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RESTRICTED ACCESS

# Ontario accessibility act lacks standards to solve housing crisis for people with disabilities

Report showed people with disabilities four times more likely to experience homelessness

Ontario's Building Code, the primary framework for residential construction standards, is often criticized for inadequacies in ensuring accessible housing.

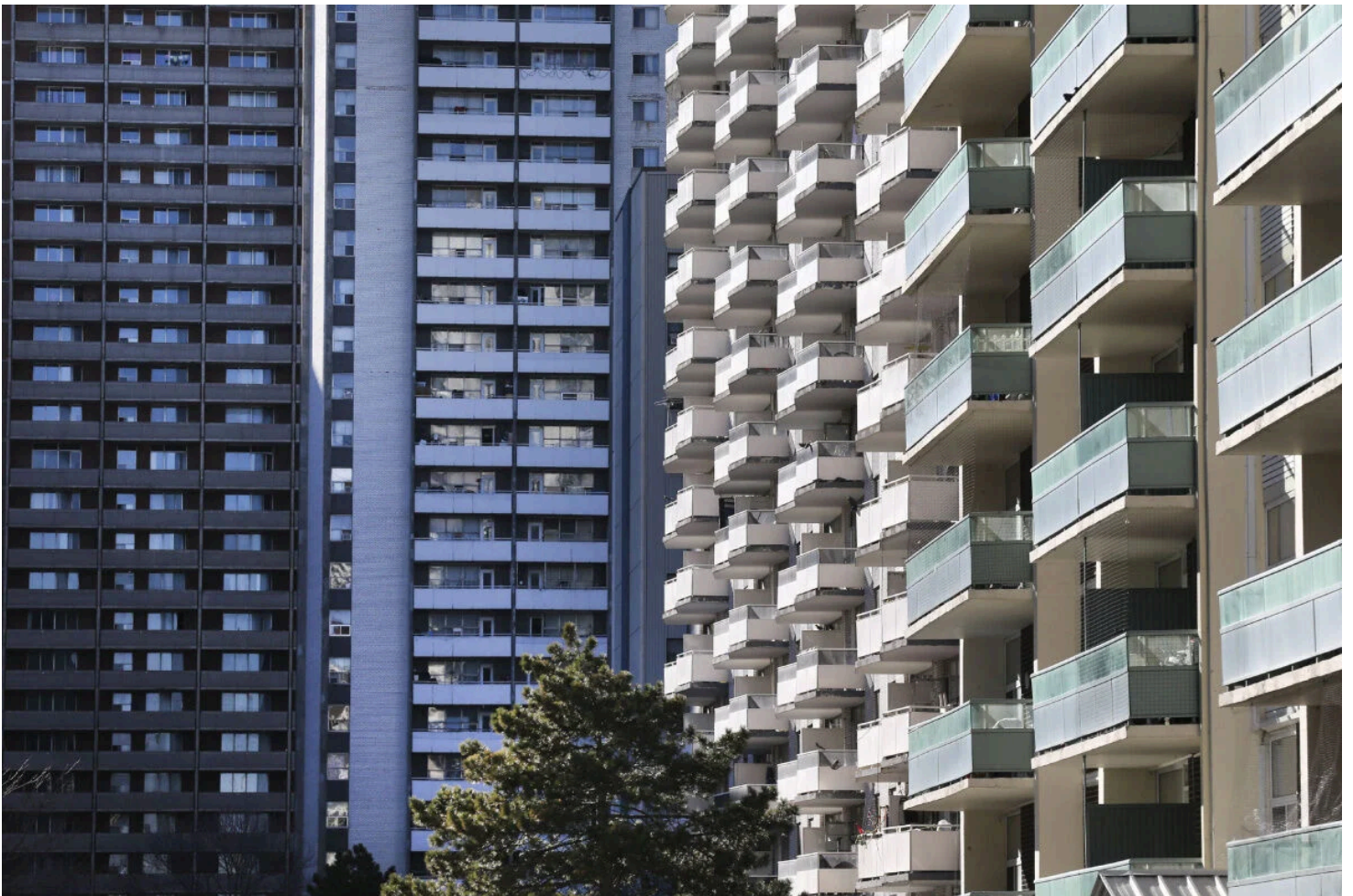


By **Mzwandile Poncana** Mississauga News

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Ontario condos pose accessibility challenges, forcing costly retrofits for residents with disabilities amid a growing housing crisis.

Richard Lautens photo

*A barrier-free Ontario was the purpose of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), unanimously passed by MPPs in 2005. With the province's 20-year deadline for the implementation of accessibility standards looming on Jan. 1, 2025, **Restricted Access: Will Ontario meet its barrier-free goals?** explores this quality-of-life issue for the millions of people living with disabilities – a demographic that's expected to skyrocket as the population ages.*

With less than a year to meet its 2025 accessibility deadline, Ontario faces mounting criticism over housing standards that advocates say fail seniors and people with disabilities.

A few years ago, Kate Chung, co-founder of the Accessible Housing Network, and her partner Doug both had knee and hip replacement surgeries. They found their apartment no longer fit their needs as they transitioned to using mobility aids.

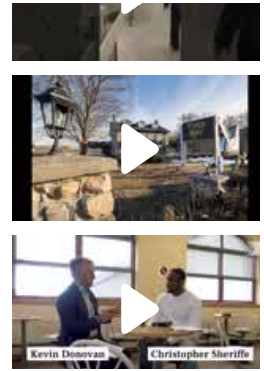


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Extensive, costly renovations to make their home safer and more manageable for their mobility needs still left many accessibility issues unresolved. They spent \$18,000 converting the bathroom, removing the bathtub in favour of a shower and adding grab bars. However, the shower installation included a five-inch lip, meant to prevent water overflow.

“It’s still a tripping hazard,” she said. “The issue — especially for seniors — is tripping.” She mentioned other designs could’ve been made to prevent the water overflow.

She explained that although eliminating the bathtub reduced fall risks, this lip remained an obstacle, and she frequently trips over other parts of the apartment, such as the raised hot water pipes at the door leading to the balcony.



Kate Chung, 82, spent \$18,000 on retrofitting her home to make it more suitable for her and her partner when they both went through mobility-limiting surgeries.

Chung says that it would have been cheaper if accessibility had been in mind while the building was being constructed, since retrofitting is more expensive.

“Luckily, we had the savings to pay for the renovations we made in the bathroom ... but not everybody does,” she said.

Chung is among many seniors and Canadians, living with disabilities, who have been affected by what advocates call an “accessibility crisis.”

The problem is prevalent in Peel Region, where the affordability and accessibility crises intersect to prevent those living with disabilities from finding adequate homes.

According to a recent Peel Region [staff report](#), approximately 91,000 households face “core need” – meaning their housing is either inadequate or unaffordable. As of now, the region only meets 19 per cent of the demand for affordable housing, leaving many scrambling for safe options.

According to the [Guide for Housing report](#) by Peel Senior Link, Peel’s seniors, the group most likely to need mobility-friendly housing, are projected to make up 21 per cent of the population by 2041. Despite an aging demographic, affordable accessible options remain scarce, often leaving older adults in unsafe conditions or forced into long-term-care facilities far from loved ones, say advocates.





Even after spending thousands on renovations, Chung says there are still tripping hazards in her home – including a raised hot water pipe at the door to her balcony.

Mzwandile Poncana Metroland

This reflects a larger trend across the province. Recent statistics from Statistics Canada reveal that 27 per cent of Canadians report having a disability, yet current provincial regulations only require 15 per cent of units in new developments to be accessible. This can result in more people relying on renovations.

Gift Tshuma, an advocacy specialist at March of Dimes who uses a wheelchair, said that since many wheelchair users need to pay for adaptations to make their apartment accessible, these individuals would require funding; however, many don't meet the qualification requirements.

“So, if you're above a certain income threshold or if you're not on ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program), you don't qualify for certain funding,” he said.

A 2019 report by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation found that adapting existing modest housing to meet accessibility standards in several major Canadian cities typically cost under \$10,000 in key areas, including entry access, horizontal circulation, bathroom modifications and rear balcony access.



In condos, most accessibility updates cost less than \$5,000 or ranged from \$5,000 to \$10,000, with kitchen renovations exceeding \$10,000. For other housing types, such as detached, semi-detached, bungalows and townhouses, accessibility costs ranged from \$5,000 to \$10,000 in these same target areas.

Jacob Cohen, COO of the Daniels Corporation — a GTA condo developer — said that they have found planning accessibility has to start at the very beginning of the project.

Sal Amenta, a chair of the Accessible Housing Network, is a senior who lives with sciatica and said it has been difficult for him to walk up the stairs and perform daily activities. There have been moments where he has had to rely on a walker or cane.

“It was so bad that I had to hold onto the sides of stairs when I went down, and when I came up the stairs, I had to walk on all fours like a dog. The pain was so bad,” he recalled of one painful memory.

Like Chung, he spent a large amount of money to remove his bathtub and make it a walk-in. His shower now also has grab bars, and there is space to sit on a stool when he is showering, if needed.

“What I fondly wish, for other people of my age, is that they will have a home that they can live as comfortably as possible, and not have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to renovate, in order to carry on living in their community with their friends and neighbours,” he said.

However, in order to get renovations for his stairs, he would need to get a reserved mortgage and take a portion of the house’s value. He estimates it would take tens of thousands of dollars, since the house was not designed for these modifications.



Sal Amenta, a senior living with sciatica, had to spend a large amount on renovating his bathroom so that his bathtub was removed and replaced with a walk-in shower.



He fears that as he ages, he will have to be dependent on a wheelchair and his home is not currently designed for wheelchair use.

Ontario's Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), passed in 2005, was intended to make the province fully accessible by 2025. But advocates say the act lacks enforcement standards for residential housing, leaving people with disabilities without accessible home options.

"There's a housing accessibility crisis," said advocate David Lepofsky, describing the current state of accessible housing in Ontario.

He added that, despite repeated calls for accessible housing standards, the government has yet to deliver regulations specific to private housing.

"When the government tries to stimulate more housing but doesn't encourage accessibility, it's condoning the creation of more inaccessible housing and making the problem worse," he said.

Rich Donovan, an accessibility expert who conducted a recent legislative review of the AODA, emphasized that the act lacks clear regulations for residential accessibility.

"The framework does not include residential housing accessibility standards," he said, adding that this omission means Ontario is missing out on a "significant opportunity" to improve housing access for people with disabilities across the province.

Luke Anderson, co-chair of the Accelerating Accessibility Coalition, said gaps in accessibility exist even in newer buildings, where many homes — like Chung's — still have steps or other barriers that make them impossible for some people to enter.

"Between half and three-quarters" of public and retail spaces, Anderson noted, remain inaccessible.

"The province had the intention of creating a barrier-free Ontario by 2025. And you know, as a wheelchair user myself, it's clear that we are not going to see that," he said.

Chung added that the lack of specific housing standards under the AODA leaves people vulnerable.

"If homes were built with accessibility in mind from the start, we wouldn't have to invest so heavily in expensive renovations later on," Chung said.

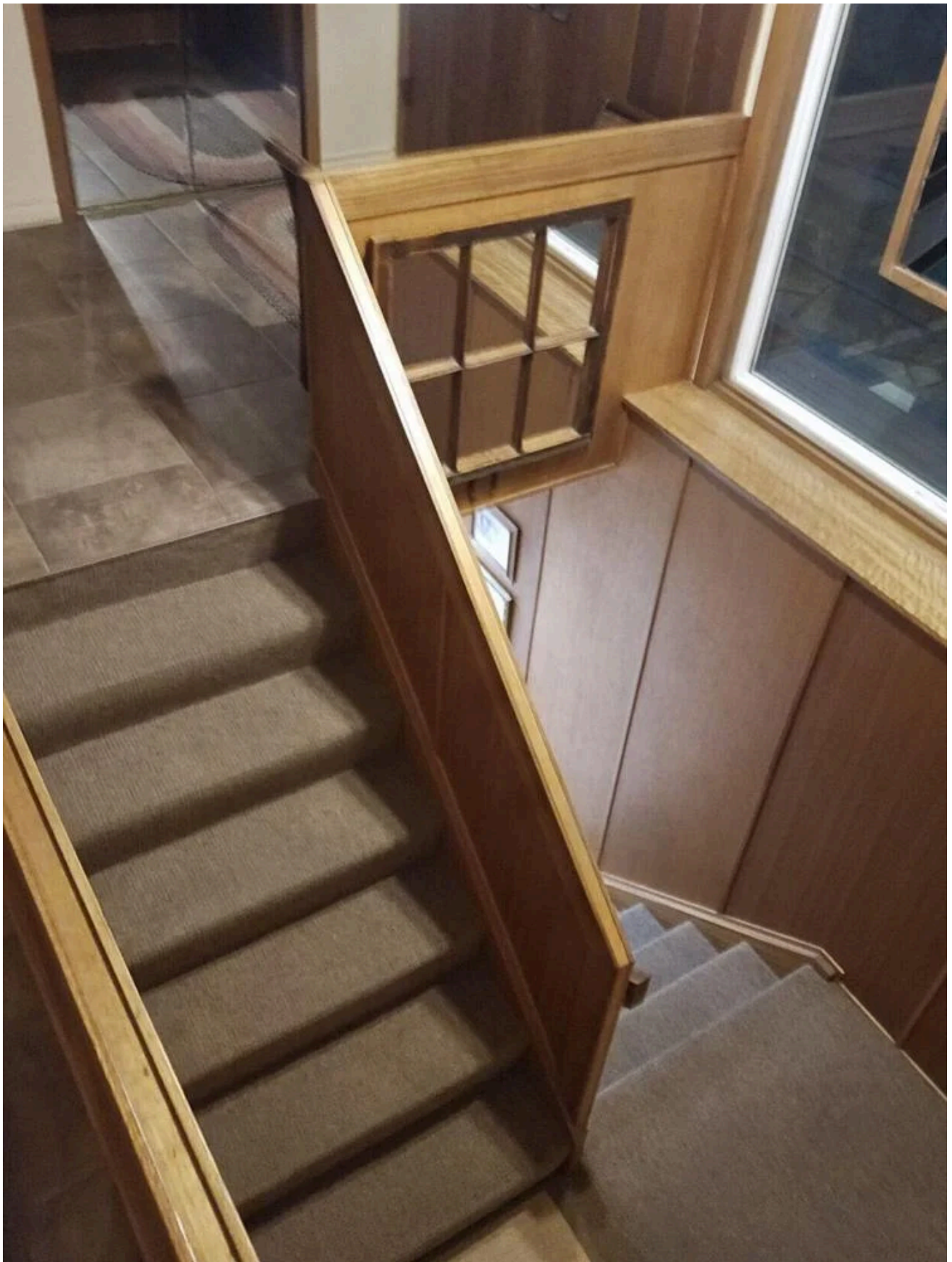
She expressed frustration over the province's resistance to applying AODA standards to residential spaces, noting that it only worsens the accessibility gap over time.

Chung said that the AODA deliberately did not include housing. They said that "we'll leave housing to the building code."



“But the building code is the source of the tragedy, because it only requires that 15 per cent of the apartments in a brand-new building be visitable,” she said.

Ontario’s Building Code, the primary framework for residential construction standards, is often criticized for inadequacies in ensuring accessible housing. Advocates say that while the code addresses certain public spaces and commercial facilities, it largely overlooks residential buildings — a gap that leaves people with disabilities facing major barriers in their own homes.



The stairs of Sal Amenta's home — he recalls when the pain from his sciatica was so severe he had to crawl up them on all fours.



A recent report from Ontario's design of public spaces standards development committee critiques the provincial building code's accessibility standards, saying the current requirements are "insufficient" — particularly in residential housing. The Improving Accessible Built Environment Standards — 2023 Initial Recommendations report urges comprehensive updates to the code to address gaps and ensure new constructions and major renovations include accessible design features, making spaces more usable for people with disabilities.

As disability rates rise, building code requirements remain minimal, leaving a critical gap in housing design, advocates say. The lack of adequate standards is evident in new builds, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area, where townhomes and condo units with raised thresholds or narrow doorways are common, says Anderson, who is also the co-founder of Stop Gap Foundation.

"There's no requirement to remove the curb on balconies, for instance," he says, explaining that wheelchair users are often unable to use outdoor spaces in their own homes.

At Daniels, they no longer solely use the building code as a standard for creating accessible housing.

"We found that it did not go far enough in terms of its use of and enhancement of accessible standards and accessible living," said Cohen.

Daniels created their own framework, which included a checklist of six or seven items they believed could be easily added to enhance the building. Some things on this list include a roll-in shower, balconies without curbs and widened door frames to ensure an easier path of travel.

"This would lead to a better quality of life for people living in those units," Cohen said.

He hopes that other organizations take inspiration from their framework and start to think about developing beyond the building code's requirements.

"The more developers and builders that do this that start today, the more accessible housing we're going to have down the road," he said.

Brad Evoy, a steering committee member of the Accessible Housing Network and executive director of the Disability Justice Network of Ontario, argued that Ontario's accessible housing crisis is inseparable from the larger housing crisis.

"The number of folks who are currently unhoused and on disability support has doubled in the last two years," Evoy said.

He pointed to a broader issue of increasing housing precarity, exacerbated for disabled Ontarians who face added layers of disadvantage when trying to secure affordable, accessible housing.



“The affordability piece and the accessibility piece go hand in hand,” he added, noting that housing policies have failed to address either need. He also noted the relationship between lack of accessible, affordable homes and homelessness.

A [report](#) by the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC) showed that people with disabilities are four times more likely to experience homelessness. Chung said this number could be significantly higher – up to 80 per cent – if all disabilities, including mental disabilities, are included.

Advocates argue that Ontario should adopt universal design principles which aim to make housing accessible to people of all ages and abilities by creating spaces that can easily be modified such that anybody can live in them. Amenta emphasized the urgency of universal design, noting that people do not anticipate future disabilities.

“For the grace of God, you’re not disabled this very moment – but you may well be soon,” Amenta said, underscoring the unpredictability of life and the necessity of planning as we age.

Amenta, Chung and Evoy all underscored the need for legislative and policy reforms to improve housing accessibility in Ontario.

“Developers are refusing to think outside the box,” Chung said, emphasizing that builders often resist changes even when accessible designs do not increase costs. She also noted that, across federal, provincial and municipal governments, responsibility for housing accessibility is often shifted rather than addressed, with each level pointing to the other for action.

“Every one of them is saying, ‘It’s the other guy’s job,’” she said.



Luke Anderson, co-chair of the Accelerating Accessibility Coalition, said it is “clear” that the province will not reach its deadline to be accessible by 2025.

Metroland file photo

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Chung expressed frustration over the reluctance of developers and policymakers to embrace universal design.

“They will build to the building code and no more,” she said. “They seem to think it’ll cost too much, which is ridiculous. It doesn’t.”

Chung said that while some developers, such as Daniels Corporation, have shown a willingness to incorporate accessible designs in certain projects, most are still hesitant to make universal design a standard.

Donovan stressed the importance of rethinking Ontario’s approach to accessibility in housing, and pointed out that Ontario’s existing standards are often insufficient in meeting the daily needs of those with disabilities.

“If we’re not thinking about those needs from the start,” he said, “we’re creating barriers that don’t need to exist.”

Reflecting on the lack of practical enforcement and user-specific design, Donovan emphasized the need for a tailored approach that goes beyond existing general regulations.

“Building for people with disabilities isn’t about checking boxes,” he noted. Instead, he argued, Ontario should use data and feedback from people with lived experience to drive improvements.

Chung and her colleagues are also urging Canada to adopt standards similar to those implemented in Australia, where all new housing must be built to universal design specifications. Amenta and Chung pointed to Australia’s progress in requiring universal design, arguing that Canada should not fall behind.

“The Australian building code now requires that all new housing be universal design,” Chung said. “Why aren’t we doing the same?”

Advocates are urging the government to look beyond the immediate costs and recognize the broader benefits of universal accessibility.

“If we have to adopt universal principles that apply to everyone and everywhere, we will create homes that serve generations to come,” says Amenta.







Mzwandile Poncana *is a community impact reporter covering Peel. His reporting is funded by the Canadian government through its Local Journalism Initiative.*

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