Defining Accessibility

One definition of accessibility is “an umbrella term for all aspects which influence a person’s ability to function within an environment.”¹ Put another way, accessibility is a measure of how simply a person can participate in an activity.

Accessibility takes many forms in many places: physical environments like homes and offices, transportation like buses, and websites with speak-to-text features. Accessibility continues to become more and more relevant to all of us.

Tackling Accessibility

Barriers to physical mobility are typically tackled two ways – by using assistive devices and/or by making the most of the built environment through design or modifications.

Assistive Devices are tools or equipment that helps individuals move around, eat, get dressed, and do other basic activities of daily life.

Wheelchairs and scooters, including manual wheelchairs (propelled by the user) and power wheelchairs (using an electric motor).

Canes, crutches and walkers assist the walking and movement of individuals, typically by transferring some body weight away from the leg or foot, or to provide stability when walking.

Smaller items like reachers or grabbers, adapted kitchen implements, and other day-to-day items can assist you in activities of daily living.

Home automation solutions, including automatic door openers, light and temperature controls, and internet and television controls linked to tablets or smartphones.

**Modifications to the built environment** are changes made to make a space or structure usable by everyone. In the home, modifications help people be more independent and safe and they reduce the risk of injury to themselves or carers.

**Doors**
- **Thresholds** are the strip of metal, stone, or wood that is located on the bottom of a doorway and that you walk, step or roll over to pass through the doorway. For accessibility, thresholds need to be as “flush” as possible with the flooring on either side of the doorway, so a wheel can easily pass over it. Typically, 1/8” thresholds are viable for wheelchair users, as achieving completely flush thresholds can be very difficult.
- **Lever door handles** refer to the hardware used to open doors that is easily used by anyone.
- **Standard swing doors** are the most common doors, and they swing open and closed.
- **Barn doors** are sliding doors that move along a metal track, and remain flat to the wall.
- **Pocket doors** have an open doorjamb on one side and are pushed inside the wall. When open, they are entirely inside the adjoining wall and take up no room in the rooms on either side.
- **Automatic doors** are sliding or swing doors with a motion sensor or accessible button that automatically open when a user approaches or activates the button.

**Counters**
- **Lowered counters** refer to counters that are typically 30” high.
- **Height-adjustable countertops** can be made higher or lower using a crank or electric motor.
- **Wheel-under counters** have open space underneath the countertop surface for the legs and feet of a wheelchair user.

**Lifts**
- **Ceiling lifts** (also called track lifts) use a metal track installed on the ceiling with a sling and motorized lift attached to the track.
- **Portable mechanical lifts** (such as Hoyer lifts) are stand-alone machines that also use a sling to transfer people from one place to another.
- **Stair lifts** use a track typically attached to the floor and wall along a staircase, with a chair that moves from one end of the track to the other end of the track.
- **Porch lifts** (also called vertical platform lift or deck lifts) are devices with a platform that travels up and down a shaft/tower to move a user from one level to another.

**Bathrooms**
- **Wet rooms** are open concept bathrooms, where everything can get safely wet, with no thresholds or change in flooring surface.
- **Accessible showers** (also called a curbless shower, wheel-in or roll-in shower) are showers with no lip, a continuous floor surface that extends from the bathroom directly into the shower space.

**Other Modifications**
- **Grab bars** are safety devices that are attached securely to a wall to provide support for individuals with poor balance, decreased mobility or who fatigue when standing.
- **Transfer poles** are floor-to-ceiling grab bars, often with horizontal extensions, that provide support for users during transfers (especially in spaces where there is no wall to attach a conventional grab bar).
- **Turning circle** (also called a turning radius) is the circular space a person in a wheelchair needs to turn in a full circle without having their movement impeded (typically 5’ in diameter).
- **Hard-surface flooring** (also called vinyl plank flooring) practical, synthetic flooring normally installed in industrial or commercial grade as it can withstand the wear and tear of wheelchairs and other equipment.