

# The Hour

## 'Strong demand' remains for accessible housing in Connecticut

Erin Kayata Feb. 15, 2021 Updated: Feb. 15, 2021 10:39 a.m.



An example of an accessible kitchen built with wheelchair users in mind at Ojakian Commons in Simsbury, Conn.

Photo: Picasa /

It's not something people think about until they're there. But many in wheelchairs face accessibility issues wherever they go, particularly when it comes to housing.

There's walk-ups without elevator access. Narrow door frames you can't fit your chair through. Carpeting that makes it hard to move your chair around.

Between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020, the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities had over 100 housing complaints filed with them. Of these, 52 were related to physical disability while another seven were related to guide dog access.



1of3 Transfer shower at Ojakian Commons in Simsbury, Conn. allows people in wheelchairs to use the shower easily.

2of3 An accessible shower for people with multiple sclerosis built in Ojakian Commons in Simsbury, Conn.

3of3 Ojakian Commons in Simsbury, Conn. is the region's first affordable housing complex made accessible for people with disabilities. The complex, geared towards people with MS, fills a gap in the housing market for affordable and accessible housing.

Inaccessibility is what Andre Tomlinson, who has multiple sclerosis, found when apartment hunting. Tomlinson, 47, was diagnosed with MS in 2010 after two years of fighting symptoms like dizziness and balance issues. A salesperson for an electrical distributor in Hartford, he soon found himself using a walker and unable to work.

At the time of his diagnosis, Tomlinson was living in his own Hartford apartment, but soon moved back in with his parents as his symptoms worsened. His parents lived in a second floor walk-up, so they had to install a wheelchair lift for Tomlinson.

Tomlinson, who was using a wheelchair regularly by 2014, eventually went on the hunt for his own place, but had a hard time finding an accessible apartment. A lot of places he was looking at in Hartford had narrow doorways that couldn't accommodate his wheelchair.

"A lot of the decent ones, they would be either too expensive or they didn't have rental assistance," Tomlinson said. "It was kind of hard...It was just a lot of research and making sure it was the right place and someplace you'd be comfortable. If I wasn't disabled, I would've found somewhere decent but the simple fact is you have to be aware of handicap situations. At one point I was distraught about everything. I didn't want to go anywhere or do anything."

While the Fair Housing Act requires housing to meet certain accessibility needs, a lot of housing built before the act was implemented in 1988 doesn't meet this standard. The act also requires landlords to make reasonable accommodations to provide people with disabilities equal housing opportunities. But this is easier said than done.

Stephen Byers, a staff attorney with Disability Rights Connecticut, said one of the biggest issues is lack of access to a building from the outside. Many housing units are built without ramps either into the building itself or to the parking lot. Other times, door frames are too small to accommodate wheelchairs which can happen inside the building as well. Byers said he had one client who slept in their living room because they couldn't get their wheelchair into their bedroom.

The issues go beyond wheelchair users: Byers said he's seen people with asthma told they can't have an air conditioner in their unit despite the necessary air quality improvements they provide. People then often file complaints incorrectly to address this or the complaints take awhile to resolve and often involve lengthy and complex legal battles.

"That's an issue we run into quite regularly," he said. "The biggest problem with this is you file complaints and no one does anything on them for months."

This is often complicated by the fact many people with disabilities are unemployed or underemployed, according to Jennifer Jenkins, Disability Rights Connecticut's lead advocate, and don't have the resources for newer, often more accessible housing or to fight a legal battle.

"In general, people with disabilities... have more likelihood to be on social security and be on subsidized housing," she said. "Many of those spots are in areas where housing is older and in less desirable neighborhoods. Just finding the housing is something you hear about all the time. The rents are high in Connecticut. There isn't a lot integrated into other housing complexes. I think developers are really short sighted in working on providing adequate housing for people in Connecticut."

Ken Regan, vice president of the New York-based Regan Development Corporation, is trying to change that by specializing in affordable and accessible housing. Regan Development is behind Ojakian Commons in Simsbury which is New England's first accessible and affordable supportive housing development for people with disabilities, specifically people with multiple sclerosis who receive services from the National MS Society and Favarh - The ARC of the Farmington Valley. Forty of the units are reserved for people with MS while another seven are for people with other types of disabilities.

Ojakian Commons was built based on feedback from those with MS. It features automatic door openers, wide door frames and hard surface flooring for easier access for those in wheelchairs. The cabinets and closets have slide out shelving and there are extra grab bars and transfer units for the showers. The fridge and freezer are side-by-side for easier access for those in wheelchairs. Outlets and light switches are also at a wheelchair-friendly height and there's a remote controlled HVAC system. There's also a van and ride services to provide transportation to residents who can't drive themselves.

Regan, who built a similar complex in New Jersey, decided to focus on accessible housing after being diagnosed with MS himself 15 years ago. Regan also worked with the state to make sure the apartments are affordable housing.

"That sort of woke me up to the needs out there," he said. "It's not to say there weren't accessible apartments prior, but it...allowed me to sort of explore what things were needed to help people in that situation...The alternatives for people in this situation are to live in substandard housing or worse, if their situation deteriorates, they have to move into a nursing home. It's way more costly for the state to have people living in more institutional settings.

"If you can have people out in the community, living in the community, the overall cost to help that person drops substantially," he added. "Connecticut has tried very hard and succeeded in doing that. The problem is there's a much greater need than there are programs out there to help this type of situation. It'd be great if someone could do this for every apartment building...but unfortunately with budgets they way they are there's way more people who need this than are available."

But Regan said he thinks it's possible for every developer to create accessible housing.

"In all new construction now, it's easy to do and the cost of doing it upfront is much less than if you were to go back and try to rework an apartment for accessibility after the fact," he said. "There's things, if you think about them upfront before you build buildings, it's not hugely expensive. There's no reason at this point anyone building new construction apartments in Connecticut shouldn't be doing this off the bat. It makes it easier and there's a very strong demand for this."

Tomlinson himself happened upon a flier for Ojakian Commons when it was first opening and was able to move in around 2015. He still lives there now with his 9-year-old daughter. He often takes advantage of the development's transportation services and enjoys living with other people who can relate to the struggles of life with MS, along with the peace and quiet suburban Simsbury has to offer.

"It's very accessible so I have more than enough room in here to wheel around," he said. "It's made a big difference...I definitely feel I lucked out on a good one. It was a blessing, definitely a blessing."

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