

ADVOCACY CHATS

EPISODE 6: HOUSING ACCESSIBILITY AND HOME MODIFICATIONS

Susan Prokop, PVA

00:00

Hello listeners and welcome to this PVA audio chat on accessible housing and home modifications.

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I'm Susan Prokop with PVA's National Advocacy Program and I'm delighted to be joined by Morgan Brown my government relations colleague and National Legislation Director.

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Along with Mark Thompson, Senior Associate Director with PVA's Architecture Program. We're going to cover the topic from a variety of angles today.

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From an overview of major housing disability rights laws to home modification legislation PVA is supporting to the work that PVA's architects do to highlight and educate about accessible housing and home modifications.

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Not surprisingly, accessible housing is of critical interest and importance to PVA and its membership.

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While many people think of the Americans with Disabilities Act as the umbrella disability rights law, it is not the primary law protecting people with disabilities from discrimination in housing.

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That would be the 1988 Fair Housing Act Amendments, which included, people with disabilities, under its protections.

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And their accessibility guidelines which call for certain accessibility features in all private multi-family residential buildings built for first occupancy after 1991.

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The only area where the ADA generally applies with regard to buildings like apartments and condominiums is in their sales and leasing offices.

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Now, when it comes to federally funded housing like section eight or other federally subsidized housing.

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there's something called Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act that calls for compliance with its accessibility standards.

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Which are somewhat broader than the accessibility standards under the Fair Housing Act. You can read more about the Fair Housing Act and Section 504.

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In a brochure on PVA's veterans and Disability Advocacy web page under disability rights and advocacy.

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Several years ago PVA partnered with habitat for humanity on legislation introduced by representative Al Green of Texas, to create a pilot project through the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

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To provide accessible home modifications for low income veterans with disabilities, both service connected and non service connected.

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Today that pilot is operating in roughly half the states and according to data from habitat, some 6000 veterans have been served under the program.

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they're always looking for veterans with disabilities to assist through this program, so if any of our listeners are interested in finding out if there is a habitat affiliate near them that is operating this pilot.

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They can reach out to PVA's Veterans Career Program and its Director Lauren Lobrano and you can also access the veterans career program on PVA's website as well.

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Another measure that PVA has supported for several years is H.R. 4695 the Inclusive Home Design Act that is sponsored by representative Jan Schakowsky of Illinois.



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This measure, which is currently pending in the House of Representatives, would call for incorporation of so called visitability features in single family homes receiving federal financing.

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Those features include a no step entrance so if someone with a mobility impairment can get into the home and an accessible powder room on the main level of the house that's not making the house not totally accessible, but at least visitable.

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So Mark's going to talk a little bit more about the Inclusive Home Design Act in a little bit later,

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but, for the moment I'm going to turn to Morgan for a general overview of the VA's Home Modification Programs, PVA's efforts to improve the HISA Grant program and other VA housing adaptation measures we have recently supported. So the microphone is all yours Morgan.

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Morgan Brown

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Thank you Susan and hello to all our listeners today. Access to affordable and accessible housing is a critical issue

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for disabled veterans and the ability to return home after incurring a significant disability is an important component of a full recovery.

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Likewise, for those with more static conditions being able to stay in the home as often safer and usually contributes to higher level of morale and quality of life.

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Currently VA may provide adaptations to a veteran or service members residence by the Veterans Health Administration under the Home Improvements and Structural Alterations Grant Program, otherwise known as HISA

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and through the Veterans Benefits Administration under the specially adapted housing, special housing adaptation, temporary residence adaptation or vocational rehabilitation and employment independent living program grant programs.

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The goal of each of these five programs is to adapt and or modify a veteran or service members residence to accommodate their disability or disabilities.

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adaptations and modifications are individually determined based on the medical feasibility for the individual to reside in their home.

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To ensure continuation with medical treatment and rehabilitation and the capability to live independently in a barrier free environment.

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I should also note that VBA's SAH Program may assist with the purchase of a home to accommodate a veteran or service members disability or disabilities.

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And the last Congress, we convinced lawmakers to update the rates and make some key improvements to the SAH and SHA Programs, so they are a greater help to the veterans who need them. Specifically, the Ryan Cools and Paul Benny Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019

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raised the rates for the SAH and SHA Programs, which would help every eligible veteran, but it was particularly necessary for those who live in high cost areas around the country.

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For fiscal year 2022, the year we're currently in, the maximum grant amounts are now \$101,754 for the SHA Program and \$20,387 for the special housing adaptation Program.

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The Act also increased the number of times a veteran can use their SAH Grant from three to six times it raised the cap on the number of post 911 veterans who have lost a limb, due to their service, that may receive the SHA Grant from 30 to 120 per year.

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And it provided SAH eligibility for veterans with blindness in both eyes. Previously there had to be a loss or loss of use of another extremity for blindness to be considered for the SAH Grant.

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Also, the definition of blindness in both eyes was changed from having only light perception to having central visual acuity of 20/200 or less

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in the better eye with the use of a standard correcting lens. This means veterans who are blind in both eyes are now eligible to receive a full SAH Grant.

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And finally, the act authorized VA to provide a supplemental SAH Grant to veterans whose home, no longer meets their needs, if at least 10 years has passed since they used up funding from their first grant.



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This part of the legislation doesn't go into effect until 2030 and the veteran would have to meet specific criteria which has yet to be determined in order to qualify.

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The Congressional hot intent, however, was that this additional funding could be used to address adaptations for veterans who have moved or for those whose disability has worsened, since they originally used their SAH Grant.

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Now, in the 117th Congress, PVA is focusing on the Home Improvements and Structural Alterations Grant Program and again this is called HISA.

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as the name suggests, the HISA Grant helps fund improvements and changes to an eligible veterans home.

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Examples of qualifying improvements include improving the entrance or exit from their homes, restoring accessibility to the kitchen or essential lavatory and sanitary sanitary facilities.

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and making necessary repairs or upgrades to plumbing or electrical systems, due to the installation of home medical equipment. It does not pay for walkways to exterior buildings, spas, hot tubs or jacuzzis exterior decking or new construction.

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veterans who need housing modification due to a service connected disability may receive up to \$6,800 through this program.

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veterans who are 50% service connected may receive the same amount, even if a modification is needed due to a non service connected disability.

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And then finally veterans who are not service connected, but who are enrolled in the VA Health Care System can receive up to \$2,000.

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Perhaps the biggest problem with the HISA is the rates themselves haven't changed since 2010 when, even though the cost of homebuilding and modifications has risen at least 40% during that time frame.

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With veterans still sheltering in place during and following the resolution of the pandemic ensuring veterans can safely remain in their homes is more essential than ever.



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HISA rates need to be raised to reflect current costs and better meet veterans current needs. Recently we were able to get H.R. 5819

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The Autonomy for Disabled Veterans Act introduced which would raise the HISA Grant rates and then tie them to an inflation formula that will help keep them relevant in future years.

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we're also working on a some senate companion bill and hope to see that measure introduced in early 2022.

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listeners to this broadcast could help us increase sponsorship of the House bill by visiting PVA Action Force Section on the PVA website at www.pva.org. There you can find a pre-written letter which individuals could send to the representatives, urging them to co-sponsor this measure.

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passage of this bill will be our chief housing related goal for 2022 and I thank you in advance for helping us raise awareness of that effort. Now I'll turn the conversation back over to Susan.

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Susan Prokop, PVA

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Thank you so much, Morgan. That was very informative and now we're going to hear from Mark Thompson with PVA's Architecture Department.

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Mark, I think you're going to go over some of architectures work on home modifications, work that the program is done with VA's Adaptive Housing Program,

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and tell us a bit about the Barrier Free Award which was recently given to Eleanor Smith and her efforts on behalf of the inclusive home design act so take it away Mark.

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Thank you Susan and welcome to all the listeners out there. PVA is the only veterans service organization with staff architects.

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Our mission includes working with the VA on spinal cord injury system of care, public project accessibility consulting and support, including accessible home design.



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partnering with the agencies who create accessible building codes and standards and outreach and education to the general public about accessible design.

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Our work on home modifications is in direct support to everything that Morgan just explained in our legislative action on trying to

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have the VA provide funding for these modifications, and although our PVA architecture does not provide direct design services, we continually provide design guidance to Homeowners by reviewing their drawings

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for their projects and providing technical assistance review comments intended to improve accessibility throughout the home.

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We provide technical assistance on project as small as installing a single grab bar to a full home design review. We do all of this work pro bono regardless of whether you're a PVA Member or not.

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The best way to request our involvement in your project is to request it directly through our Technical Assistant email address, which is pva_architecture@pva.org.

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after receiving your request, a PVA architect will be assigned to your project, and we will be in touch to learn more about it and request any additional information we need to assist you.

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We are also directly involved with the VA by supporting their specially adaptive housing grants.

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As Morgan explained, this grant is awarded to veterans who require modifications to their home or a new home to accommodate their specific disability.

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Again, although PVA Architecture does not provide direct design services, we do regularly meet with the Chief of the VA SAH Program and work to

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educate VA personnel managing these grant programs how to best achieve home accessibility.



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We were also in the process of working with the VA to develop a sample kit of parts for the VA SAH Program in order to provide easy to use guidance for veterans to use as they meet with architects, designers and builders to design their home modifications.

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Any veteran that receives one of these VA housing grants can also use PVA's technical assistance services at no cost.

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Again, to contact us if you need our assistance, please use our email address pva.architecture@pva.org and we will be back in touch with you to help

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you with your project. The Barrier Free America award is an award that PVA Architecture

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has issued since 2000 annually, since 2001 and it recognizes outstanding contributions to accessible designed by architects and others

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through this award. The award honors innovative accessible architectural design and advocacy for built environments to demonstrate the importance of equal access.

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Those who honored with the PVA's Annual Barrier Free America Award help provide all people with disabilities, including veterans, access to the opportunities and freedoms available to every American.

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Based on our continuing advocacy for basic home access, promoting visitability and inspiring policy change through her work with concrete change,

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Eleanor Smith was the perfect choice to receive the 2015 Barrier Free America Award.

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Visitability seeks to provide single family homes, not otherwise regulated for access, with the bare minimum level of accessibility so a wheelchair user

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or anyone else with the mobility issue can comfortably visit the home. The visit part of this concept is important

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because it not only provides access for the homeowner, but also for disabled visitors, such as neighbors or relatives or your child's friend that wants to be invited to a birthday party.



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It really opens access to your home for everyone and it's beneficial not only for those with disabilities, but also makes it easier for all to move

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with a suitcase or a stroller or just simply bringing goods into your home.

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Since Eleanor began her advocacy for visitability, there's been significant progress in creating guidelines that outline what is required to provide basic features for visitability. These basic features include one no step entrance to the home.

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32 inch wide doors throughout the home and one bathroom on the main level that is wheelchair accessible.

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Some guidelines also promote providing a gathering area such as a living room and kitchen with adequate wheelchair maneuvering space on the main level.

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While these guidelines may not currently be required at all locations, they have successfully provided guidance for designers, home builders and housing authorities.

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They want to provide visitability and their project studies have shown that the cost to renovate an existing home to meet the visitability goals, may be somewhere between \$3,000 and \$5,000. However, the cost impact for new home construction is negligible.

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furthering this cause, Eleanor has been a leading advocate for the creation and Congressional passage of the Inclusive Home Design Act, which will require compliance with these visitability features in single family homes that receive federal funding.

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PVA Architecture also has published a book titled Accessible Home Design Architectural Solutions for the Wheelchair User.

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The book covers all areas of your home from entry to use of every type of space, including outdoor spaces.

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It also includes a section on how to undertake a design and construction project working with architects, designers and construction professionals.

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We are currently working on a new edition of the book which will expand to include chapters covering the design of accessible home offices and home automation. We expect this new addition to be available in.

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If you would like the current edition, it is available for purchase by emailing [pva architecture@pva.org](mailto:pva_architecture@pva.org). That's [pva architecture@pva.org](mailto:pva_architecture@pva.org).

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The cost is \$9.99 for PVA members and \$16.99 for non-members. Thank you all for your interest in PVA Architecture Accessible Design and Visitability. Susan, I will turn it back to you.

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Susan Prokop, PVA

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Thank you Mark, again, that was a great

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scan of all the good works that architecture is doing in the field of home accessibility.

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You all certainly have been busy. Quick question Mark on the Inclusive Home Design Act and for more information. Is Concrete Change a good organization to learn more about the inclusive home design act?

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I believe they are, they would be a good contact to learn from them more about what they're advocating for, yes.

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Susan Prokop, PVA

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Okay, and I'm sure if somebody just googled Concrete Change you could find that organization website.

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Correct. I want to

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just remind our listeners that

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That I well I hope our listeners today got a good sense of the wide range of activities in which PVA is involved.

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I want to remind you again reflecting on what Morgan talked about about the HISA Bill that you can take action on that on PVA Action Force website.

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Available off of the pva.org page. And again remind people they can get that wonderful home modifications book from the architecture department, by going to pva architecture@pva.org.

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And I want to thank Morgan and Mark again for chatting with us today about these many programs and opportunities to advocate for housing accessibility.

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Morgan, what did I did we forget anything on the VA side of things that you'd like to reflect on further?

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Morgan Brown

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No, I think that's about it.

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Okay, thank you.

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Susan Prokop, PVA

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Okay, well good gentlemen, I thank you for your time today and appreciate your help with this, and we hope that.

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The folks listening to this recording have picked up some useful tips and information and hope they'll reach out to PVA for further information if they so desire. Thanks again ladies and gentlemen and have a good day.