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Houses to get marks for being disability-friendly

Katie Chapman
 HOUSING

THE housing equivalent of the heart tick could save the Government up to \$60 million a year in renovation costs.

The Social Development Ministry has completed an economic assessment of Lifemark, a quality mark that identifies disability-friendly houses which can be easily adapted for disabled people in the future.

About 45 per cent to 50 per cent of disabled adults are living in homes that have not been modified for their needs.

The ministry's report says the need for appropriate housing is going to increase as the population ages, and if housing does not adapt, the Government will have to contribute more money to renovations for the disabled community. New Zealand's disabled population of about 326,000 is expected to grow to about 560,000 by 2039.

The Health Ministry spent \$13,952,000 on house modifications in the past financial year, and ACC spent \$19.6 million.

National uptake of Lifemark would significantly reduce that, the report said.

With a 33 per cent uptake, savings would be up to \$30m annually by 2039. With a 67 per cent uptake, savings would be \$60m.

Lifemark chairwoman Viv Maidaborn said the report simply confirmed what common sense already dictated. "The housing stock in New Zealand isn't going to work for an aging population."

The cost of readying houses for people with disabilities was going to increase, and

it had to be balanced by building better houses, she said.

"Our environment needs to be designed to support us to get on with our life."

The report has been backed by Social Development Ministry chief executive Peter Hughes. "The demand for disability-friendly housing is set to rise significantly over the next 30 years as the population ages. The reality is that the design of New Zealand's housing stock does not yet take into account this dramatic shift in demographics."

The Disabled Persons Assembly national president, Wendy Neilson, welcomed the report, and said it represented the direction New Zealand had to take.

The need for appropriate housing for disabled people could not be underestimated, she said.

Simple things like the right door handles, or a wet area in the bathroom made the world of difference, she said.

"When those things aren't there, there's a whole lot of issues where you're constantly saying 'can you help me?'"

The benefits were not just felt by the disabled people, she said.

"The house is easier for everyone."

But she hoped the report would result in action, not just words.

The building industry had to take the message on board, and the Government had to endorse it, she said.

WHAT IS LIFEMARK?

➤ To get a lifemark, a home must be independently assessed on several factors.

These include:

- Paths to the house have no steps, are at least 1.2 metres wide, well-lit, stable and slip-resistant.
- Hallways are at least 1.2m wide, doors are 86 centimetres wide.

➤ Light switches are only 1m above the floor.

➤ Floors are slip-resistant.

➤ There must be a toilet and bathroom on the entry level of the house, so they are accessible without stairs. The bathroom should have room for a wet-area shower, and have strengthened walls to allow for handrails.