

# Easier access

Tour home aids those in wheelchairs



**Bullder Steve Thomas (above) opens the side door next to the main door for an even wider entryway into this house with a stepless entrance.**



**Bill Fuller, president of Virginia Assistive Technology Solutions, demonstrates how easy it is to enter and swivel around in the master bath shower of an EasyLiving Home in Henrico County, the first home in Virginia built to these standards. He is shown with Terri Morgan, board member of the non-profit organization, who helped bring the EasyLiving program to Virginia.**

ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH

**BY CAROL HAZARD**  
Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

**T**he living is easier in a new house in the Spring Lake subdivision going up in northern Henrico County.

The home, at 2332 Thomas Kenney Drive, is easy to enter and navigate for people in wheelchairs or with limited mobility.

The house is the first in Virginia to get the seal of approval as an EasyLiving Home from Virginia Assistive Technology Solutions Inc., a newly licensed nonprofit in Virginia.

The house is part of the Dream Home Tour of new homes for sale in the Richmond area. The tour, free to the public, is today and next weekend from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The 3,145-square-foot, five-bedroom house in Spring Lake is on the market for \$424,950.

An EasyLiving Home must have three features:

- a stepless entrance;
- ample hallway space and door widths; and
- a first-floor with a master bedroom, kitchen, entertainment area and bathroom.

Stephen Thomas Homes, the Richmond builder, added lever handles on all doors, which are easier to manipu-

late than knobs.

He positioned rocker light switches lower and electrical outlets higher on walls than most settings — within easier reach of someone in a wheelchair or with limited ability to maneuver.

He designed removable cabinet fronts at kitchen and bathroom sinks, setting drains and pipes as far back as possible, so someone in a wheelchair could slide their legs underneath.

"I got involved in this process four years ago when my mother broke her hip and she had to struggle to get around the house," Thomas said. "It was painful to watch."

Thomas said it costs an extra \$1,500 to build this house to EasyLiving standards, including excavation costs for a crawl space to have a stepless entry. "It seemed like a great idea without a whole lot of expense."

The EasyLiving concept was started and developed in Georgia eight years ago. More than 800 homes in Georgia have been certified as EasyLiving homes.

The people behind the movement here hope EasyLiving will become as familiar as EarthCraft, a certification process for energy efficient homes.

"With people talking about aging in place and all the Baby Boomers out there, this design makes sense," said Terri Morgan, a board member with the nonprofit group and a program

## Dream Home Tour

Home Building Association of Richmond is presenting the tour.

**What:** 60 new homes by 31 builders will be open

**When:** Today and March 15 and 16

**Hours:** 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

**Maps:** Supplement in today's newspaper, at Ukrop's stores, HBAR at 400 N. Bridge Rd., Richmond

**More information:** [www.hbar.org](http://www.hbar.org)

manager at Virginia Housing Development Authority.

Wider doorways come in handy not only for people in wheelchairs, but also for moving furniture or for lugging packages and strollers, Morgan said.

This house is both EasyLiving- and EarthCraft-certified, built to be energy efficient.

"I cannot describe to you how great it is to be able to roll out on the deck," said Bill Fuller, president of the nonprofit group and a senior community housing officer with the development authority. He toured the house recently.

Fuller, whose legs are paralyzed from polio, uses a wheelchair. Most

decks have a 4-inch drop, making it impossible to wheel over the threshold without assistance.

"It's all a matter of independence," said Fuller, who also relies on Abigail, a Jack Russell terrier service dog, for his independence. Abigail has retrieved things for his master for more than eight years.

Only one thing is difficult about EasyLiving design, Fuller said. It's getting people to change their perceptions. Are four-step entryways really needed? What about 6-inch drops into garages?

This house has neither.

The design seems so simple. Yet, Fuller and his wife discovered how hard it is to find something comparable when they shopped for a house five years ago.

"We wanted a rancher or a house with two stories and master suite on the first floor," Annie Fuller said. "But here's the issue with that — the doors to master baths are not wide enough. 'Who would have thought that what we wanted was out of the ordinary?'"

She looked at 114 houses in 2003 before finding one that was suitable in Chesterfield County. It had been modified for accessibility, but it had no ramp. The Fullers added one.

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