

April 21, 2005

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Re: Housing Project

Dear Ms. Britton:

This semester marks the end of the Housing Project. We are writing this letter to reflect upon the project's mission and accomplishments, describe the Home Access Modification and Barrier Removal workshops we facilitated in Des Moines and Fort Dodge, and recount some of the lessons we learned from members of these communities.

**Background & History:** The Housing Project was formed in 2002 in response to the steady stream of calls and email messages IPAT received from people asking where and how they could get money, materials or other help to install exterior ramps, widen doorways, obtain equipment or retrofit homes and apartments. Most inquiries came from people whose family or friends had experienced an accident, injury or disability that limited day-to-day functioning and activities. They had scoured their communities looking for home modification programs, only to find that that, with few exceptions, none existed outside of Iowa's largest cities. The lack of programs and information left people trapped in their houses and apartments or forced them go into debt, move elsewhere, sell their homes or enter a nursing home.

You asked the Clinical Law Program to develop systems reform projects and craft responses to help alleviate the critical shortage of existing and newly constructed housing that is accessible to and usable by persons with disabilities in Iowa. The Universal Design Project was established to promote barrier-free design, eliminate costly retrofits and push for the enactment of local and state laws or rules to require that homes built with public funds include minimum access features (Student Legal Interns from that project will provide you with a separate letter that chronicles their achievements).

The Housing Project was formed to make sure people could obtain and pay for home modifications and retrofits. The first project teams carefully researched the federal and state agencies that fund -- or could fund -- home modifications, barrier removal projects

and assistive technology to promote independent living. Student Legal Interns mapped out in great detail the universe of agencies, officials, laws, regulations and policies and procedures that are involved in these matters.

The next team developed handbooks that contained a wealth of information about federal, state and local programs. They soon realized, however, that each city and community in Iowa had different needs, programs and resources as well as different ways of setting housing priorities and allocating funds.

Ultimately, we decided that conducting workshops would be the best way to connect with each community, exchange ideas and insights, and encourage people to establish a home modification program, improve or expand an existing program or petition state officials to change funding policies and priorities. We also planned to convey the comments and concerns that emerged from the workshops directly to state and federal housing officials for their review and action.

**Home Access Modification & Barrier-Removal Workshops:** In 2003, the Housing Project hit the road for the first time to deliver a workshop in Mason City. The two-hour session was devoted to how communities can obtain or leverage funds to retrofit homes, help people pay for home modifications or change local or state policy to ensure the mainstream housing needs of persons with disabilities are given top priority. The workshop was extremely well received; we soon received requests from other cities and towns interested in hosting one. Here is a list of the locations and dates of each workshop:

Mason City	April 8, 2003
Cedar Rapids	July 24, 2003
Decorah	December 8, 2003
Dubuque	December 9, 2003
Sioux City	March 12, 2004
Waterloo/Cedar Falls	October 21, 2004
Des Moines	March 9, 2005
Fort Dodge	March 30, 2005
Iowa City	2003, 2004 & 2005

People from all walks of life participated. The audiences included community development officials, disability advocates and organizations, health care professionals, builders, contractors and developers, grant writers, individuals who wanted to modify their homes, landlords, code enforcement, civil rights and fair housing officials, service providers and representatives from religious organizations.

**Preparing for the Workshops:** We spent several weeks familiarizing ourselves with the voluminous transfer memo and project files, and the vast amount of information that exists regarding home access modifications and funding. Early in the semester, we decided to end the housing project on a high note by accepting invitations to conduct workshops in Des Moines, Iowa's capitol city and most populace city, and in Fort Dodge, a smaller community.

The bulk of our time was spent researching Des Moines, Fort Dodge and adjoining communities, identifying local ramp, assistive technology and home modification programs and services and learning how they set housing or funding priorities and administer or apply for federal or state funds. The task wasn't easy for us; it was sometimes difficult to get any or accurate information from government officials and community organizations. We can't imagine what it must be like for consumers who are trying to seek out immediate help and information about local programs.

We had a solid starting point from previous groups, whose efforts made it easier to update and revise the slides, exhibits, workbook and resource guide. Still, we expended much energy modifying these and other materials. The end result -- two successful workshops -- was well worth the time and effort.

**The Des Moines and Fort Dodge Workshops:** The Des Moines workshop was held on March 9, 2005 at the Iowa Methodist Medical Center. Sixty-one health care professionals, disability advocates and consumers attended the session, which was co-hosted by the Citizens Disability Council and IMMC.

The Fort Dodge workshop was held on March 30, 2005 at the Fort Dodge Public Library. About a dozen individuals navigated stormy weather conditions and lightning strikes to attend the session, which was sponsored by the Webster County Disability Alliance. They represented a cross section of the community, which included the six-counties comprising the MIDAS Council of Governments.

The sessions were structured around the workbooks; we asked questions posed in the workbooks and the audience (or we) provided and discussed the answers. Some examples include, What Are Home Access Modifications? Where Would You Go For Help or Funding? What Is Your Community Doing? What Are Other Communities Doing? What Else Can Communities Do Today To Make Home Access Modifications Programs More Available to People Who Need Them? In addition, we provided a map of the world of federal funding, described the nuts and bolts of HUD and IDED housing programs, and furnished practical tips on what individuals could do to apply for funds or change local or state priorities and policies.

As expected, people freely shared their experiences and ideas and asked a host of questions. They applauded our efforts and gave the Resource Guide and materials glowing reviews. To our surprise, however, neither city had a program devoted exclusively to home modifications and the one or two programs in or near Des Moines were restricted to homeowners or older Iowans. We ended each workshop by asking people to convene a workgroup whose mission is to design, operate and secure funding for a home access modification program that serves renters, homeowners and persons with a disability, regardless of age. Our goal was to get people involved immediately and provide them with the time and information they need to apply for CDBG funds through the City of Des Moines or Housing Funds through the IDED. Individuals at the Fort Dodge workshop promised to get started right away.

**Lessons from the Des Moines and Fort Dodge Workshops:** From our perspective, we learned as much as we taught in the workshops. We discovered several things this semester, most of which are included in the Lessons Learned section of the workbooks that are included with this letter. The individuals who attended the Des Moines and Fort Dodge sessions passed along these additional and valuable insights:

*The Resource Guide, IPAT and IOWA COMPASS:* As previously mentioned, people found the Resource Guide to be one of the best things about the workshops and requested additional copies. IPAT and Iowa Compass are the most important sources in Iowa for information about assistive technology, home modifications and related matters. It is essential that the funding manual be kept up to date and made available in alternate formats without cost by phone, Internet and mail.

*Other Public and Private Funding Sources:* The IPAT manual is a first-rate tool, however, we found there are a host of potential funding sources that manage to escape under the radar. Internet searches and a bit of luck brought to our attention two such programs. The first is the Christopher Reeves Paralysis Foundation's Quality of Life Program, which provides grants to nonprofits for accessibility, barrier removal and other projects. The second is the MIDAS Council of Government's Revolving Loan Program, which makes loans of \$5,000 to \$250,000 to cities and organizations to improve or maintain housing. Loans can be used to make home modifications, but no one has ever applied for a loan for that purpose. That oversight should be remedied soon; one individual who had been turned down for IDED funding said she was going to contact MIDAS immediately.

*Home Modification Programs Should Focus First on the Basics:* We asked people to brainstorm and consider the wide range of modifications, equipment and assistive technology that could help a person live independently. The suggestions included everything from levered door handles to automated environmental control systems. The occupational therapists in the audience reminded us that sophisticated and expensive assistive technology is all well and good, but it's important to first address basic needs. Their top priorities are helping people enter the home, leave the home in emergencies and move safely in and around the home so they can use the bedroom, bathroom and toilet facilities. Anyone thinking of starting a home access program should keep these priorities in mind.

*Communities Need Technical Assistance to Start Programs and Apply for Funding:* At both presentations, we strongly encouraged individuals to band together and start a local program. Most people recognized the need for a program, but they were not sure they had the talent or skills to take on such an ambitious project. IDED offers technical assistance regarding its Housing Fund and other programs. IPAT publishes the contractor network manual and is a clearinghouse for information on assistive technology.

What's missing, however, is expert, on-site guidance on how to build or install a ramp or make other structural changes, evaluate a person's independent living skills and equipment needs or write a winning application. Please consider assembling a team of consultants that

would visit communities and help them design, establish and operate a home access modification program. Community organizations and governments also encounter problems when trying to apply for funds. For instance, IDED's application process remains a mystery even to veteran grant writers. Moreover, that agency does not give much, if any, feedback to unsuccessful applicants. We recommend that you consider collecting and distributing successful applications from IDED or entitlement communities. The Iowa State Association of Counties might be interested in partnering with IPAT to develop model applications. To somewhat complicate matters, many agencies are requiring people to submit applications in both electronic and paper formats, which works to the detriment of people who do not have or know how to use computers. The need for technological assistance will increase as this trend continues.

*The Administration Is Considering Moving the CDBG Program from HUD to Commerce:* State officials, housing advocates and disability organizations were shocked to learn the administration is proposing to move the CDBG program from HUD to the Department of Commerce. If approved, that action would turn the world upside down, strip HUD and IDED of any oversight or control over the program and shift responsibility to Commerce, which has no experience or expertise in housing and disability matters. The Clinical Law Program will continue to monitor proposals and draft legislation; we trust you will do the same.

**Changing Iowa's Housing Policies and Priorities:** Every five years, Iowa is required to develop and submit to HUD the State's Consolidated Plan, a long-range planning document and action plan for the investment of HUD funds. The Consolidated Plan (ConPlan) is a blueprint that controls how funds will be earmarked and used and determines who benefits from affordable housing activities.

The Iowa Department of Economic Development is responsible for preparing the plan and holding public hearings and open forums to ensure that citizens participate in the process and help identify housing needs and set priorities. To their credit, IDED officials and staff have been extremely cooperative over the years. They answered questions from team members, provided us with data, statistics and documents and furnished us with the background information and context we needed to fully understand how the planning and funding process works in the real world. On the other hand, some officials were unaware the agency had the power and discretion to set aside funds specifically for persons with disabilities. As a result, groups who submit applications to start a home modification program stand little chance of receiving awards from IDED.

IDED held hearings about the ConPlan in late 2004. Len Sandler traveled to Des Moines to meet with agency officials and provide formal comment. He recounted the barriers that prevent the state from meeting the mainstream housing needs of persons with disabilities and suggested ways the system could be improved. Many of his recommendations were furnished by people who attended our workshops; most of his comments are included in the plan IDED submitted to HUD.

He also clarified that HUD allows Iowa and other states to a) create a special funding category for home modification programs that is not tied to rental rehabilitation, b) designate or earmark funds exclusively for activities that benefit persons with disabilities, c) give greater weight and rating points to applicants that promise to serve persons with disabilities d) require that home modifications, other rehabilitation or new construction for owners, renters or landlords meet universal design or visitability standards and e) fund home modifications without requiring that the entire structure be brought up to federal or state code.

The meeting was a critical first step toward changing state policies and achieving systems reform. We are contemplating the next steps the Clinical Law Program will take. The Lt. Governor's Housing Summit should convene again this year. You might consider placing on the agenda a mini-workshop on the ConPlan process or Home Access Modification and Barrier Removal programs and funding.

Thank you so much for your help and support. We truly enjoyed working on the Housing Project, and cannot thank you enough for your time and assistance.

Sincerely,

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Student Legal Intern

Molly H. Sutter  
Student Legal Intern

Curtis "Jeff" Tarver, II  
Student Legal Intern

Enc: Des Moines Workbook and Resource Guide  
Fort Dodge Workbook and Resource Guide