



# Accessible Home

By Rosemarie Rossetti, Ph.D.

## How to Modify a Wheelchair-Friendly Apartment or Condominium

In my last column, I recounted my experience looking for a temporary accessible apartment while my husband Mark and I waited to move into our new home — a specially designed residence that which will double as the Universal Design Living Laboratory ([www.udll.com](http://www.udll.com)). With luck and diligence we were able to locate a place that met most of our needs. Even though our time in this space was limited, we had to make some changes to enable me to live with it in my wheelchair for the weeks this would be our home.

I resolved to live with some of the frustrating inconveniences that our temporary apartment presented: thick carpeting, 36-inch high countertops in the kitchen, high kitchen cabinets that were out of reach for me, cooktop and oven controls on the back panel, and the freezer section out of reach on top of the refrigerator.

I was told by the apartment manager that a van-accessible parking place with a curb cut for me to use was located three buildings away, 330 feet from my apartment. Management was not legally required to build a closer curb cut to my apartment since the sidewalk was continuous.

I made a list of modifications that the apartment maintenance person would be able to do, such as install an adjustable height hand-held shower faucet and grab bar. I supplied the parts. I also asked the management to order 5-foot-long control rods for all of the window blinds. This makes it easier for me to open and close the blinds from a seated position. The maintenance

person also installed long chains on the ceiling fans so that I could reach them easily to turn the fan and light on and off. He also removed two closet doors that were in my way, and then installed another towel bar in the bathroom.

Here are some of the items that you can look for when selecting your next rental unit:

- Accessible parking on a level, continual path of travel to the rental unit
- No steps to get into the unit
- Threshold less than half an inch at the main door
- At least 32 inches of clearance at all doorways
- Adequate space to transfer to the toilet, bath tub/shower
- Adequate room for a shower chair
- Counter heights in the kitchen and bathrooms that are appropriate for you
- Flooring material that is easy to roll on
- Thermostat at a visual height



- Closet rods at a reachable height and space to maneuver in the closet
- 50 percent of the cabinets should be accessible in the kitchen and bathrooms
- Adequate space to open and close the oven door
- Easy reach of controls for cooktop, oven, microwave and garbage disposal
- Refrigerator/freezer with side-by-side doors
- Reinforced walls in the bathrooms and grab bars where appropriate
- Hallways that are easy for you to navigate
- Lever handles on all doors, if round door handles are difficult for you to use
- Reachable light switches and electrical outlets in all rooms
- Reachable and ample number of towel bars in bathrooms
- Bathroom mirrors at an accessible height

- Adequate space in the laundry room to navigate and operate the washer and dryer. (Front loading laundry appliances are easier to access than top loading appliances.)

A person with a disability is protected by the Fair Housing Act. The key to this Act as it relates to rental units is that in most cases, reasonable modifications must be allowed by the owner for the tenant with a disability. A reasonable modification is a structural change made to existing premises, occupied or to be occupied by a person with a disability, in order to afford this person full enjoyment of the premises. These modifications can include structural changes to interiors and exteriors of dwellings and to common and public use areas. A request for a reasonable modification may be made at any time during the tenancy.

If you are looking to rent an apartment or condominium for a

long period of time you may want to make your own investment to make modifications that do not fall into the category of "reasonable modification." For example, you can change the carpet to hardwood flooring; however, you will need to pay all expenses and agree that this flooring will stay when you move.

For modifications the apartment complex agrees to make, put these in writing as a part of your lease agreement. Make sure the details are included as to who is responsible to buy the parts and install them. This will save you time and aggravation later.

*Rosemarie Rossetti, Ph.D. is building a national model universal design home in metropolitan Columbus, Ohio. To learn more about the Universal Design Living Laboratory go to: [www.UDDL.com](http://www.UDDL.com).*



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