

For disabled seeking housing, newer is better

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When Magdalena Truchan bought a condominium for \$410,000 last year at Harbors at Haverstraw, she found that the developer had gone out of his way to meet her needs.

Truchan, who has used a wheelchair since a car accident 13 years ago, said that those accommodations included an elevator and wider, 32-inch doorways that made getting in and out of the condo easier. The bathroom came with grab bars and special plumbing fixtures in the sink and shower.

Outside, her wheelchair can easily move along a paved, 1.5-mile trail. Even the swimming pool is accessible thanks to a hydraulic lift that lowers Truchan into the water.

"It is almost life-changing," said Truchan, a 38-year-old graphic designer. "I didn't have to worry about hiring contractors to make things accessible. It was already done for me. It has really put my mind at ease."

Accommodations for people with disabilities have become common at newly constructed residential developments like Harbors at Haverstraw since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Advocates for the disabled said that newer buildings generally have the fewest problems with accessibility, since the ADA law sets compliance standards for builders and developers.

Ginsburg Development Cos. of Valhalla, one of the largest developers in the Lower Hudson Valley, said that all of its newly constructed multifamily buildings, clubhouses and common areas are accessible to the disabled. Harbors at Haverstraw, a luxury residential development along the Hudson River in Rockland County, is one of its projects.

"When we have a handicapped person who has special needs, we work to accommodate their needs," said Martin Ginsburg, the principal of Ginsburg Development. "That is our company policy. ... I don't necessarily take credit for that, because that is the law."

Accordingly, the biggest accessibility issues are at the many older buildings constructed before the ADA went into effect. Those also happen to make up the bulk of the area's housing stock, said Michael Hellmann, accessible housing coordinator for Westchester Residential Opportunities Inc. in White Plains.

His organization surveyed 1,100 buildings in Westchester County and found that 750 of them had "limited access" or "no access." Most were older buildings.

"If you need accessible housing to any degree, the choices are limited right now," Hellmann said. "There also is not a whole lot of enforcement. Nobody goes out and checks to make sure that they are complying with the regulations."