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All the comforts of home Tons of cool devices can help people with disabilities live easier

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Thirty-year-old Amy Waterman, who has cerebral palsy, gets help from her mother, Ethel, using a lift between the pool and her wheelchair. (Concord Monitor photo/Ken Williams)

On a sunny afternoon, you'll most likely find Amy Waterman in the backyard swimming laps in the pool. It's a hobby she's enjoyed her whole life and one that got a lot easier three years ago.

Waterman uses a wheelchair and needs help from her mom getting in and out of the water. Until three summers ago, it meant being hoisted by her mother into a chair that could be lowered into the pool.

These days, Amy wheels up to a machine that can pick her up, swing her over the edge and dip her gently into the water. She still needs a little help from her mom, but the whole thing takes less than five minutes.

"It has made a real difference," said Ethel Waterman, Amy's mother.

There's no end to the cool devices that can help people with physical disabilities get around. The company that makes Amy's poolside lift also makes machines that carry people through the house via harnesses suspended from the ceiling. And as more homes go up, builders are slowly starting to make room for them. They're even installing contraptions of their own.

Jeff Lavoie, owner of Always Accessible, the company that set up Waterman's poolside lift, said he's getting more and more requests to put elevators in private homes.

"In 1997, we installed one residential elevator," he said. "In 1998, it was two or three. Last year we put in 50."

Not everyone has difficulty with stairs, he said. Often they're planning for the future.

"They say, 'I'm in my 40s or my 50s now, I know I'm going to be in the house for a

while, it makes sense to have this for when I get older," he said.

And people are getting older. A lot of them.

With the baby boomer generation heading toward its golden years, the number of people with mobility issues is expected to increase dramatically. A study by the National Institute on Aging found that as life expectancy continues to rise, people will have, on average, 13 years during which they won't be fully mobile.

The answer to greater numbers of people with more limited motion isn't just elevators, which are pretty expensive to begin with. (They start at around \$16,000.) These days, people can and are making all sorts of changes to houses to make t

hem more accessible.

Time for a change

The Watermans have had 21 years to adapt their Concord home. Over the years they've turned a ground floor office into a bedroom for Amy, turned a closet and pantry into a wheelchair-accessible bathroom, and added ramps wherever needed.

Amy Waterman, 30, has cerebral palsy, a condition which limits her movement.

Some of the changes they made when they moved in; others they've added as Amy grew up.

"It used to be I could lift her and carry her," said Ethel Waterman. "But as she got older, it became more difficult."

These days the family has tracks along the ceiling of Amy's bedroom which hold a motor and a harness. Once Amy is strapped into the harness, the motor can shift her off the bed and onto her wheelchair.

It's much better than what she used to use, she said.

"I've had four lifts in my room," Amy Waterman said. "They just took up so much room."

In the dining room, a track that runs the length of the ceiling makes it possible for Amy to exercise indoors. She walks back and forth gripping metal railings. When she wants to turn around or get back in her wheelchair, the harness can lift her up and move her around.

Of course, none of it has come cheap. Ethel Waterman reckons they've spent more than \$12,000 on the track and harness equipment. As for what they've spent widening doorways, and adding ramps, it's anybody's guess.

With retrofitting a costly option, there is some effort among people building homes to make them more mobility-friendly to begin with, according to Jill Burke of the Granite State Independent Living Foundation.

Burke said people often call looking for building and design tips that will make their homes more accessible in years to come. The agency often refers them to Web sites, some of which have actual plans people can use to build.

The features on these designs include wider doorways and halls, a full-use bathroom on the first floor - as opposed to a half-bath - and built in ramps.

It helps that, in general, doors and hallways are already being built wider on new homes, according to Lavoie. While hallways used to average 26 inches across, these days it's closer to 36 inches. Some condominiums even come with railings on the walls.

Others may have hidden features. In most low-income housing that's built these days, the bathroom walls are reinforced in case a grab bar needs to be installed at a later date, said Chris Carley, a Concord architect.

"It doesn't cost much to do it," he said. "But it would cost a lot to have to go back and redo it."

For the Watermans, all the work they've done will eventually be undone. Amy has been accepted into a Portsmouth apartment complex, Betty's Dream/Rainbow Apartments, with units specially equipped for people with disabilities.

As soon as crews finish work, Amy's moving in.

Her parents will eventually take the tracks down, and move the ramps out of the way. Then they'll move.

And while Amy's psyched to get her own apartment, she will miss the swimming.

"This will probably be my last summer in the pool," she said, wrapped in towels, wet from her dip. "It's kind of sad."

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