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Bath Access: Two Reports

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Part One: Accessing The Typical Phone Booth Size Half Bath

Have you ever noticed how the half bath of a home becomes the bath of "convenience"? It seems to fall into that distinction quite naturally, either by location, or in the case of a multi-level home, its access. That is, unless you have to face this room in a wheelchair or with a walker.

Most half baths are small, confining little areas with the accent on confining. In many cases, even a regularly able-bodied person has to perform the dance with the door to get around the vanity and get turned around to close the door again. They are truly constructed with tots or horse jockeys in mind.

When faced with the need to make a half-bath accessible without demolishing walls, a number of steps may be considered. You must be able to get into the room to use it, so the door will be the first challenge.

Doors may need to be resigned with offset hinges to swing outward instead of inward. The offset hinges will allow the door to swing completely out of the opening and back against a wall. For maximum frame opening, you may also need to cut the door's stops to about door knob height. The knob may also need to be changed to a lever style handle in place of the traditional ball or tulip style turn knob.

Once the opening is maximized, the sink is usually the next obstruction. The typical half bath usually has a vanity set into a corner. The handles on the doors can do some real damage to knuckles or chair spokes, aside from not leaving enough room to maneuver. There are a number of options to consider here. The first is a pedestal sink or a 1960's type wall mount with no lower cabinet. The third is a triangular corner mounted sink. The corner sink may offer a bit more room due to its three sided design, which cuts off the obstructing corner. Again, the faucets should be changed to lever style handles, or the new auto sensor types. The lower feed lines and trap should also be wrapped with pipe insulation to guard against burns or bruises.

The toilet is next. If the use of the room is restricted to a challenged person only, a raised toilet may be a good consideration. If general use is still the case, a portable raised seat may be a viable alternative.

Of course, safety grab bars are a must. It may help to lower the mirrors or medicine cabinet to angle them towards the user. The electrical outlet, as most areas require, will be a GFI (Ground Fault Interrupter) style outlet. And the switch should be changed to a butterfly type fixture. They are large and only need to be bumped with an elbow or something to operate.

Part Two: Accessing The Typical 5' x 7' Milwaukee Bathroom

You page through home design magazine and attend home improvement shows and see all these huge baths and beautiful fixtures that make your bedroom look like a utility closet. Then you go home to your typical 5'x7' Milwaukee bathroom, where all the fixtures are lined up on one wall like dominoes, bringing frustration considering the fact that you need to make this room accessible.

In my last column I addressed some of the issues surrounding half bath accessibility. The considerations regarding door entry, sinks, and toilets can also be used in full bath alterations. What I would like to address in a full bath situation is the tub and problems surrounding tub access.

In new construction, or if major alterations are required, portable lifts can be installed, as can tubs with accessible swinging doors. It may also be required to convert to a roll-in shower. However, in situations where major alterations are out of the question, other means can be considered.

There are many portable devices on the market today that are made to be a temporary fix to immediate needs, such as clampable grab bars for tub walls and portable seats. These are very good for quick fix situations, but there are some drawbacks and safety issues to be considered.

For example, the clampable grab bars for the outside tub wall may not work on all tub configurations. Forcing a fit may create a danger to the person using it. The other problem is that if it does fit, the bar is typically set in the center of the tub due to the tub's inner profile. In other words, the slope of the back end or fixture wall can make it impossible to have the clamp type bar at the end of the tub. With it mounted more toward the center, the leg or swinging room is cut way down, making an already awkward maneuver even more dangerous.

The same can be said about portable transfer seats. Due to the inside slope of the tub walls, these seats mainly fit in the center of the tub. They can be unstable and may tip backward, while swinging legs into our out of the tub. Both are frustrating challenges when immediate means are needed to help in situations you may be thrust into with little time to prepare.

If time allows, or after the situation settles down, there are other much safer products that can be considered without an extensive outlay of investment. Wall mounted rails and grab bars come in all sizes and configurations to suit almost any need. However, they must be correctly secured to inner wall studs if they are truly going to be able to take the weight of a person.

Hinged transfer seats on the back wall swing downward into the tub. These are more stable in many ways and offer the back wall as support, thus eliminating the rocking and unsure movement typical of portable equipment. However, there is a portable transfer seat that I have found that offers the best of both worlds. It is portable yet very stable. This is a vinyl webbed transfer chair that hangs on the properly mounted safety grab bars. So you see there are products available that do not require major renovations, yet are safe and stable to the user.

We hope this information has been helpful to you! If you have any further questions, please visit our website at www.aroundyourhouse.net, or contact Jim at Around Your House.

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