

As Judy's grandmother approached retirement, she began to ponder the future of her granddaughter, who has a severe disability. The grandmother had always helped Judy's parents, who sometimes struggled to meet all Judy's needs and maintain a home for their other children.

Judy's grandmother and parents began exploring the options for placement in a residential facility, but were disappointed to find that, in some cases, Judy did not qualify or, in other cases, there was a long waiting list. Instead of waiting for the system to meet their needs, Judy's family set out to make things happen. Judy's grandmother established a charitable fund and began raising money to build a home for her granddaughter and other children like her in Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

In six years of arduous work, Judy's family raised enough money to build the home, found three children who were compatible housemates, and received a commitment from the county board to provide support services. Reaching these goals was possible because of the generosity of many individuals from the community and the cooperative effort of several community organizations.

A foundation funded the home with a non-interest-bearing loan. The home is owned by a subsidiary of a nonprofit housing corporation. The county board uses Supported Living or Individual Options Waivers to pay for support services for each of the children.

The families established a nonprofit board. Each of the parents serves on the board. Although the children receive SSI, the household expenses (food, clothing, transportation, utilities) exceed the monthly income of the children, so their parents are responsible for paying the remainder. Because none of the families have deep pockets, they will need to continue to raise funds to help with the costs.

Although the parents are no longer responsible for the day-to-day care of their children, they bear a great deal of responsibility, as a team, for the management of the home and have undertaken a significant financial burden. They can continue to be very involved in the lives of their children and influence their care and daily routine, more than in a group home or other facility. As Judy's mother explains, "You have more responsibility for your child's happiness."

# HOUSING

How to develop and maintain a family-directed home depends on individual needs and unique circumstances. The information offered here is intended only as a guide to available options and issues that should be considered.

## RENTING VS. PURCHASING

Although owning a home will usually provide greater stability and financial security, in some situations, renting may be advantageous, at least initially.

These reasons include:

- **Ensuring that housemates and families are compatible.** If individuals decide, after a time, that they do not want to live together, moving from a rental property is much easier than from a purchased home, because no one has made a large financial investment.
- **Making sure that a setting works for an individual.** Renting first can prevent a financial loss if a change needs to be made. For instance, if an individual is currently in school or post-secondary-school training, his or her eventual job may require a move to a different area. Another individual may have significant behavior issues that the support team believes may improve with greater independence, but they will not be sure until the person has experienced independent living.
- **Exploring ambivalent feelings.** If a person is not sure that he or she is ready to leave the parents' home or is unsure about what type of situation he or she wants to live in, renting may be preferable until the person is more certain.
- **Allowing time to save money and establish credit.** If an individual doesn't have the financial resources to buy a home, it may be better to rent initially.

## RENTING: The Advantages

- *Entry costs are far less than the cost of securing a loan and purchasing a home.*
- *Monthly expenses tend to be more predictable because the landlord takes care of major repairs. There are fewer unexpected costs.*
- *There are fewer responsibilities for upkeep of the home.*
- *It is easier to move without the financial loss of entry costs and equity.*
- *Some apartment complexes include amenities such as swimming pools, party room, etc.*

## RENTING: The Disadvantages

- *Renters do not build equity in property.*
- *Leases end or can be terminated, so there is less stability.*
- *Renters can expect housing costs to go up steadily.*
- *Landlords have control of exterior and interior design.*
- *Landlords may have restrictions, such as no pets.*
- *Frequent change in neighbors may make it difficult to establish and maintain natural supports, or connections in the community.*

## CONSIDERATIONS WHEN RENTING

### *Location, accessibility, nearby transportation...*

those are all things to consider before renting. But for parents of children with disabilities, here are some other considerations:

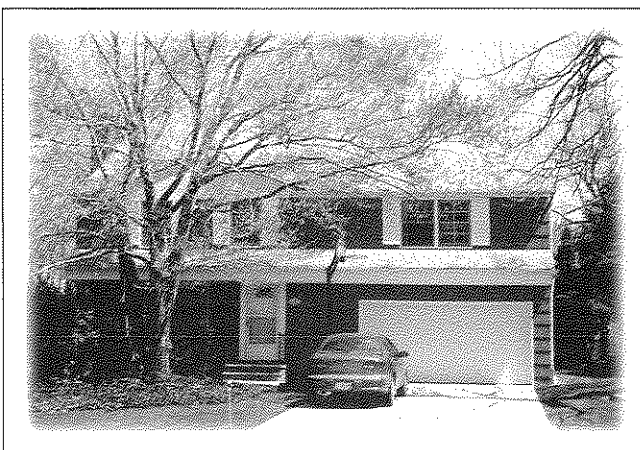
- *Parking for support staff must be adequate.*
- *If support staff need a key to the building or unit, the landlord may need to be informed.*
- *Renter's insurance needs to be figured into the monthly costs.*
- *The lease agreement and all building rules and restrictions should be examined and understood by all parties.*

## HOME OWNERSHIP

If a family decides against renting or is ready to move out of a rented facility into a home, the first decision concerns who will actually own the home. There are several options with advantages and disadvantages to each.

## OCCUPANT-OWNED

Owning a home of one's own is widely considered to be the most secure option and the best financial investment. Parents often assume that home ownership is not an option for children with a disability because their government benefits will be at risk. This is not necessarily true. SSI and Medicaid, for instance, do not consider a home in which an individual lives as a countable asset when determining eligibility. It may also be assumed that an individual with low income cannot afford to purchase a home. Nevertheless, some programs make home ownership possible for people with modest incomes.



## OCCUPANT-OWNED:

### The Advantages

- *The child feels great pride of ownership in his or her own home.*
- *As the mortgage is gradually paid down, the debt decreases while the resale value usually increases.*
- *The living environment is stable.*
- *The owners have maximum control of home.*
- *An individual with a low income or a disability may qualify for programs that can decrease the cost of the home (i.e. Homestead exemptions reduce real estate taxes).*

## OCCUPANT-OWNED:

### The Disadvantages

- *It may be hard to come up with the down-payment and monthly mortgage.*
- *Even if a person has the funds for a down-payment and mortgage, it may be difficult to establish credit history to get a mortgage.*
- *Saving enough money to cover expenses—such as repairs and replacing appliances—could risk government benefits.*
- *The homeowner is responsible for all of the maintenance of the property.*
- *Stability for the home's other residents is at risk if the owner decides to move.*

home, but the guardian would be responsible for managing the home, thus minimizing the owner's control. Additionally, there may be other times when the guardian would need approval from the probate court—such as for selling the property or making major renovations. Seeking court approval can take a significant amount of time. The rules concerning guardianship vary, and specific court processes are up to each county probate court. Specific rules and procedures are available at a county probate court or from an attorney.

- *Some financial advantages may accrue to a homeowner with a disability. If some or all of the financing for the home will have to be secured through a mortgage, the individual may qualify for lower down payments and greater flexibility in loan requirements. A person with a disability may also qualify for other programs that can decrease the overall cost of housing, such as a Homestead Exemption to lower the cost of ownership.*

- *A capital reserve account for maintenance and major expenses can protect government benefits. For example, an escrow account may be established as a provision in the contract with a management company or mortgage company.*

- *Before charging rent to others, the owner should consult a tax professional. Collecting rent to cover expenses in the home in which one lives is not usually considered taxable income. However, if the amount of rent being collected exceeds the actual expenses by a large amount, it can be subject to income tax.*

- *If an individual has difficulty physically maintaining a home, it may be necessary to hire outside contractors to handle lawn care and home maintenance. Most counties in Ohio have local MR/DD housing corporations, which develop and manage special needs housing. Some commercial contractors offer this service, as well. This additional expense must be included in the budget.*

- *If the home is sold, any gain may be taxable and will be considered a capital resource impacting government benefits.*

- *If the homeowner has to move into a different setting, such as a nursing home, the house can be considered a countable resource impacting eligibility for SSI and Medicaid.*

## CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY PURCHASES A HOME

- *Benefits that an individual is receiving might be placed at risk if he or she purchases a home.*
- *If the child has a court-appointed guardian, there may be some road blocks to home ownership. Typically, a person with a legally appointed guardian can own a*

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## ARENT OR RELATIVE OWNERSHIP

Since many parents are more financially secure than their children with disabilities, it often seems best for them to purchase the home. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach.

### RELATIVE-OWNED: The Advantages

- Parents may have better access to funding, and can therefore make a down-payment and mortgage payments more easily. Chances are they will also have established adequate credit history to secure a mortgage.
- Parents have greater control of the home as an asset.
- There is a higher level of stability for the children of parents who own the home.

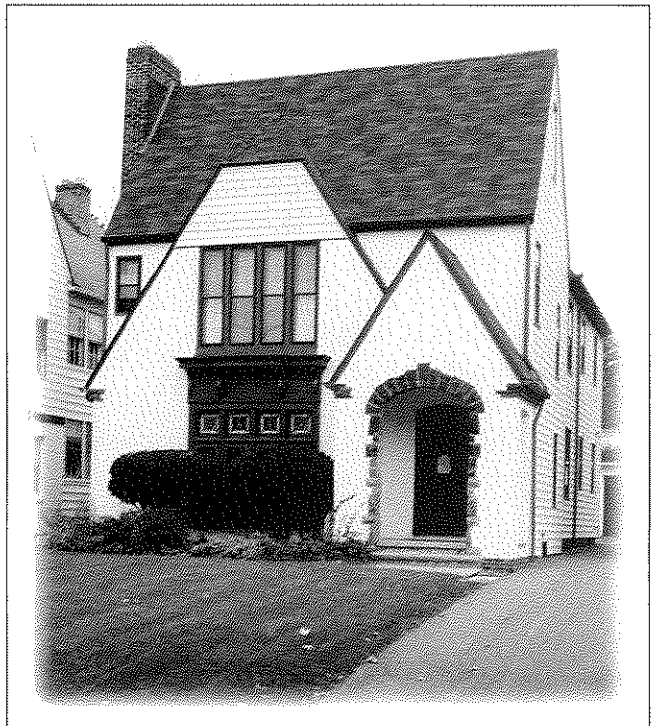
### RELATIVE-OWNED: The Disadvantages

- The home could be at risk if the parents experience financial problems.
- The parent or relative who owns the home assumes liability.
- Ownership could potentially increase parents' tax liability.
- Others living in the home without any ownership interest may experience less stability.
- Ownership includes responsibility to maintain and repair the property.

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR RELATIVE OWNERSHIP

- The house is an asset for the owner of record. If the owner is sued or confronted with an unforeseen event, such as divorce or bankruptcy, the house is at risk. If the owner applies for need-based benefits, such as Medicaid, the home is a countable resource.

- Rent received from the residents of the home is taxable income for the owner. A tax professional should be consulted.
- A written agreement about expenses (repairs, taxes, and so on) is essential, especially if only one parent or family member owns the home and other occupants are renting. For example, if a resident needs accessibility adaptations, would the owner or the resident be responsible?



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## PTIONS FOR OWNERSHIP

Among the options to discuss with an attorney chosen by the family are:

- Joint ownership;
- Trust ownership; and
- Corporate ownership.

More information about these options is included in Appendix A.

## FUNDING THE HOME

In most family-directed projects, parents pool their resources to purchase a house for their children. The stability of the home does not necessarily require, however, that families have significant financial resources. The same amount of money that the average parent spends on a college education or a child's wedding can be enough to put toward a home for a child with a disability. Finances can come from the individual's assets, family assets, support trust assets, or a traditional home mortgage.

Some mortgage programs can make the purchase of a home easier for families. The government also offers programs to finance homes through nonprofit agencies or Public Housing Authorities (PHA). Some families have raised funds through contributions for at least a portion of the home and furnishings.

## MORTGAGE PROGRAMS

To borrow money to purchase the home, considerable research is needed. The best mortgage will depend, in part, on who is actually purchasing the home.

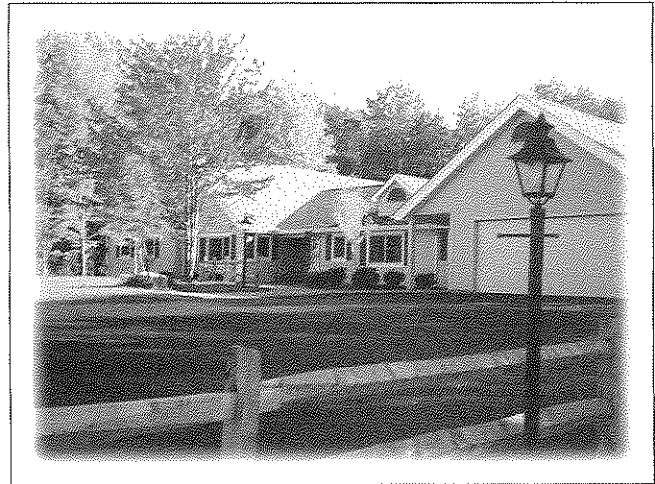
For example, parents over the age of 62 may be able to use a reverse mortgage (see below). If their child is actually purchasing the home, they may be able to take advantage of resources for first-time homebuyers or programs specifically for people with disabilities. Other programs specifically apply to people purchasing a home in certain rural areas or in larger cities.

Families should talk to mortgage lenders and housing coalitions in their area to find out more about what may be available. Some of the available options are standard home loans, reverse mortgages, secondary mortgage markets, FHA loans, government housing programs (including vouchers), tenant-based rental assistance, home-ownership assistance, and other county programs.

## STANDARD HOME LOANS

A standard home loan may offer the easiest option for funding a home, although the process of getting a loan can be complicated. Families who are not familiar with the process should do some research to find the best product.

One of the key questions a bank will ask is whether the home will be owner-occupied or rented to others. The cost of loans for commercial rental properties is typically higher, because lending institutions assume that if a property is not occupied by the owner, there is a greater possibility it will not be as well maintained.



## REVERSE MORTGAGE

A Federally-insured reverse mortgage is an option for parents over the age of 62 who own their own home. A reverse mortgage is a loan against one's home that does not have to be paid back for as long as it is occupied. The amount that can be borrowed depends on the homeowner's age, the home's value and location, and the cost of the loan. The money borrowed can be received in a lump sum or in smaller periodic payments. The money is paid back, with interest, when the last living borrower dies, sells the home, or permanently moves out of the home. Income is not a factor in approval for the loan, because a monthly loan payment is not required.

Some costs associated with the mortgage, such as application fees and closing costs, are typically paid with loan advances. The cost of a reverse mortgage depends on the lender. A reverse mortgage may have tax consequences and can affect eligibility for government benefit programs.

Reverse mortgages are available through private lenders and local and state government agencies. Because reverse mortgages raise many issues, additional research is beneficial. The AARP offers information on reverse mortgages on their website – [www.aarp.org](http://www.aarp.org) – or at 1-800-424-3410.

## S ECONDARY MORTGAGE MARKET

The secondary mortgage market provides more affordable and accessible mortgages to low or middle-income homebuyers. Congress has chartered Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac to provide this service. These companies do not work directly with homebuyers, but purchase mortgages from lenders and resell them to investors in order to make more capital available for lending. Freddie Mac does not recommend specific lenders, but Fannie Mae (1-800-7FANNIE) does.

Fannie Mae has specifically designed a mortgage program for people with disabilities called the Home Choice mortgage. It offers flexibility in down payments, qualifying debt-to-income ratios, and credit histories. The mortgages are available through approved coalitions comprised of organizations and agencies working together to create home-ownership opportunities for people with disabilities. Fannie Mae will provide a list of coalitions in different areas of the country.

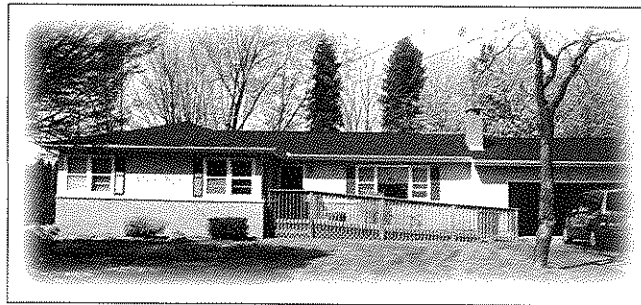
### FHA LOANS

The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has several programs to help people secure home loans through the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). HUD does not loan money directly, but insures loans. This encourages lenders to make credit available to people who would not otherwise qualify for conventional loans, such as first-time home buyers or residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods.

These loans have more flexible requirements for down payments, credit histories, and qualifying income. Applications for these loans can be made directly to a FHA-approved lender. The HUD website at [www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov) lists approved lenders.

## G OVERNMENT HOUSING PROGRAMS

A number of government programs can help with the rental or purchase of a home for low-income people with disabilities. The Public Housing Authority administers most of the programs and applies for funding, then gives the funds to a nonprofit organization. Most such programs are not directly available to individuals.



Taking advantage of government-funded programs requires substantial research and additional work for families. Families must work in conjunction with a government agency or nonprofit organization, which can then facilitate purchasing a home for individuals and families with limited financial resources. Some examples of programs include community block grants, the Ohio Housing Trust Fund, and Section 811 Supportive Housing for Persons with Disabilities.

### HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER PROGRAM (SECTION 8)

One of the most commonly used federal programs for housing is the "Housing Choice Voucher Program." It is still often referred to by its older name, Section 8.

The Housing Choice Voucher Program offers several different types of assistance. Federal money funds the program, but local public-housing authorities and some nonprofit organizations administer it. Programs and funding vary by area. A limited amount of funding is available each year. The local Public Housing Authority (PHA) maintains an applicants' waiting list for Section 8.

### TENANT-BASED RENTAL ASSISTANCE

The primary type of Section 8 assistance is "tenant-based rental assistance." In this program, people with disabilities and low incomes can receive a subsidy to assist with monthly housing costs. The subsidy, provided in the form of a voucher, is used to rent housing of the person's choice. Once a person receives a voucher, he or she looks for an approved apartment or house to rent. The property has to meet certain standards, and the owner has to enter into an agreement with the administering agency. The renter pays a portion of the fair-market rent, established by HUD, usually equal to 30% of the family income, and HUD pays the remainder. The subsidy is based on the cost of moderately priced rental housing in the community. Households with low incomes are eligible for Section 8 vouchers.

## PROJECT-BASED RENTAL ASSISTANCE

A Public Housing Authority is permitted to use up to 20% of its voucher funds for “project-based rental assistance.” In this case, the funding is approved for certain properties for which the PHA has a special agreement with the owner. The PHA refers a person on the waiting list for rental assistance vouchers to the property owner. If the person decides to move from the project-based unit, he or she can not rent another home with the voucher, as one can with tenant-based assistance, but instead would have to go back on the waiting list.

## HOME OWNERSHIP ASSISTANCE

HUD also gives local Public Housing Authorities the option to use Section 8 vouchers to assist families to purchase a home through “Home Ownership Assistance.” PHAs are not required to offer this assistance, and some do not. The program is designed for first-time homebuyers. There are a number of additional eligibility rules and some special conditions to accommodate individuals with a disability.

## VOUCHERS

There are three other types of vouchers that are designed for people with disabilities.

- *Mainstream vouchers* work similarly to tenant-based rental assistance, but are available only to families with a child with disabilities.
- *Certain developments vouchers and designated housing vouchers* are specifically designed to counter public housing that is designated “elderly-only.” Housing choice vouchers can be used when a family member or corporation owns a home.

For all three of these vouchers the process of applying is the same as tenant-based vouchers and individuals and families can still be placed on the waiting list.

Residents should apply to the local Public Housing Authority in their county for a voucher. Then the owner of the home enters into a contract with the PHA. There will be some safety requirements, usually similar to what families would have already considered. The local PHA can be found in the phone book or through HUD.

Funding from the Housing Choice Voucher Program can be complicated. The Technical Assistance

Collaborative has published “Section 8 Made Simple,” which includes much more detail. It is available on-line at [www.tacinc.org](http://www.tacinc.org).

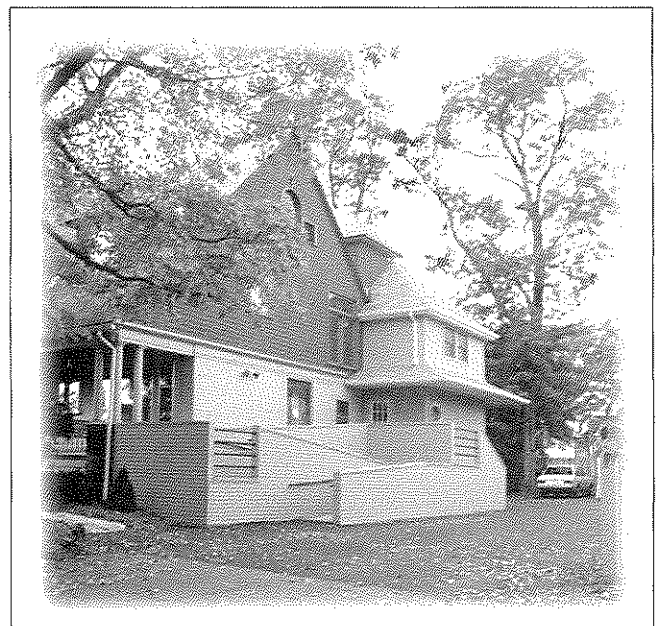
## LOCAL AND COUNTY PROGRAMS

Depending on where one lives — or where the home will be purchased — local or county programs may be available. Some of these programs are funded through HUD, while other programs receive state funding or private grants. The city department of community development (or a similar department) and local housing coalitions are good places to research such programs.

## DEVELOPING A HOME BUDGET

As loans and other financing help are being worked out, parents and children need to be looking ahead to their own finances and budgets.

Two separate budgets are helpful when planning for a home. The first budget addresses initial purchase costs. The second budget provides for ongoing care and upkeep. Developing the second, ongoing budget prior to a purchase decision helps ensure that the monthly expenses of the home will be affordable for the residents. Such a budget is also needed when one is renting rather than buying a residence.



## 1<sup>ST</sup> BUDGET: PURCHASE COSTS

Besides the actual cost of the home, this first budget must include:

- Fees paid to a housing corporation or development company (if you use a local special-needs housing corporation to assist you in purchasing a home);
- Legal fees;
- Down payment (3 to 20% of purchase price);
- Closing costs (1 to 2% of house price);
- Repairs, renovations, or improvements to property;
- Common area furnishings; and
- Utility deposits.

## 1<sup>ST</sup> BUDGET: RENTING COSTS

Many of the same items also apply if the family has decided to rent rather than purchase a home.

- Deposit and first month's rent;
- Renovations for accessibility;
- Utility deposits; and
- Common area furnishings.

## 2<sup>ND</sup> BUDGET: ONGOING COSTS

- Mortgage or rent;
- Property tax (for purchase);
- Home or renters insurance;
- Utilities:
  - Gas
  - Electric
  - Water & sewer
  - Garbage
  - Phone
  - Cable;
- Home maintenance:
  - Condo or association dues
  - Management fees (if using a property management organization)
  - Snow removal & lawn care
  - Routine maintenance
  - Capital replacement reserve (roof, carpet, furnace, and so on);
- Food and household supplies;
- Transportation; and
- Recreation.

## CONSIDERATIONS WHEN SETTING UP A BUDGET

The following three considerations should motivate the homeowner to set aside funds on a regular basis for predictable expenses. It helps to save ahead of time for these.

- **Monthly home maintenance allowance** involves setting aside money each year for annual maintenance and repair.
- **A capital reserve account** can be calculated by dividing the cost of appliances and household fixtures (furnace, water heater, roof, carpet, etc.) by the expected life of each item. This amount should be saved per year. (Some people prefer to replace anything with less than two years of use left.)
- **The expected cost of utilities** can be figured by contacting the utility company for the rate paid by the previous owner in the last year. One can then compare the previous owner's usage to the expected use of the current residents and make adjustments.

## SAMPLE HOUSING BUDGET (FOR FOUR PEOPLE WHO ARE AMBULATORY)

### House Purchase Cost

– Purchase	\$174,000
– Renovations	10,000
– Development Fee	2,000 - 10,000 (* if using a local non-profit housing development corporation)
– Legal Fees	750
– Closing Costs	1,000
– Utilities	300
– Misc.	250
– Common Area Furnishings	4,000

**Total Cost (approximate) \$192,300 – \$200,300**

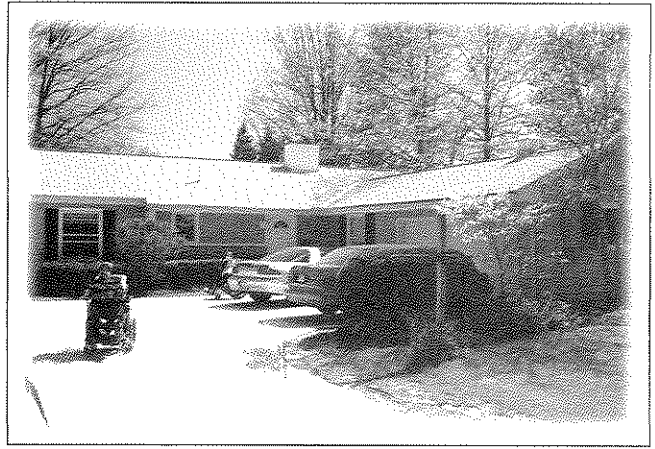
**MONTHLY OPERATING EXPENSES**

**Expenses – General**

	Cost	Per Family
– Utilities (electricity, gas, water, sewer, trash, phone, cable, internet)	450	
– Food and Household supplies	700	
– Recreation	100	
– Transportation (reimburse car use)	75	
– Miscellaneous	100	
<b>Total General</b>	<b>\$1,425</b>	<b>\$356.25</b>

**Home Maintenance**

– Snow removal & lawn care	80	
– Routine maintenance	250	
– Capital replacement	175	
– Management Fee (if working with a housing corp.)	185	
<b>Total Maintenance</b>	<b>\$690</b>	<b>\$172.50</b>
<b>Total Monthly Expenses</b>	<b>\$2,115</b>	<b>\$528.75</b>



**I** NVOLVE A HOUSING CORPORATION

It may be helpful to involve a housing corporation that develops and maintains housing for people with disabilities in the purchase of a home. Such companies have experience in buying homes for persons with disabilities. Although services from a housing corporation or development company may add cost initially, they can save substantial work and may be cost effective in the long run.



## SAMPLE MORTGAGE COSTS

The monthly cost in mortgage payments to each family will, of course, depend on the down payment and terms of the mortgage. Here are some examples.

<b>Interest</b>	7%	7%	8%	8%	7%	7%	8%	8%
<b>Term</b>	15 yr.	30 yr.	15 yr.	30 yr.	15 yr.	30 yr.	15 yr.	30 yr.
<b>Down payment</b>	–	–	–	–	\$40,000	\$40,000	\$40,000	\$40,000
<b>Financed</b>	\$200,000	\$200,000	\$200,000	\$200,000	\$160,000	\$160,000	\$160,000	\$160,000
<b>Monthly payment</b>	\$1,798	\$1,331	\$1,911	\$1,468	\$1,438	\$1,064	\$1,529	\$1,174
<b>Property tax</b>	\$325	\$325	\$325	\$325	\$325	\$325	\$325	\$325
<b>Insurance</b>	\$100	\$100	\$100	\$100	\$100	\$100	\$100	\$100
<b>Total mortgage</b>	\$2,223	\$1,756	\$2,336	\$1,893	\$1,863	\$1,489	\$1,954	\$1,599

## COST PER FAMILY

<b>Mortgage</b>	\$556	\$439	\$584	\$473	\$466	\$372	\$489	\$400
<b>Expenses</b>	\$515	\$515	\$515	\$515	\$515	\$515	\$515	\$515
<b>Total per month</b>	\$1,071	\$954	\$1,099	\$988	\$981	\$887	\$1,004	\$915

*There is a housing budget form in Appendix F.*

## PURCHASING A HOME – MORE CONSIDERATIONS

In purchasing a home with other families, a plan for handling the purchase will prevent confusion.

**Some of the decisions that will need to be made include:**

**1) Location, location, location.** Each family will need to consider the distance to work or day programs; transportation; the distance from the family homes; access to shopping, entertainment and doctors; the safety and comfort of the neighborhood; amenities such as parks; and convenience for staff.

**2) A real estate agent.** The families should decide which real estate company to use and how to choose a specific agent.

*It may help to use an agent that one or more of the families have used in the past, or other families who have purchased homes may provide recommendations.*

**3) A contact person for the real estate agent.** The families should designate one person to communicate with the real estate company. This will expedite the process and help prevent miscommunications.

**4) A strategy for looking at homes.** One or two members of the group could look at homes initially identified by the real-estate agent, or the group could review information to narrow the number of homes the entire group sees. Appendix F contains a form for recording information about each house.

More information on how to purchase a home is available on the Web at [www.freddiemac.com](http://www.freddiemac.com) and [www.fanniemae.com](http://www.fanniemae.com).

## TYPES OF HOUSING

### SINGLE FAMILY

Many families opt to purchase a single-family home, because it provides the most family-like setting. A house may also offer the most privacy, space, and security. Single-family homes offer maximum consumer control, but the cost of this control is the sole responsibility for upkeep of the home and property.

### APARTMENTS & DUPLEXES

Apartments can be rented from a third party. In the alternative, the parent group can purchase a building and then rent individual apartments to other family members or to people from the community, either with or without disabilities.

#### PURCHASING A MULTI-UNIT BUILDING: The Advantages

- *Individuals living in separate apartments enjoy more privacy and autonomy than in a single-family home.*
- *Parent ownership allows for greater flexibility in use of the building and decoration of individual units.*
- *Renting to others can offset the cost of ownership.*
- *Renting to other people from the community can provide for a more integrated setting.*

#### CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE BUYING A MULTI-UNIT BUILDING

- *The investment to set up the housing and maintain the building is significant.*
- *Insurance for a rental property increases cost.*

- *Renting to others increases the business complexities and makes establishing up a legal structure critical.*
- *Landlords must adhere to fair housing and other laws.*
- *Tax consequences accrue to the additional rental income.*
- *Sharing support staff with people in separate living units may not be possible, depending on individual needs and funding regulations.*

### CONDOMINIUMS

Some parents have purchased condominiums for their children with disabilities. The primary advantage of a condominium is that one reaps the benefits of ownership without most of the burdens of exterior property maintenance. Condominiums also may be less expensive than single-family homes and may include amenities such as recreational areas.

#### CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE BUYING A CONDOMINIUM

- *Additional expenses may be added to the monthly fee. These should be checked out ahead of time.*
- *Restrictions may be placed on alterations and use of individual units.*
- *Unlike a single family home, a condominium association can establish restrictions on use and decoration of the units. They may also have rules and regulations that pertain to all owners.*
- *The condominium association may charge periodic assessments for improvement to or repair of the common property.*
- *There may be restrictions on support staff, such as parking regulations or limitations on distributing keys to the building or unit.*

## C OOPERATIVES AND CO-HOUSING

Some approaches to home ownership do not involve the direct purchase of a typical housing unit. Co-housing and cooperative housing provide the personal and economic benefits of ownership, as well as the social benefits of community membership. Some of these models focus on a particular group of people with similar needs or interests.

A housing cooperative is a group of people organized for the purpose of owning, building or renovating housing for its members. The group incorporates itself and owns all property, as provided in the articles of incorporation and bylaws. A member (shareholder) does not own his or her dwelling unit, but owns a membership certificate that entitles him or her to occupy a dwelling unit and to have a vote in the operation of the corporation. All decisions affecting the cooperative are made democratically. Housing cooperatives are often eligible for financial assistance or low-cost loans from the government.

Co-housing is a special form of cooperative housing. A separate entity owns the property, and individuals own a share of that entity. Usually the community includes a number of individual units clustered around a common space, large enough to accommodate all of the members. Community life revolves around this space, including meals and group activities.

The model is relatively new but recreates some aspects of traditional community life. Because every co-housing organization approaches community in a unique way, there is no specific model. Funding has also been problematic for new groups, and in some areas they are not legal. Nevertheless, the potential of these communities to increase the inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities may make them worth exploring.

## N EIGHBORHOOD ACCEPTANCE AND ZONING

Resistance to group homes and other residences for people with disabilities has a notorious history. Legally, everyone has the right to live in the community of his or her choice. The Federal Fair Housing Amendments prohibit the exclusion of people with disabilities living

together in a house and gives cities the responsibility to adapt their regulations so that people with disabilities may use and enjoy the residential property of their choice. Courts have backed up this law. Even so, many people with disabilities have encountered resistance.

Differences of opinion exist about the best approach to prevent resistance. Some parents and providers have met with neighbors in advance to introduce themselves and explain the plans for the home. Others question this approach, because it may be perceived as asking permission, and because non-disabled people never have to introduce themselves in this manner.

Most neighbors voice complaints about a home for people with disabilities by referring to zoning laws, which regulate and control the use of private property. For example, property is zoned according to intended use, such as commercial or residential, and also according to the number of unrelated people who can live in a single-family unit. Opponents to housing for people with disabilities often focus objections on these two zoning matters. The city may send registered letters to neighbors to inform them if the consortium is making a new zoning request.

## Z ONING CONSIDERATIONS

**To limit and prepare for resistance, the consortium should:**

- 1) *Learn all it can about the zoning classification for the property by calling city hall, township zoning boards, or the county (in 8 out of 10 situations, there will not be a specific public zoning process to develop a home for persons with disabilities);*
- 2) *Know what the property classification means, because cities may have different definitions of family or business use;*
- 3) *Consider sending a letter to city officials – such as the mayor or township trustees – after the home is purchased to offer basic information about plans, but not to ask for approval;*
- 4) *Request a variance or conditional-use only if needed;*
- 5) *Be prepared for the zoning process to take two to three months and to involve at least two meetings;*

## ZONING CONSIDERATIONS - Continued

- 6) Consider taking an option on a house, which requires a nonrefundable fee (usually about \$1,000), giving the option to withdraw an offer within an agreed period of time until parents can investigate zoning and the neighborhood's reactions; and
- 7) Prepare to go through the building or planning department for any renovation or rehabilitation of the property, a process that may also include architectural review.

## DEALING WITH RESISTANCE

If resistance from neighbors or problems in the zoning process occurs, parents should:

- 1) Always provide accurate information to local officials;
- 2) Share and hear information without taking offense;
- 3) Attend meetings only if they can handle the heat;
- 4) Look for supporters from the neighborhood, because neighbors do not want to hear from the consortium's supporters from across town and outside their community;
- 5) Get an attorney involved, so that if the dispute has to go to court, important information will be in the public record; and
- 6) Have the attorney present legal opinion on zoning rules, explaining why the home can be legally developed.

## Zoning issues

and neighborhood resistance are good reasons to use a housing corporation to help develop a home.

## HEALTH & SAFETY CONCERNS

### Fire Safety:

Families need to plan exit routes for tenants, and it is strongly recommended that any home for persons with disabilities have a hard-wired smoke-detection system which also includes carbon monoxide detectors. The advantage of hard-wired versus battery-operated smoke detectors is that the batteries do not have to be replaced and the alarm system can be tied into a security company for notifying the local fire department. If the tenants are not able to exit the home in case of a fire, a sprinkling system should be considered. All families should plan for fire safety; however, when several people with disabilities live in one property, the need for careful planning increases.

### These are some other recommended precautions:

- A plan for evacuation in case of a fire. The evacuation plan should include a meeting place outside. The provider agency can help with fire safety plans or families can contact the local fire department;
- A schedule for periodic practice drills. The evacuation plan should be reviewed regularly with residents and staff;
- Smoke detectors installed properly and checked periodically;
- A fire extinguisher in the kitchen and vehicle;
- Easily operated, unobstructed bedroom windows— an effective secondary means of escape in case of fire;
- No chain locks on exit doors, which, in emergencies, have prevented people from exiting a building. Exiting a building should be as easy as possible, especially in the confusion of a fire;
- Light bulbs with the appropriate wattage for their fixtures. Many light fixtures are designed for light bulbs of 60 watts. Installing 100-watt bulbs in these fixtures can lead to dangerous deterioration of the fixture or wiring;
- Light bulbs installed in all light fixtures. Electrocution can result from open light fixtures without bulbs;

- Clean dryer lint filters and vents, which can be a source of fire;
- Exterior doors in good working order; and
- Minimal use of extension cords throughout the house. Overloaded extension cords or those that can be walked on can cause a fire.

### Scalding:

Families should evaluate the ability of the tenants themselves to control the hot water in the house, because the staff can not always protect tenants from scalding. For tenants who cannot recognize or control water temperature, anti-scald devices can be installed at the bathroom fixtures or centrally at the hot water tank.

### If someone in the house smokes, these features should be considered:

- A designated smoking area, preferably away from food preparation and not in a bedroom;
- Ashtrays with cigarette holders in the center (so that if a cigarette falls it will fall into the ashtray);
- An air cleaner unit in the smoking area; and
- A policy about staff smoking on the property.

### Severe Weather:

#### For severe weather, these items and procedures should be in place:

- A clear procedure for severe weather (tornado, flood, etc.);
- Periodic practice drills and a regular review of the plan with residents and staff;
- A severe weather kit with first aid, flashlights, battery-operated radio, and any other needed items; and
- A total evacuation plan.

In case the home needs to be completely evacuated, due to damage from an accident, severe weather, power failures, or sewage problems, parents should plan an alternate site for the residents, as well as a backup site, in case the first choice is not an option (if one family is out of town or affected by the same power outage, for example). The plan should be reviewed with staff, and instructions should be easily accessible in the home.

### Emergency Information:

- Pertinent information about each person living in the home needs to be accessible, including information about allergies, medical diagnosis, current medications, height, weight, special diets, date of last tetanus vaccine, guardianship information, emergency contacts, insurance information, and any other information that a healthcare provider may need to care for the person.
- The information needs to be updated any time there is a change. It may help to assign one person to check the sheets periodically.
- All emergency information for staff and residents should be stored close to the phone where it is easily accessible in an emergency. This can include emergency contacts and critical medical information (allergies and diagnoses such as diabetes). It could be kept in a folder along with emergency instructions and other important phone numbers.

## A ACCESSIBILITY

An accessible home, or one that can be made accessible, will be more flexible or accommodating for future tenants, their families, or visitors. It can also accommodate the changing needs of the tenants over time.

A person should be able to do whatever he or she wants to do, as independently as possible. The house should be examined closely to determine if it needs to be made more accessible. Whether a home should be accessible depends upon the nature and extent of the disabilities of those who live there.

The availability of accessible housing has not kept up with the demand. There are no federal building access requirements for single-family residential settings. Depending on specific needs, it is often very difficult to find a home that is accessible or can be modified.

## ACCESSIBILITY - Continued

Adaptable or universal design features are most practical, because even if the individuals living in the home do not currently need certain features, they may need them as they grow older. Additionally, an accessible home is more stable; such features increase the pool of potential housemates if one person leaves. It is less expensive to add these features as the home is being built or renovated than to add them later.

### GLOSSARY OF TERMS USED IN MODIFYING HOMES

**Accessible:** An accessible home is designed with permanent features that accommodate people with disabilities. The entrance and access throughout the home, including a full bath, should accommodate someone who has mobility challenges or uses a wheelchair. These features may include lower countertops in the kitchen or grab bars in the bathroom.

**Adaptable:** An adaptable home is one where accessible features can be added or removed easily. Adaptable homes include features like reinforced walls to which grab bars can be added or countertops with supports that are adjustable rather than built into the wall.

**Universal Design:** Universal design refers to features necessary for people with disabilities that can also be comfortably used by all people. Universal design expands the scope of accessibility by making all spaces useable by people with disabilities. These features include lowered light switches and levered doorknobs.

**Visitability:** Visitability refers to features that allow guests with disabilities to enjoy the housing as well as allowing the resident to remain in the home over time as his or her physical needs change. For example, a visitable house has doorways wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair that the resident may need in the future.

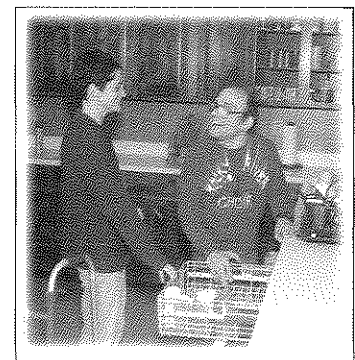
## FUNDING FOR ACCESSIBILITY

Funding may be available for accessibility modifications. Families should check with their county boards of MR/DD, local housing coalitions, and disability support groups to find out about available funds.

## FEATURES TO CONSIDER

This list offers ideas for possible accessible and adaptability features. Not all features may be necessary or affordable. But, if you are building or doing other renovation to the home, it may be practical to include:

- A level entryway or steps free of obstructions and short enough to ramp, if necessary;
- At least one bedroom and bath on the first floor;
- An emergency exit from the bedroom;
- No steps or abrupt changes on the main floor;
- Grab bars attached to the wooden studs behind the walls;
- Five-foot clear circle area in the bathroom (so that a wheelchair can make a 360-degree turn)
- A kitchen large enough for easy wheelchair mobility, such as an open area or a U- or L-shaped area;
- Various heights for countertops and cabinets;
- Thresholds with a maximum height of a half-inch;



## FEATURES TO CONSIDER - Continued

- Chair-height doorbell and mailbox (48 to 54 inches);
- Chair-height electrical outlets and light switches (in general, that means making switches six inches lower and outlets six inches higher than standard);
- Chair-height telephones and phone jacks;
- Doorways with a minimum width of 36 inches;
- Wide hallways of 42 to 60 inches;
- Easily operated window controls 24 to 28 inches above the floor;
- Shallow shelves, no more than 18 inches deep;
- Built-in cabinets with a six-inch baseboard recess;
- Out-swinging doors;
- Large windows, overhead lighting, or several outlets in each room;
- A roll-in shower without a curb;
- Toilet seat that is 17 to 19 inches from floor (or a wall-mounted toilet if available);
- Adjustable shelves and clothing rods in the closets;
- Low-pile carpet with thin padding;
- Non-slip floors;
- Lever hand faucets;
- Large push-button phones;
- Audio and visual smoke detectors;
- A front control operated range;
- Side-by-side refrigerator with dispenser;
- Front loading washer and dryer;

- Hand-held or adjustable shower head; and
- Bathtub with nonskid strips or surface.

## ACCOMMODATING CONGREGATE LIVING & SUPPORT STAFF

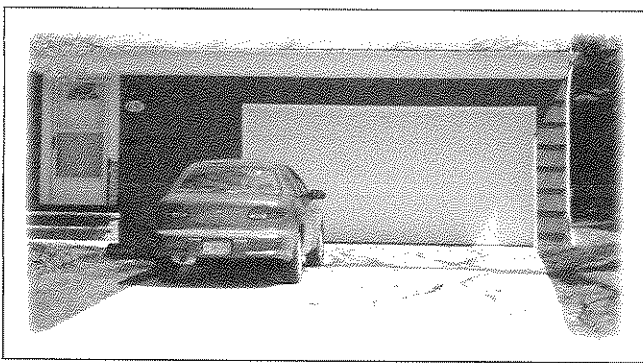
In addition to accessibility for individuals with physical disabilities, a home can be made more accommodating to residents in other ways. Environmental adaptations can minimize some of the problems inherent in congregate living. Though no house will be perfect, the list below offers some issues to consider, depending on the needs of individuals living in the home.

## GROUP LIVING CONCERNS

- Does the home have at least one and a half baths? Even if only two or three people live in the home, support staff and frequent visitors will make use of the facilities.
- Is there more than one common area for visiting and recreation? These rooms can accommodate private visits with friends and family or provide space for quiet relaxation and recreation simultaneously.
- If the individuals living in the home have very different schedules, are their bedrooms separated enough to prevent the person getting up early in the morning from disturbing those who get up later?
- Is the kitchen large enough for several people to work in at the same time?
- Is there adequate space for storage, including space for personal hygiene items for each person sharing bathrooms, sufficient closet space in bedrooms, and additional space for storing seasonal clothes or holiday decorations?
- Is it possible to have a guest bedroom for out-of-town family or friends who visit or a support staff or family member to sleep over?

## PARKING & VEHICLES

- *If there is a van, is the garage large enough to accommodate it?*
- *If a vehicle with a wheelchair lift will be used, is there enough space close to the main entrance to operate the lift?*
- *Is parking adequate for residents, staff and visitors? At least three unrestricted parking spots outside of the garage are advisable, so staff and visitors can arrive and leave without blocking other cars.*



- *If staff will need to park on the street, are there any city bans against parking at night or during a heavy snow?*
- *If the residents use a county bus or agency vehicle for a day program, is there room to board in the drive or will they need to board in the street? (This may involve a call to the transportation provider.)*

## RESPONSIBILITY FOR REPAIRS & UPKEEP

Finally, all the parents involved in the home must have a clear understanding of who is responsible for repairs and upkeep. One person needs to take responsibility, because often when responsibility is shared, nothing gets done.

When a child is renting, the lease should clearly spell out the landlord's and tenants' responsibilities. In a condominium, the association's and the owner's duties should be clear. Also, in some neighborhoods, neighborhood associations or city ordinances regulate standards for upkeep of single-family homes and other buildings.

Parents also need to clarify the duties of support staff. If parents are paying support staff directly (without public funding), they can decide what household maintenance is the staff's responsibility. This should be put in writing and clearly explained. In contracting with a provider agency, the contract should specify what household maintenance the staff will be expected to handle.

Funding such as Supported Living and Medicaid Waiver funding do not necessarily cover maintenance of the home; funds for support services are separate from housing costs. Government funding will pay for supporting the individual in the home, but not necessarily for maintaining the home itself.

For instance, homemaker personal care services under the Medicaid waiver will pay for staff to assist a resident in housekeeping tasks such as vacuuming and dusting, but not for a staff person to vacuum and dust the home for the residents. So, only household maintenance tasks in which the child can participate can be paid for with government funds.

## DECIDING WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Parents should make a list of what routine tasks will need to be completed and how often they should be done. The list also should include routine maintenance that may be needed in the home. It should be clear which tasks a condominium association, landlord, or home's residents will complete with assistance from the support-service staff. Then, families need to decide who will complete the remainder of the tasks and how to pay for the work.

## MAINTENANCE

In addition to routine housekeeping tasks, here are some of the routine maintenance tasks for which the parents need to plan:

- *Minor and major repairs;*
- *Routine maintenance, such as painting;*
- *Outside clean up of windows and gutters;*

## MAINTENANCE - Continued

- *Snow removal;*
- *Grass cutting;*
- *Raking leaves;*
- *Landscaping;*
- *Pest control;*
- *Hiring a locksmith;*
- *Plumbing;*
- *Electrical work;*
- *Sewer cleaning;*
- *Heating and air conditioning; and*
- *Hiring a general handyman.*

## C O M P L E T I N G T A S K S

Some families may choose to take care of many home maintenance tasks themselves. This can certainly save money and can be a significant contribution that skilled family members can make.

**If parents and family choose to do the work, these things must be kept in mind:**

- *Those volunteering their services should have the skills needed to complete the task.*
- *Agreements about family members completing tasks should be added to the written contract that the group signs, including deadlines and alternative solutions if the deadlines cannot be met.*
- *A contingency plan for how tasks should be completed if the family member is not able to do the work is very useful.*

## WARNING: KEEP THE HOUSE AT ITS BEST

Most parents already have a high standard for the safety, cleanliness and appearance of their children's homes. Neighbors, however, may closely scrutinize a home for people with disabilities, especially in situations where neighbors have already expressed resistance. Neighbors often use small problems with upkeep as evidence to support their objections.