



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN

# PROBLEM PATHWAY

Accessible housing  
shortage in tight  
market makes search  
more difficult

C8

Chris Rosa, CEO of The Viscardi Center, said many contractors lack expertise in accessible housing.

## SPRING CLEANING

What power washing, landscaping, more could cost this season C4



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## BUYING IN BABYLON

Maritime haven, thriving downtown draw buyers to community C16





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# ACCESSIBILITY GAP IS REAL

BY LIZA N. BURBY  
Special to Newsday

## Lack of inventory, know-how are obstacles

It wasn't easy for Joseph Slaninka to find an apartment he could easily enter with his motorized wheelchair. During his five-month search four years ago, he had to first deal with real estate agents who didn't understand his needs.

Slaninka, 54, who has spina bifida, a birth defect, and the resulting condition, hydrocephalus, has been using a wheelchair since he was 27. So it wasn't the first time that he, like many Long Islanders, faced a competitive housing market. But his situation was compounded by a lack of accessible housing options and ill-informed real estate experts.

One agent insisted to Slaninka that a four-step walk-up was an "accessible" unit.

Another showed him an apartment with a stackable washer and dryer.

"I told her I need side-by-side units because I can't reach in my wheelchair. She told me I could work on my clothes into the washing machine. She thought she was being funny," said Slaninka, an assistant teacher in the physical education department at the Viscardi Center in Albertson.

He was finally approved for an accessible apartment in a Roslyn Heights complex where 10% of the 120 units are compli-

ant under the 1991 Americans with Disabilities Act Standards for Accessible Design. But construction wouldn't be completed until 2023.

During that process, Slaninka said he still had to ask for modifications. What the developer thought met the ADA requirements initially included cabinets under the sinks and standard-height closet clothing rods — all inaccessible from a wheelchair.

"The problem is that the word 'accessible' means a lot of different things to a lot of different people," said Slaninka, who previously lived

in an apartment where he "had been making do" though it wasn't fully accessible. "People in real estate don't know what someone who has mobility issues really needs. That lack of awareness is just part of the problem on Long Island."

The other is a housing inventory that was built predominantly decades before the ADA and wasn't designed to meet the needs of anyone who might have disabilities, said Emily Ladau, 33, a disability rights activist and editor of Able News — and that includes residents who want to age in place.

The lack of options applies to apartments as well as houses, said Abraham Kanfer, a real estate broker with Daniel

Gale Sotheby's in Great Neck.

He said clients with disabilities face significant barriers due to outdated building designs and co-op board restrictions because a lot of buildings were built before accessibility was a requirement. That completely rules them out because the door frames aren't wide enough or there's no ramp.

"Even if we find a building that is accessible, the apartment usually isn't," he said. "When it comes to homes, ranches are probably the best housing style, but there aren't even many of those available here. Some people have entire floors of their homes they can't get to."

### 'TEMPORARILY ABLE-BODIED'

The lack of awareness and supply is a problem for Long Island — and beyond — be-





Therése Aprile-Brzezinski says those with disabilities often face an added "disability tax" of homebuying expenses.



NEWSDAY / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

The Viscardi Center president and CEO Chris Rosa says his facility provides a model home that helps students prepare for accessible living.



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# FOR FINDING HOMES ON LI

cause anyone's mobility can change at any time and not many residents are prepared for that, said Ladau, who was born with Larsen syndrome, a genetic physical disability, and uses a motorized wheelchair. "There's a concept in the disability community that technically everybody is temporarily able-bodied. The state of not having a disability is not necessarily permanent for anybody."

The result is that as an individual's needs change, unless the home already has some accessible features like a bedroom and bath on the first floor and no steps to get in, people will have to either build new to meet their specifications or retrofit — make alterations — to their existing homes. Either option can be expensive, Ladau said. She grew up in a ranch in West

Babylon that had to be modified for her needs multiple times, costing more than \$50,000 over several years, she said.

## A 'DISABILITY TAX'

While real estate is expensive for most Long Islanders, people with disabilities have additional costs to make their homes livable, said Therése Aprile-Brzezinski, director of planning and public policy for the Long Island Center for Independent Living Inc. in Levittown, a cross disability advocacy and service organization.

"We think about it as a 'disability tax' that there are expenses that people with disabilities have to figure out how they're going to cover and make ends meet, and the accessibility piece is definitely one

of those aspects. It's a puzzle that folks with disabilities here generally can't avoid," said Aprile-Brzezinski, who has mobility issues and said she has never lived in a fully accessible home.

Most of the time, people with disabilities are forced to accept their living situation and adapt as they are able. "We work around things, mostly because there's not a great deal of funding available for the majority of people with disabilities. All of those things are barriers to fully accessible homes," she said.

Whether homeowners are planning a home renovation to meet current or future accessibility needs, Brian Baer, an

architect based in upstate Beacon, said most jobs are cheaper if they're part of the initial construction. For instance, he said the cost of the average ADA-compliant

36-inch-wide door is only \$5 more than a standard 32-inch door, which is about \$145. But if you need to retrofit aspects of a home, be prepared for the costs of materials and labor.

"A renovation is more expensive than a new build because now you've got to make the doorway that much bigger, so there might be some additional framing that you have to install to provide the needed support for the door. And you might have to move a

light switch or outlet so there's new electrical work," Baer said. "The cost of that overall labor and material could be a \$500 change or it could be a \$2,500 change. And then you're multiplying that by many doors in the house."

Baer is founder and executive director of The Elevated Studio, a nonprofit that rebuilds homes after disasters, including on Long Island following Superstorm Sandy. He said another frequent retrofit is in a bathroom where a tub needs to be replaced with an accessible shower. Depending on the level of renovation needed, that can cost anywhere from \$10,000 to \$50,000, he said.

Stella Hendrickson, 75, president of Rebuilding Together Long Island in Farmingdale, a

See ACCESSIBILITY on C11





# NAVIGATING A TIGHT ACCESSIBLE HOMES MARKET

## ACCESSIBILITY from C9

nonprofit that does free minor home repairs, as well as home modifications for qualified homeowners, said that a ramp could cost from \$1,500 to \$3,200 depending on the size of the home and lumber costs. Both she and Baer noted lumber costs could increase with tariffs. Then there are the more minimal expenses of adding transitions from one room to another — like a short ramp on a single step, which she said is the cost of lumber — and grab bars in the bathrooms, which are about \$50 each.

Aprile-Brzezinski said most people need some funding assistance in order to make these modifications. “Most of the assistance that you can get for doing disabilities-related modifications are dependent upon income, so you have to have a pretty low income to

even qualify to be considered to get any kind of money,” she said.

## A MODEL FOR CONTRACTORS

The solution, she said, would be to have an ongoing existing stock of homes that are accessible. The Visibility Bill in the New York State Legislature aims to solve that problem. It mandates certain accessibility features in any new residential construction, both to accommodate residents of the home and to make homes “visitable” for friends and loved ones with disabilities, Aprile-Brzezinski said. Key requirements include at least one accessible bedroom and bathroom on the main level and an accessible entryway.

In the meantime, there aren’t many contractors who have the expertise and capacity to know all the aspects of what truly accessible housing should look like, said Chris Rosa, president and CEO of the Viscardi Center,

which has programs and services for children and adults with disabilities. One of their features is an Independent Living House, used by their students to practice independent living skills. But it also serves as a model of the features that an accessible home can have.

“Part of our goal is to expand the commercial market of people with this content expertise so they first of all realize how many people with disabilities ultimately are important to them as customers — not only for the people who own those homes, but also who are looking for homes,” said Rosa, 57, who has limb-girdle muscular dystrophy and has been using a power wheelchair since he was 16. “We host architects, contractors and engineers to give them very practical experience and insight into what type of individualized modifications need to be made to tailor to a specific individual,

but then also looking at it more generally as a global resource.”

In addition to ADA-compliant ramp entrances and doors, the house also features an automated sink, stovetop and counters in the kitchen that all adjust based on the height of the user; a hands-free AI program that can adjust the lights and the shades; and roll-in showers and accessible sinks and toilets. Rosa said all those features could either be part of builders’ new construction or renovations.

## MAKING ACCESSIBILITY PART OF THE PLANS

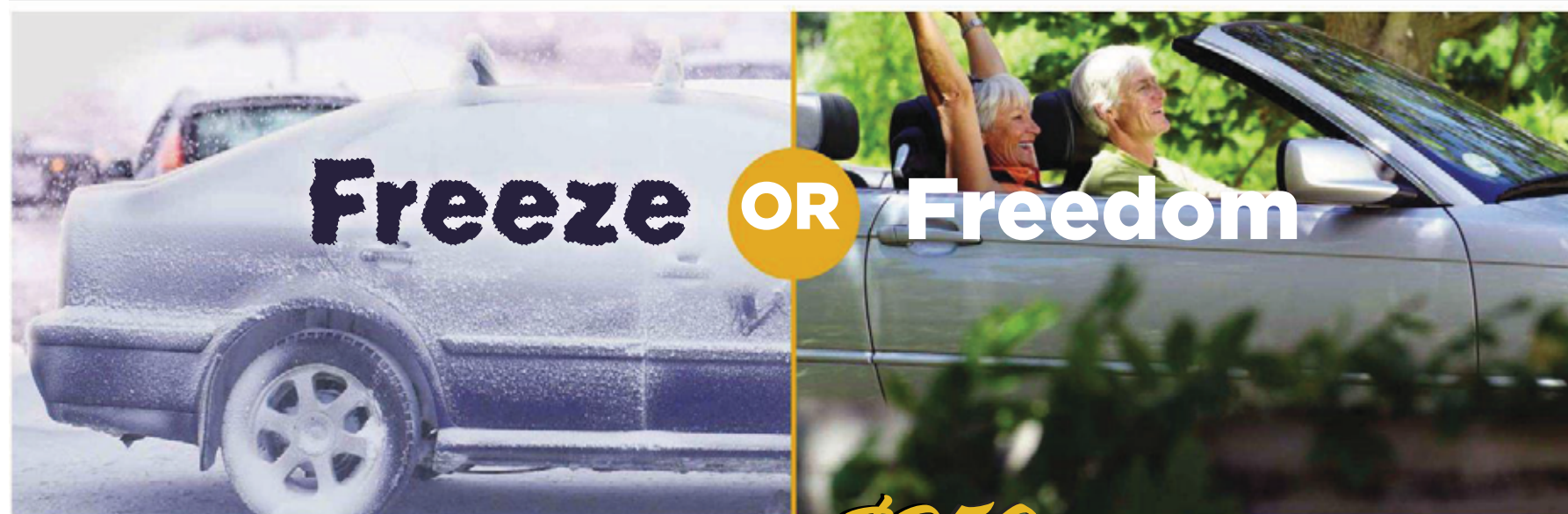
“There certainly needs to be more education for the builders and developers to consult with the disability community as a whole, to really understand the needs and the practicality of the way things are set up,” Slaninka said. “That communication

stream could really improve things a lot.”

Ladau, who now lives in West New York, New Jersey, agreed that while accessibility should be part of builders’ plans to make new properties more appealing to a wider number of people, real estate agents can also help. “It’s important for Realtors to at least familiarize themselves with the basics of accessibility. If a Realtor has some basic understanding and can work with someone looking for an accessible home, I think that’s a huge benefit,” she said.

Rosa said these are considerations that everyone involved in real estate should make.

“It’s about perceiving the marketplace in a completely different way,” he said. “It’s about building the accessibility and the support people will need in anticipation of what their future needs will look like.”



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