

April 19, 2004

Testimony in support of the addition of section 17-125 to the administrative code of the city of New York

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Good Afternoon. I have been a practicing occupational therapist for 19 years working in the area of physical dysfunction. My expertise is in the area of maximizing function and safety by adapting environments for individuals with disabilities based on a graduate degree in Occupational Therapy from Columbia University. I have been working for the past 7 years with The Philadelphia Corporation For Aging, providing home accessibility evaluations to their elderly consumers so that homes can be made safer with increased accessibility.

The Philadelphia Corporation For Aging (an Area Agency on Aging) is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest AAA in the United States. Its' Housing Department (which I provide services for directly) is the largest in the nation. In the past 7 years, I have performed in excess of 4,000 on site home accessibility evaluations with the number one priority consistently being bathroom safety. The result of these evaluations has been the installation of grab bars in the tub and toilet areas and providing non-skid materials for bathtub surfaces of the consumer's existing bathrooms in buildings ranging in age from 150 to 15 years.

We, at the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging, have learned many things from our extensive experience with home modifications and I am grateful for the opportunity to share that experience with you today as an advocate for the safety and health of seniors in their homes throughout New York City and our country.

The field of home adaptations has been evolving over the past 20 years from specific problem based design focus to one that is now known as a Universal Design approach. An example of Universal Design can be observed in a very common adaptation utilized throughout your city...the "curb cut". Every street corner sidewalk has been sloped to allow for crossing the street without stepping down. One might think of this as "handicap accessibility" i.e. wheelchair accessible. A parent of young children however sees it as an essential design feature making it possible for them to maneuver a stroller through the streets of the city. A skater on the other hand utilizes this design feature to roll along the sidewalk without the need for 2 short jumps every block. The elderly and visually impaired are the more obvious beneficiaries of this design but able-bodied pedestrians also have grown to appreciate the absence of the curb in their path as well.

The grab bar and non- skid standing surface in the bathroom are 2 additional design features that have more than one specific user (the "handicapped person") to serve. Tub/shower units are, by definition of their function, frequently wet and soapy. One unfortunate result of their use is a very slippery surface for any individual to safely negotiate. Whether the user is 7, 37 or 67 years of age, a strong reliable handhold and non-skid standing surface in the bath decreases the risk of slips and falls significantly. Toilets provide a functional challenge as well in those same bathrooms. The standard seating surface in the US is 18-19 inches high. The average height of a household toilet is 15 inches. When the users' height or leg strength is not well suited to getting up from such a low surface compensation by using the arms to pull up is the next step. The most common objects within reach are towel bars and sinks. Neither of these items is designed to bear the weight of a person pulling him or herself up to standing. The towel bar placed

under the stress of 100-300lbs pulling against it eventually pulls out of the wall constituting a serious falls hazard. The sink, while not so likely to break free as quickly, loosens and becomes unstable, frequently leading to expensive repairs. Another less common but even more dangerous object to pull up on is a steam radiator. Burns are all too frequently the result of grabbing a radiator for needed support. Not unlike the “curb cut”, in my experience I have found that the solution of adding appropriately installed grab bars and non-skid strips to bathrooms has improved the safety and function of the majority of users, not just a select group.

Falls and their resulting injury are never something that we want to see happen to anyone in their home. The personal cost as well as the cost to society needs to be minimized as much as is humanly possible. The elderly and disabled, as mentioned previously by others in this hearing, unfortunately have been found to suffer disproportionately from these often preventable falls in the bathroom. Findings show that severity of injury, length and amount of recovery, loss of function and independence, are all suffered to a greater degree by this rapidly growing group of the population. These are the reasons that the agency that I provide services for has committed such extensive time and resources to the prevention of falls in the bathrooms of seniors.

I would now like to focus my statements on the specifics of how to implement falls prevention in the residential bathrooms of seniors and the disabled.

- Grab bars
  - The most useful length of bars has been found to be 18 inches and 24 inches
  - Bars are readily available in chrome and stainless steel. A burnished or .knurled surface in the middle grip area is essential to prevent slipping.
  
- Installation
  - Bars need to be installed by a competent professional to insure that they are attached to an area of the wall that can support the weight of a person pulling on them. This is frequently a stud or a masonry wall.
  
- Placement in Bathtub/shower
  - An 18-inch bar needs to be installed on the front wall of the tub (same wall as the faucet) beginning at 8 inches above the tub and extending vertically to 26 inches above the tub. (structure allowing)
  - A 24-inch bar needs to be installed on the side wall at an angle sloping up towards the shower head beginning 8 inches above the tub and extending to 20 inches above the tub. (structure allowing)
  
- Placement at Toilet:
  - A 12 inch bar needs to be installed vertically beginning at 22 inches from the floor up to 34 inches from the floor. The bar needs to be installed 12 inches

in front of the toilet to achieve the proper position for a seated person to pull up on. (structure allowing)

### Non Skid Strips

These need to be appropriately installed according to the manufacturer's recommendations covering the bottom surface of tub with the strips no further than 10 inches apart.

Follow up visits to homes that have been adapted in the past leads me to take an additional moment to emphasize the need for proper installation of the needed grab bars. A bar that has been inappropriately installed to a surface area that cannot support it can present even more of a falls hazard than no bar at all. Any assistive device needs to be installed by a person knowledgeable in the building trades to assure that it is safe and effective.

In my practice as an Occupational Therapist I have been privileged to witness first hand the improved safety and increased independence of many many seniors and people with disabilities living in the community. This relatively small investment in their continued wellbeing through falls prevention is an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss.

Respectfully submitted by  
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