

Post-Accident BARRIERFREE HOMES

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Suitable Housing Choices to Meet Needs

Discharge Planning Options

After a traumatic accident causing physical injury to the victim, families have many decisions to make – some of them life-and-death decisions. Emotional and physical energy is spent on the long road to recovery. But eventually, discharge is imminent. However, discharge to where? For many, the home they knew may no longer meet their needs. Temporary or permanent accessible living accommodations may be required.

Take for Instance the Story of Brett

Brett was an international-level gymnast. Originally from Eastern Ontario, he was training in Western Canada. While training he had a misstep and suffered a neck injury resulting in quadriplegia. He was transferred back to Ontario for his care.

First the family dealt with the acute medical emergency, followed by months in a Toronto Rehabilitation Centre. The whole family – parents and siblings – were impacted by the accident. Worrying

or even thinking about housing was the last thing on their minds.

Brett's parents had already moved temporarily to Toronto when Brett was in hospital. But as rehabilitation progressed, discharge began to be discussed. However, discharge also meant Brett had to live nearby to continue rehabilitation as an outpatient. The apartment Brett's parents were renting would not be suitable for Brett's mobility needs.

Unfortunately, this story is not unique. I see it all too often. Brett had to actually stay in hospital longer than he needed simply because the family could not find suitable accessible housing. In fact, if finding suitable housing had taken any longer, Brett would have been discharged to a nursing home – a totally inappropriate option for a 19-year-old young man.

But what options were available? Sadly, as Lindsey Kozack, Case Manager at Practice in Rehabilitation explains, the options are very limited.

“It is a horrendous situation for individuals to find suitable housing after an injury such as damage to the spinal cord. Suitable housing is not

always available at the time of discharge. Although many condominium buildings are wheelchair accessible, the units themselves are generally not. As a result, the need is critical. And sometimes, if the patient is younger, the housing has to accommodate a parent or other significant adult as well. The search can take months.”

As with every aspect of the client's care after the accident, a team approach is critical when planning for a discharge. Everyone has a part to play, including the Lawyer, Case Manager, Occupational Therapist (OT), Home Modification Expert and, my role, the Barrier Free Real Estate Specialist. The common goal is to ensure the client can be discharged to a home that will meet his or her needs, including mobility, comfort, safety and budget.

My first step is to seek feedback from the OT to understand the client's needs. Then, I research the available housing options and ask for input from the home modification specialist. Once all of the information is gathered, the options are presented to the family for consideration. Before the real estate deal is firm, the OT confirms that the space



and modifications will actually work for the individual's mobility needs.

Post Accident Residential Options

Fortunately, elements of accessibility, universal design, and barrier free living are becoming more common, particularly since the province is implementing legislation to increase accessibility for Ontarians. Nevertheless, the situation is far from ideal. Just like the many options available to make a home accessible or barrier free, the options for suitable housing after a traumatic accident are also diverse. None are perfect and the costs vary substantially.

Houses

In the event of a permanent disability, an individual or family may need to consider a house that is either already barrier-free/wheelchair accessible, or can be modified to meet all of the client's needs. Homes that are fully accessible come in many different styles and layouts. Thanks to advances in products to help increase accessibility, even a two-story home can be barrier-free. And of course, in some situations, the family member with the disability may not need access to the whole house.

Retrofitting the family's current home or one to be purchased is also an option.

Depending on the circumstances, the person having the need for an accessible home will have a list of features needed to make the home suitable for his or her situation. Features can range from extensive modifications such as a barrier-free washroom including toilet, sink and roll-in shower, lower kitchen counters and easy access to the stove, sink and cupboards, to doors that can be easily opened, level door thresholds, and accessible light fixtures and thermostats.

The Acosta family is an example of the collaboration involved in helping the client move from traumatic accident to a home that would provide barrier-free living.

Mr. Acosta had been involved in an accident leaving him with quadriplegia. Mr. Acosta and his daughter Michelle needed to find a post-accident wheelchair-accessible home.

After receiving a referral from the Case Manager, I consulted with the professionals involved to identify the family's specific needs, and I began the process to research and identify a Brampton home that could be modified.

Each member of the Acosta team worked together closely to develop the perfect solution. I found a home that

had the space and layout that could meet the family's needs. The Case Manager coordinated the details including confirming financing. The Adapt-Able Design Group assessed the house and developed a practical design to suit the family's unique needs.

The result? The two-story home was modified to include a main floor accessible bedroom and an ensuite bathroom for Mr. Acosta, and the second floor living space was left as is for Michelle. The biggest challenge was providing actual access to the home for Mr. Acosta. A solution was found by installing a wheelchair platform lift to provide entry to and from the garage to the main floor of the home. In this particular case, the sellers of the home agreed to allow a hole to be made in the garage ceiling to confirm if adequate ceiling height was available for the lift.

In situations like this, the role of Adapt-Able Design is critical. They visited the home and confirmed my assessment that the home was suitable. They consulted with Mr. Acosta and his rehabilitation team before completing drawings, obtaining permits, and managing the project through to completion.

Their expertise is often sought by both lawyers and insurance companies to determine what accessibility

modifications are required, and to assist in quantifying costs for the purpose of settlements.

As Jeffrey Baum, President of the Adapt-Able Design Group says, “Finding the right home – one that can be made accessible within the budget and that the entire family likes – is always difficult. We obviously have better and faster success when a real estate agent understands all of the needs and has the patience to work toward creating a solution instead of just selling houses”. It is important to have a team player who is very proactive and understands the process.

Condominiums

There are many advantages to purchasing an accessible condominium. A condo is generally easier since maintenance of the building and grounds are included in fees and handled by outside contractors. But just as there are some elements that are positive, there are many considerations to take into account.

Renovations may not be as easy to make in a condo unit. Plumbing can be a particular challenge since toilet drains, floor drains and main water lines cannot be moved and this has to be factored into any renovations that are required.

The accessibility of the whole building must be closely inspected. Take into account entrances to every part of the building particularly at the main entrance, parking area and the amenities, including the recreation, social and laundry facilities. Automatic door openers are also critical. Carpeting in the lobby may look nice but will make it harder to navigate with a wheelchair. The underground parking may need to accommodate the height of the client's vehicle, provide transfer space and an accessible path to enter the building.

There is wide variation in what condos can offer for the unique needs of each client.

Rentals

Unfortunately, barrier-free or wheelchair-accessible rentals are very rare. Although accessible rentals generally command a higher rent than traditional units, landlords rarely allow a unit to be modified for a variety of reasons, including cost.

The high demand for rentals and the low supply provides an opportunity for investors – but a challenge for the renter.

Short Term Stay Accessible Hotel Rooms

As a result of recent legislation and increased awareness about the whole topic of accessibility and the built environment, many newer hotels have one- and two-bedroom suites with roll-in showers. This can be a very good option in the short-term, however, it can be very costly over the long-term.

Assisted Living and Long-Term Care Residences

Residents in facilities that offer assisted living or long-term care will range in age and care required. However, the majority will still be seniors.

Services will vary from one assisted living facility to the next. It is important to compare what is offered and the costs.

Long-Term Care Homes, often referred to as Nursing Homes, are licensed by the Ontario Ministry of Health and are intended for people who need the availability of 24-hour nursing care, supervision or higher levels of personal care. In Ontario, access to a long-term care bed is coordinated by the Community Care Access Centers or CCAC. No matter where your client

lives, there will be a process they will have to follow to access a long-term care bed. And waiting lists can be quite long.

Options Within a Growing Market

There is a lot to consider and, often, time is of the essence when suitable housing is needed after a catastrophic accident. The majority of the clients I work with usually choose between buying an accessible house or condominium. Generally-speaking, it is easier to find the right house or condo in the client's preferred location and budget. And clients have more control over modifying the space to meet their needs.

Professionally-modified homes and condos – while becoming more common – are still in short supply. Demand is high though, created in part by our aging population and the fact that one-third of Canadians aged 65 years and over have some sort of mobility challenge.

Homes that have been custom built along with ones that have been modified to be barrier-free, have features that appeal to everyone regardless of their mobility. And with the increasing demand for barrier-free homes, the re-sale value of these homes is only increasing.

All of these options and decisions take time. Planning has to begin as soon as is practical during the recovery phase after the accident.



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