robert Bass
New England INDEX
UMass Medical School
robert.bass@umassmed.edu
781-642-0246

This document was developed under Grant Number P-91512/2 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. Please include this disclaimer when copying or using all or any of this document in dissemination activities.

¹ Richey, Amy. "Mass Access Program Evaluation for 1999-2000." Northeastern University Department of Political Science. Boston, MA. June 30, 2000.