ACTION GUIDE

Partnering to Expand Access to Home Modifications, Repairs, and Weatherization for Community Living



This action guide is designed to provide approaches for aging, disability, and health organizations on ways to build partnerships with the housing sector for home modifications, repairs, and weatherization services. These partnerships can improve the accessibility and safety of existing housing, and support community living for older adults and people with disabilities. The priority for action should be the populations with the greatest social and greatest economic needs, including individuals who are low-income, underserved, and living in rural communities.

What Are Home Modifications?

Home modifications are changes made to a home that help create a living environment that is accessible, safe, and promotes independence. These changes can include removing hazards, such as removing clutter on the floor that could lead to falls or other injuries. They may also involve adding supportive features, such as those that improve a person's ability to engage in daily activities, care for themselves, or maintain access to community participation. Home modifications also include assistive technology (AT) devices, technology, and services that help people manage everyday tasks and navigate the home, such as transfer benches for bathing and voice-activated controls for lighting, blinds, and thermostats.

In addition to home modifications, weatherization and home repairs are also important. Weatherization is the process of protecting a home's interior from outside elements like moisture, cold air in winter, hot, humid air in summer, and even sun, snow, and ice damage. Home repairs range from major, such as fixing roof or foundation problems, to minor, such as tightening loose handrails or removing door thresholds.

Why Focus on Home Modifications, Repairs, and Weatherization?

Home modifications, repairs, and weatherization can help reduce falls, make daily activities and/or caregivers' work easier, and improve the ability of older adults and people with disabilities to live in their homes. The accessibility of the home environment impacts the health of its occupants. Barriers to individuals' ability to safely conduct daily activities include a slippery step-in bathtub, fall hazards such as inadequate lighting, and weatherization issues such as a broken heating or cooling system. These barriers can negatively impact a person's ability to maintain their health and independence.

Home modifications, repairs, and weatherization often go hand in hand to make homes safe and accessible. For example, a home may require roof or plumbing repairs before modifications can be implemented. A safe, accessible home will not support community living if it has unaddressed weatherization needs that affect individuals' health and safety, such as a basement that floods. Read the "Know the Lingo" section of this guide for definitions of each service type and where to learn more.

Why Is It Important to Increase Access to Home Modifications, Repairs, and Weatherization for Older Adults and People with Disabilities?

Most people with disabilities and older adults want to live and age at home in their communities. The vast majority live in the community, primarily in their own homes. These include single-family houses, apartments, manufactured homes, and other types of dwellings. Less than five percent of older adults and people with disabilities live in nursing homes or other institutional care settings. Surveys have shown that between 77 and 88 percent of Americans over age 50 want to continue to live in their homes and communities as their needs change over time, rather than move to an institutional setting. 2,3

Unless built with universal design standards that make living spaces easier to use, homes can present barriers to independence and hazards to safety. Most homes were not built with features that support individuals' ability to perform their daily activities, such as bathing and cooking, should they develop mobility impairments. Fewer than four percent of U.S. residential units are suitable for people with moderate mobility disabilities; about one percent are wheelchair accessible.⁴ Also, 28 percent of households with adults age 65 years and older have at least one person who has difficulty using some element of the home, such as climbing stairs or using the bathtub.5

Challenges in Rural Housing

Some of the populations with the greatest need for home modifications, repairs, and weatherization reside in rural communities. One quarter of Americans age 65 and older live in rural areas. About 80 percent of rural older adults own their homes. Three in five homes in rural communities were built before 1980. Among rural homeowners, nearly two out of every five homes need major modifications for easier aging in place. Most homes in rural areas are single-family residences, which often require a high level of maintenance. People often delay making modifications due to cost and difficulty performing the work.

Challenges in Rental Housing

Low-income renters face unique challenges with affording and accessing home modifications, repairs, and weatherization. In 2021, more than 2.2 million older, very low-income renter households had severe cost burdens, were living in severely inadequate housing, or both.⁷ Also, renters and landlords alike may not be familiar with Fair Housing policies that protect the rights of renters with disabilities. See the resources section at the end of this guide to learn more about fair housing.

Why Is the Housing Sector a Natural Partner?

Partnerships with organizations in the housing sector are critical to organizations that provide home modifications, repairs, and weatherization services. Some of the many benefits of partnering with housing organizations include:

- Access to specialized funding sources and expertise.
- Support to document the need for home modifications, repairs, and weatherization in the community.
- Contribution of a housing perspective.
- Development of champions within the housing sector who can build awareness, knowledge, and engagement among their peers.

These partnerships can bring about long-term change, including increased access to home modifications, repairs, and weatherization services for older adults and people with disabilities and improved coordination of these services.



Know the Lingo

Home modifications are changes made to a home that help create a living environment that is safe, accessible, and promotes independence for the people who live in them. These changes can include removing hazards and adding supportive features. Learn more at The Fall Prevention Center of Excellence⁸ and the Assistive Technology Training and Technical Assistance Center (AT3).⁹

Home repairs range from major, such as fixing roof or foundation problems, to minor, such as tightening loose handrails or removing door thresholds. Some minor repairs may be conducted by volunteers, while more complex repairs require the specialized expertise of experienced housing professionals.

Universal design is designing products and environments to be useable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Learn more at The Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University.¹⁰

Visitability is creating homes that are minimally accessible to both residents and guests. Visitable homes have:

- At least one entrance with zero steps;
- Interior doors that are at least 32 inches wide; and
- At least a half bathroom, but preferably a full bathroom, on the main level.

Learn more at visitability.org.11

Weatherization reduces energy costs for low-income households while ensuring the occupants' health and safety. It addresses the whole house and building systems as well as health and safety issues. Learn more at Weatherization Assistance Program. 12

The information below can help organizations connect with housing organizations to explore ways to work together to promote community living for people with disabilities and older adults.

Which Housing Organizations Support Home Modifications, Repairs, and Weatherization in Existing Homes?

The housing sector presents many opportunities for collaboration with disability, aging, and health organizations. Certain housing organizations are already involved in partnerships to promote home modifications, repairs, and weatherization in their communities. These include volunteer groups such as Habitat for Humanity and Rebuilding Together, non-profit housing associations and non-profits serving veterans), local business associations for home builders and remodelers, housing providers, public housing authorities, and Neighborhood Housing Services organizations. The housing sector also has many other types of organizations that can also play a role in home modifications, such as home-building supply stores, housing manufacturers, and home technology companies.

Essential Steps to Building Partnerships with Housing Organizations

Prepare

- Develop a list of what you know about the population you serve and their home modification needs. Consider the following questions:
 - Which organizations can help you with these needs?
 - Do you already have relationships with any of these organizations?
 - Can you build on these relationships?
 - Where are the gaps of specific needs you would like to address?
 - What additional organizations can assist you?
- Find housing entities in your community (see links at the end of this action guide).

- Become familiar with potential partners' missions, strategic plans, goals, and possible motivators. Consider the following questions:
 - Whom do they serve?
 - What do they provide?
 - What were their accomplishments last year?
- Learn partners' key terms to promote effective communication (you can start with this list of terms and acronyms¹³ from the Housing and Services Resource Center).
- Seek champions in the community who have a vision and are committed to change.

Approach

- Reach out to or seek connections to get an introduction to housing organizations.
- Schedule meetings and set goals for initial outreach.
- Outline existing services, demands/needs, preferences, data sources.
- Ask about their organization, the populations they serve and their needs, and annual goals. Consider the following questions:
 - What do your organizations have in common?
 - Where are opportunities to leverage expertise and/or work together?

- Discuss opportunities to work together to achieve mutual and individual organization goals.
 - Offer examples on how partnering will support housing entities' goals and bottom lines.
 - Suggest opportunities to fill gaps and expand their reach/impact.
 - Highlight whether you serve the same or similar populations and discuss how a partnership can create better outcomes for the people you serve.
 - Share examples of how they can help you and your organization.
- Find common ground that will provide a foundation for the planning phase.

Create a Plan

- Create a shared vision for success.
- Clarify terminology and get on the same page.
- Set priorities that will be mutually beneficial.
- Select/adopt/create a home modifications, repairs, and weatherization service delivery approach.
- Identify funding and in-kind resources to braid or leverage.



TIP: For more approaches to establishing cross-sector partnerships that promote home modifications, check out Action Guide 1: The Power of Cross Sector Partnerships to Advance Home Modifications on the Housing and Services Resource Center website.¹⁴

Finding Common Ground

The activities described below can serve as focal points in which to engage housing organizations. Examples of partnerships that bring together aging, disability, health, and housing are provided in the next section.

Educate Consumers

Many people do not know how to find home modifications, repairs, and weatherization services, let alone determine whether they meet varying eligibility requirements for programs that may assist them. Housing organizations that interact with older adults and people with disabilities can educate consumers about home modifications and assistive technology for community living. Fact sheets and videos on the benefits of home modifications for diverse populations are available at www.homemods.org. Examples of assistive technology that can be used to modify people's homes can be found at the AT3 Center website. 15

Engage Volunteers

Non-profit housing organizations, such as Rebuilding Together¹⁶ and Habitat for Humanity,¹⁷ as well as some corporations with foundations such as Wells Fargo,¹⁸ offer opportunities to give back to their communities through volunteering. By working with these organizations, you not only leverage the impact of the volunteer efforts, but also provide them with a better understanding of the need for programs, products, and design features that support community living, particularly in underserved communities.

Provide In-Kind Contributions

Housing organizations can also provide inkind contributions. By donating materials or lending expertise, they can support the efforts of aging, disability, or health organizations while gaining public recognition for their efforts. Collaboration is also a way to share their resources with a new audience.

Streamline Access to Services

It can be challenging for people in the community to access needed home modifications, repairs, and weatherization services. People can get bounced around to different agencies or put on waitlists. Applications can be complex. When encountering these barriers to access, people often give up.

Partnerships can help providers mobilize services and create efficiencies, especially when there are multiple players in the community. Partnerships can coordinate efforts to increase access to existing home modifications, repairs, and weatherization services. They offer opportunities to learn about services that community organizations offer and provide cross referrals.

Examples of Partnerships for Improved Service Delivery

Bath Housing, Comfortably Home in Maine provides safety checks, accessibility modifications, and minor repairs at no cost to low-income older adults or people with disabilities who are homeowners. Modifications and repairs include smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, light bulbs, grab bars and handrails, drawer pulls, storm door winterizing, and entry/exit improvements.

As a result of these improvements, residents receiving this support report fewer falls, fewer 911 calls, and fewer hospitalizations. Grants from MaineHousing fund the replication of Comfortably Home by public housing authorities, community action programs, and Habitat for Humanity affiliates with paid staff. Visit the Bath Housing website 19 to learn more.

Civic Works, Housing Upgrades to Benefit Seniors (HUBS) in Baltimore, Maryland, is a collaborative program that connects lowincome older adults to home improvement services that make homes healthier, more accessible, and more secure. The services include home repairs, accessibility improvements, rehabilitation, weatherization, and environmental hazard remediation. Examples include grab bars and handrails, roof and plumbing repair, and insulation. Social workers provide application assistance for these resources and assist clients with accessing other benefits. HUBS members include Civic Works, Green & Healthy Homes Initiative (GHHI), Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) of Baltimore, and Rebuilding Together Baltimore. Partners include the Maryland Access Point for long-term services and supports (the aging and disability resource center), Maryland Energy Assistance Program, and the Keswick Wise and Well Center for Healthy Living. Learn more on the Civic Works website.²⁰

The Orange County Home Preservation Coalition (OCHPC) in North Carolina coordinates organizations that provide home repairs and modifications to residents of Orange County. Many families that the coalition serves include adults age 55 and older and people with disabilities who are low-income homeowners. OCHPC was formed as part of the Orange County Department on Aging's Master Aging Plan development process to increase service coordination and decrease the burden on service seekers, many of whom are older adults. Services of coalition partners include minor home safety improvements (such as installing grab bars and railings); critical repairs and weatherization (including roof replacements, plumbing and electrical); and accessibility modifications (such as ramps or accessible bathroom renovations).

Partners include the OC Department on Aging; OC Housing and Community Development; Rebuilding Together of the Triangle; Habitat for Humanity of Orange County; Central Piedmont Community Action, Inc.; and University of North Carolina Chapel Hill's Community Practice Lab. Initial grant funding from the Southeast Energy Efficiency Alliance supported the development of a unified intake and assessment process, a shared online database to coordinate referrals among partners, and compensated partners for developing and participating in the coalition. Partners provide home repairs and meet monthly to review cases.

OCHPC has improved communication and collaboration among organizations and increased access to repair services for Orange

County residents. Since grant funding concluded, partners continue to share administrative and service delivery responsibilities, with the goal of integrating operating expenses into county budgets. Learn more about OCHPC's process, outcomes, and sustainability plans on its website.²¹

Relevant Evidence-Based Programs that Promote Partnerships

The Community Aging in Place—Advancing Better Living for Elders (CAPABLE) program uses a team consisting of an occupational therapist, a registered nurse, and a handyperson to improve a participant's ability to conduct daily activities in the home. This multidisciplinary approach, which has been shown to decrease hospitalizations and nursing home stays, can involve different agencies to deliver the program. Providers include area agencies on aging, centers for independent living, hospitals, and non-profits such as Habitat for Humanity and Rebuilding Together. CAPABLE locations across the country, and coverage for support, are growing in number.^{22,23} ACL's the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research has supported grantfunded research on the modification of the CAPABLE program for different populations of people with disabilities (e.g., individuals who receive home-based primary care, medically complex children, individuals with mild cognitive impairment/dementia) and family caregivers of people with disabilities. For information on the CAPABLE program, visit the CAPABLE National Center.

The Home Hazard Removal Program (HARP) addresses home hazards and fall risk behaviors for older adults at high risk of falling. An occupational therapist assesses the individual, their behavior, and their environment. They then create a tailored and client-centered plan for minor home repairs and modifications, adaptive equipment, task modification, as well as education and self-management strategies. HARP was developed with funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and tested with involvement from an area agency on aging, including referrals and outreach. For more information, visit the HARP website.²⁴

ADDITIONAL HOME MODIFICATIONS, REPAIRS, AND WEATHERIZATION PARTNERSHIP EXAMPLES

Additional detailed examples of partnerships with housing entities are outlined in the Fall Prevention Center of Excellence's Case Studies in Home Modification Service Delivery: State and Local Aging Network Efforts Across the United States.²⁵ The case studies highlight partnerships that bring together the aging, disability, health, and housing sectors. Featured partners include area agencies on aging, centers for independent living, state assistive technology programs, state units on aging, nursing home transition programs, and nonprofit housing organizations. Each case study describes program operations (eligibility, outreach, referrals, intake, assessment, delivery process, follow-up), funding, partnerships, challenges, and ingredients for success.

Know What Resources Are Available to Support Your Work

The resources listed below can help your organization learn more about establishing partnerships that support home modifications, repair, and weatherization.

FALL PREVENTION CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

The Fall Prevention Center of Excellence (FPCE)²⁶ at the University of Southern California Leonard Davis School of Gerontology²⁷ is dedicated to promoting aging in place and independent living for persons of all ages and abilities. It offers research, training, and technical assistance opportunities for professionals who wish to respond to the increasing demand for home modification services and address fall prevention in the home environment. FPCE also serves as an information clearinghouse on home modification for professionals and consumers with resources such as the National Directory of Home Modification and Repair Resources. In addition, check out the Home Modification Information Network and home modification toolkit.

HOUSING AND SERVICES RESOURCE CENTER

The Housing and Services Resource Center (HSRC)²⁸ was created for people who work in the organizations and systems that provide housing resources and homelessness services, health services, independent living services and other supportive services, and others who are working to help people live

successfully and stably in the community. Its goal is to foster collaboration and cross-sector partnerships to streamline access to services, better leverage resources, and make community living possible for more people. The Center is a partnership between the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development,²⁹ and its website provides practical, actionable information for aging and disability services professionals.

AT3 CENTER

The AT3 Center³⁰ is the Assistive Technology Act National Training, Technical Assistance and Public Internet Site project funded under a grant award by the Administration for Community Living at U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The mission of the AT3 Center is to increase access to and acquisition of AT by individuals with disabilities across the lifespan. AT3 provides technical assistance and supports to State and Territory Assistive Technology Programs funded under Section 4 of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, as amended (P.L. 108-364). Find your state AT program by using AT program directory search tool on the AT3 website.

Consult the following resources for potential partners in your area and relevant services, programs, and information.

FAIR HOUSING AND RENTERS' RIGHTS

The Fair Housing Amendments Act protects the rights of renters with disabilities to accessible homes. Learn more to increase access to home modifications and repairs for renters with disabilities from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity and other sources below:

- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.
- Reasonable Accommodations and Modifications.
- Accessibility Requirements for Buildings.

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

Habitat for Humanity developed the Housing Plus model, which takes a person-centered, holistic approach to address older adults' needs through home modifications, repairs, and community services. Learn more on their aging in place services webpage.³¹ Visit their directory³² to find a Habitat for Humanity affiliate in your area. Habitat also created the comprehensive Bridging the Gap guide³³ to support effective home modifications and home repair partnerships between health and housing organizations, including participation in CAPABLE model implementation.

NATIONAL COUNCIL ON INDEPENDENT LIVING

The National Council on Independent Living represents individuals with disabilities, centers for independent living, statewide independent living councils, and other organizations. It developed a home modifications fact sheet³⁴ that includes promising practices and examples of home modification programs led by CILs.

NEIGHBORWORKS AMERICA

NeighborWorks America is a non-profit network³⁵ of community organizations that create opportunities for people to live in safe, healthy, and affordable homes. Members include coalitions, community action partnerships, community development corporations, neighborhood housing services, and other community organizations that provide services and property management. Visit their directory³⁶ to find a member in your area. Also, visit this webpage³⁷ to learn more about their partnerships to rehabilitate and weatherize homes in rural communities.

REBUILDING TOGETHER

Rebuilding Together conducts a Safe at Home program³⁸ that provides no-cost home modifications to people with disabilities and older adults with low incomes to improve accessibility, reduce falls, and increase independence. Safe at Home's services include critical repairs, fall prevention strategies, accessibility modifications that address changing mobility needs, and fire prevention strategies. Visit this webpage³⁹ to find a Rebuilding Together affiliate in your area.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

The Office of Rural Development offers loans and grants to buy, build, or repair homes in rural areas. Home improvements include repairs and home modifications to increase health, safety, and accessibility.

Programs are available for people
with low incomes, non-profit providers of
single-family housing, 40 and property owners
of multi-family housing 41 to develop and
rehabilitate properties for low-income people
who are older or living with disabilities.
Use this webpage 42 to find your local Rural
Development Office and learn about loan and
grant programs in your state.

STATE HOUSING FINANCE AGENCIES

State housing finance agencies work to meet the affordable housing needs of their states' residents. They administer affordable housing, rural housing, and community development programs that focus on homeownership, rental, and special needs housing. Learn more from the National Council of State Housing Finance Agencies, 43 and visit this webpage 44 to find a housing finance agency in your area.

WEATHERIZATION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

The Weatherization Assistance Program⁴⁵ reduces energy costs for low-income households while ensuring the occupants' health and safety. It addresses the whole house and building systems—the exterior; heating, cooling, and electrical systems; and electric appliances—and includes health and safety measures such as minor repairs and mold hazard evaluation. Use this webpage⁴⁶ to find your state weatherization administrator.

Conclusion

To live independently and safely in the community, many people with disabilities and older adults need home modifications, repairs, and weatherization. These needs are particularly acute in rural areas, among renters, and for individuals with low incomes. Partnerships among aging, disability, and health organizations with the housing sector can bring about long-term change. Successful partnerships have increased access to these services and improved service coordination for these populations.

There are many different forms that these partnerships can take, and a variety of ways they can address the needs in their community. The first step is to develop a relationship and begin to build a partnership using the steps and resources in this action guide. Consider how you might adapt or replicate the featured models and strategies. Additional information on home modifications, accessibility, and cross-sector partnerships is available on the HSRC website.⁴⁷

Endnotes

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