RI REALTORS®

Helping Clients Who Use Wheelchairs Navigate the Home Search Process

A Practical Guide for REALTORS®

Clients who use wheelchairs or other mobility aids may encounter barriers at different stages of the real estate process, including when visiting properties or meeting with real estate professionals in brokerage offices. Much of the nation's housing stock was built without accessibility in mind, and some offices and properties may present challenges for individuals with mobility limitations.

At the same time, the need for accessible housing continues to grow. According to the Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging, 13% of Rhode Islanders have a disability, slightly higher than the national average. As the population ages, more consumers will seek housing that accommodates mobility needs or allows them to safely remain in their homes as their needs change.

REALTORS® are often the first professionals whom consumers contact when beginning a housing search. By considering accessibility both in-office interactions and when showing properties, REALTORS® can help ensure that all clients can participate fully in the home search process.

Housing Accessibility and Current Housing Stock

Many homes present barriers for individuals who use wheelchairs or other mobility aids. Research indicates that only about 1% of homes in the United States include key accessibility features, such as step-free entrances, wider doorways, and accessible switches and controls.

However, a home that is not immediately accessible may still meet a client's needs with modifications or adjustments. REALTORS® can assist by providing clear, objective information about a property's layout, dimensions, and potential barriers so clients can determine whether the home may be suitable.

Why This Matters to REALTORS®

- ✓ 13% of Rhode Islanders have a disability
- ✓ The population is aging, increasing demand for accessible housing
- ✓ Many clients want to age in place rather than relocate later
- ✓ Only about 1% of homes nationwide contain key accessibility features

Providing accurate property information can help clients determine whether a home may meet their needs.

Accessibility Considerations for REALTOR® Offices

Clients may initially meet with a real estate professional at a brokerage office before visiting properties. Ensuring that office environments are accessible helps provide equal access to real estate services. When possible, REALTORS® and brokerage offices may wish to consider:

- Step-free building entrances or accessible ramps
- Accessible parking spaces and pathways to the office
- Temporary ramps
- Doorways wide enough for wheelchair access
- Meeting spaces that allow adequate room for mobility devices
- Accessible restrooms when available

REALTORS® can consider alternative arrangements, such as meeting clients at an accessible location, conducting virtual meetings, or meeting directly at accessible properties. Providing flexible meeting options helps ensure that clients can comfortably participate in the home search process.

When a Property Is Not Accessible to a Client

A client who uses a wheelchair may inquire about a property that they cannot easily enter due to stairs, narrow doorways, or other physical barriers. Even when a property is not accessible, REALTORS® can still help clients evaluate whether the home may meet their needs.

Providing clear, objective information allows clients to assess the property and determine whether modifications or adjustments may make the home usable. Helpful approaches include:

→ Offer a Guided Virtual Tour

Walk through the property using a phone or video device while speaking with the client in real time. This allows the client to ask questions and direct attention to specific areas of the home.

→ Provide Photos and Video

Capture images or video of key spaces such as entrances, hallways, bathrooms, kitchens, and other areas that may affect accessibility. This allows the client to review the property more closely.

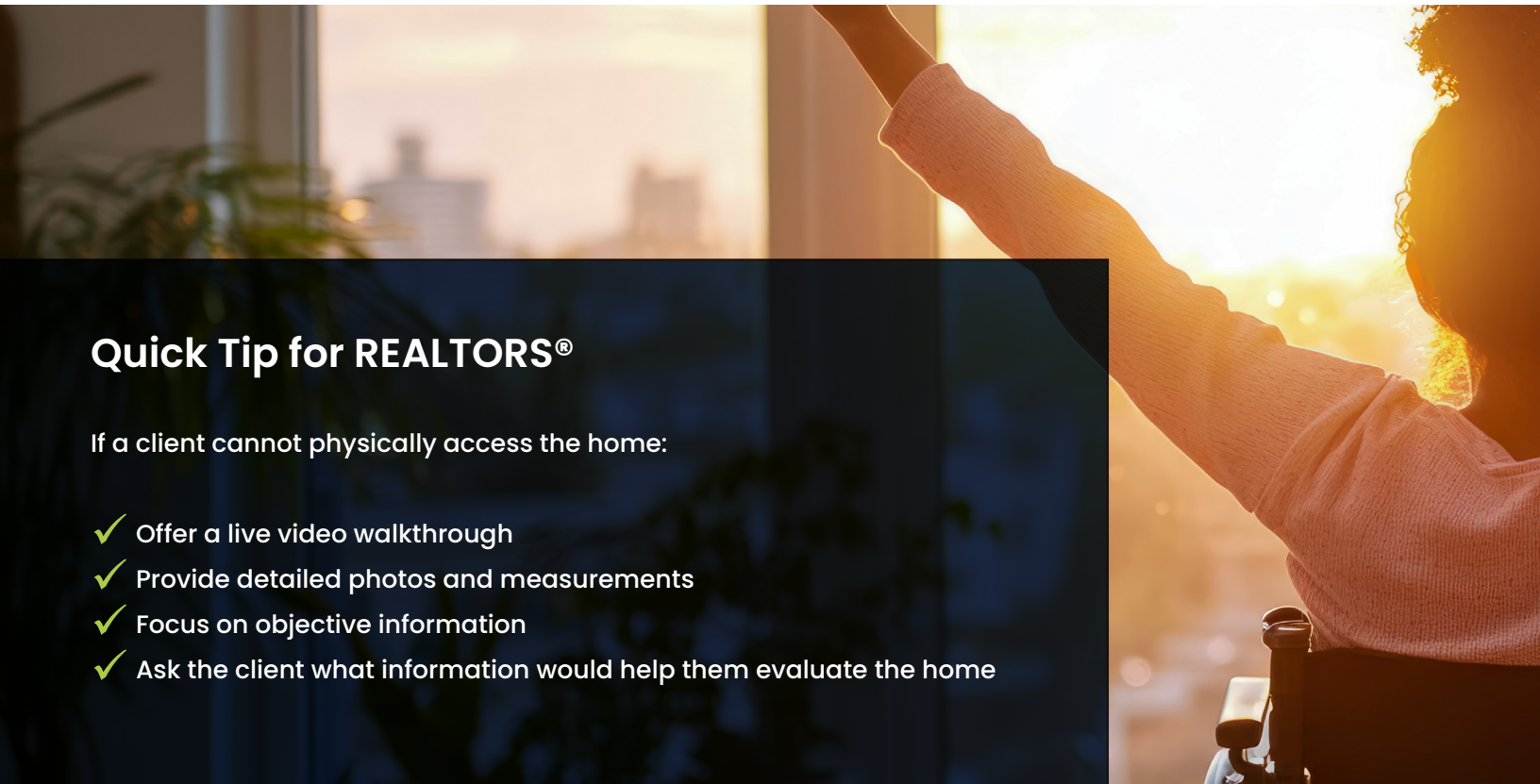
→ Share Objective Property Details

Provide information about the layout and dimensions of the home so the client can assess whether modifications may make the property usable.

Avoid making assumptions about what a client can or cannot do. Instead, focus on providing accurate information so the client can make an informed decision.

Key Accessibility Features: Understanding "Visitability"

Some homes may include basic features that make them easier to enter and use, even if they are not fully accessible. This concept is often called visitability. Visitability focuses on a small number of design elements that allow a person who uses a wheelchair or other mobility aid to enter and navigate the main level of a home.



Quick Tip for REALTORS®

If a client cannot physically access the home:

- ✓ Offer a live video walkthrough
- ✓ Provide detailed photos and measurements
- ✓ Focus on objective information
- ✓ Ask the client what information would help them evaluate the home

A visitable home typically includes:

- At least one zero-step entrance
- Doorways wide enough for wheelchair access
- A bathroom on the main level

These features allow someone using a wheelchair to enter the home and access essential spaces on the main floor. Even modest accessibility features like these can significantly improve usability for people with mobility limitations and can make homes more functional for residents and visitors of all ages and abilities.

What Is Universal Design?

Universal design refers to housing features that make a home usable for people of all ages and abilities.

- ✓ Step-free entrances
- ✓ Wider doorways and hallways
- ✓ Lever-style door handles
- ✓ Curbless showers
- ✓ Lower light switches and controls

Accessibility Information REALTORS® Can Provide to Clients

Consider collecting the following information to help a client evaluate whether a property may meet their needs.

Entry and Parking

- ☐ Number of steps to the entrance
- ☐ Height of steps or threshold
- ☐ Distance from parking area to entrance
- ☐ Presence of ramps or step-free entry

Doorways and Hallways

- ☐ Width of exterior doors
- ☐ Width of interior doors
- ☐ Width of hallways

Accessibility guidelines generally recommend at least 32 inches of clear doorway width for wheelchair access.

Bathrooms

- ☐ Doorway width
- ☐ Floor space for wheelchair movement
- ☐ Type of shower or tub
- ☐ Location of sink and toilet

Kitchen

- ☐ Height of countertops
- ☐ Space between counters or islands
- ☐ Height of appliances

General Layout

- ☐ Location of bedrooms
- ☐ Location of bathrooms
- ☐ Whether essential living spaces are on the main level

Providing this information can help clients determine whether the home may be suitable or whether modifications might be possible.

Accessibility Modifications May Expand Housing Options

A home that is not currently accessible may still meet a buyer's or renter's needs if certain modifications can be made. Relatively common improvements can significantly increase accessibility and usability for people with mobility limitations.
Common modifications include:

- Installing ramps to create step-free entry
- Widening doorways to accommodate wheelchair access
- Adding grab bars in bathrooms
- Installing walk-in or roll-in showers
- Adjusting counter or cabinet heights
- Installing stair lifts or residential elevators

While REALTORS® should avoid providing construction or design advice, they can help by directing clients to qualified professionals who specialize in accessibility modifications or aging-in-place improvements.

Entry Barriers: Challenges and Possible Solutions

Steps at the main entrance are one of the most common barriers for individuals who use wheelchairs or other mobility aids. Many homes were built with raised entrances or front steps, which can limit or prevent access. Access may still be possible through modifications or alternative entry points.

Potential solutions may include:

- Ramps
- Alternative entrances such as through a garage or side door
- Exterior pathway improvements

Because ramps and other structural modifications must meet applicable building codes and safety standards, clients should consult licensed

Rhode Island Resource: Livable Home Modification Grant Program

Rhode Island provides financial assistance to help residents with disabilities make accessibility improvements to their homes. The Livable Home Modification Grant Program helps fund modifications that improve safety and accessibility.

Program highlights:

- ✓ Pays 50% of modification costs up to $4,500
- ✓ May be used for ramps, widened doorways, accessible bathrooms, and other modifications
- ✓ Designed to help residents remain safely in their homes

Clients can contact the Governor's Commission on Disabilities for application information.

contractors or local building officials before making any changes to the property.

Rentals and Accessibility

Accessibility issues can arise in rental housing as well. Under fair housing laws, tenants with disabilities may request reasonable modifications to rental property. These are physical changes that allow the tenant to use and enjoy the dwelling.

Examples include:

- Installing ramps
- Adding grab bars
- Lowering cabinets, counters, or switches

In most privately owned rental housing, the tenant is responsible for the cost of the modification, although the landlord must generally allow the change if it is reasonable. Tenants may also be required to restore the property to its original condition when they move out.

Fair Housing and Disability Protections

Disability is a protected class under the federal Fair Housing Act and Rhode Island fair housing laws. When working with buyers or renters who use wheelchairs or other mobility aids, REALTORS® must provide the same professional services offered to all clients.

Key principles include:

- **Provide equal access to housing opportunities**

  REALTORS® should not refuse to show a property because it is not accessible.

- **Avoid assumptions**

  Do not assume whether a property will or will not work for a client.

- **Focus on objective information**

  Provide measurements, descriptions, photos, or virtual tours so the client can evaluate the property themselves.

- **Respect client preferences**

  Ask the client how they would like to view or evaluate the property.

- **Understand reasonable modifications**

  Tenants with disabilities may request physical changes to a rental property that allow them to use and enjoy the home.

Providing clear, objective information helps clients make informed housing decisions while supporting compliance with fair housing laws.

BEST PRACTICES FOR REALTORS® WHEN ASSISTING CLIENTS WITH MOBILITY LIMITATIONS

When assisting clients who use wheelchairs or other mobility aids, REALTORS® can provide better service and reduce potential risk by focusing on clear communication and objective information.

Focus on Objective Information

Provide factual descriptions and measurements rather than subjective opinions.

Avoid Assumptions

Do not assume what a client can or cannot do based on a disability.

Ask How the Client Would Like to View the Property

Some clients may prefer virtual tours or additional photos and measurements.

Document Communications

Keep records of information provided to clients regarding property features and limitations.

Refer Clients to Qualified Professionals

Contractors, accessibility specialists, and building officials can provide guidance on modifications and code requirements.

Supporting Housing Access for All Clients

Accessible housing options can be limited, but REALTORS® play an important role in helping clients navigate accessibility challenges throughout the real estate process.

By providing clear information, offering flexible meeting options, and connecting clients with accessibility resources, REALTORS® can help ensure that all consumers can participate fully in the home search process and make informed housing decisions.

For more information, contact the RI REALTORS Legal Department at legal@rirealtors.org.

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