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January 04, 2010

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Bihn Lu strains as she climbs the basement steps with 5-year-old Alan in her arms.

Her son, who was born with cerebral palsy and has limited use of his arms and legs, sleeps in the basement to be near the only bathroom in the family's cramped, three-room apartment that spans two floors of a row house in Toronto's east end.

"The stairs are steep and we have to carry Alan up and down. It's very inconvenient," says Lu, who has slipped once and is afraid of falling with her 41-pound son.

But at \$850 a month, it is the only apartment the family can afford that is near Alan's doctors at Toronto East General Hospital, and his school at Bloorview Kids Rehab Centre near Bayview Ave. on Kilgour Rd.

Alan's father, Tanh Tang, earns just \$1,400 a month as a cook for a Chinese restaurant. He and Lu have been on the waiting list for an affordable apartment for seven years, but have been told they may wait another 10 years for a unit that is wheelchair-accessible.

"Families with disabled children face so many challenges," says Barb Fishbein-Germon, a social worker at Bloorview. "And finding accessible, affordable housing is one of the most difficult."

Bloorview is hoping that Ontario's affordable housing strategy, expected late next spring, will include measures to help families like Alan's.

Of Toronto's 70,000 subsidized homes, fewer than 2,000 are wheelchair accessible, and only a quarter of those are large enough for families, according to Housing Connections, which manages the city's affordable housing waiting list of 70,000 households.

About 150 households are looking for wheelchair-accessible units with more than one bedroom, the agency says.

Ontario doesn't keep readily available statistics on the number of affordable housing units that are wheelchair-accessible and appropriate for families, nor keep track of how many families are waiting for them.

Bloorview wants the province to pay more attention to these vulnerable families, who tend to live in smaller homes with fewer amenities than other Ontarians because of their higher expenses and parents' restricted ability to work.

The rehab centre wants Queen's Park to earmark a set percentage of new affordable housing construction to families raising disabled children as well as funding to retrofit existing units.

It also wants new construction designed to be easily converted to accommodate wheelchairs. Tax incentives to encourage the private sector to build accessible units and special housing allowances for families paying market rent would also help, Fishbein-Germon says.

Since the McGuinty Liberals were elected, 40 wheelchair-accessible units for families have been built and 25 more have been approved as part of this year's federal-provincial stimulus funding. Retrofitting units for the disabled is also a priority in the agreement, a provincial spokesperson says.

Bloorview has 20 families struggling to raise their disabled children in unsafe and unhealthy environments, Fishbein-Germon says.



Bihn Lu, left, and Tanh Tang, right, are on a 10-year wait-list for wheelchair-accessible, affordable housing. Their son, Alan, has cerebral palsy.

COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

"These parents love their children and they want them home with them for as long as possible," she says. "Affordable housing that is accessible can prevent family breakdown and the need for these children to move to residential care."

Often it is the nondisabled children who suffer in these families.

A year ago, the Tangs reluctantly sent Alan's 1-year-old sister, Aimee, to Vietnam to live with Lu's brother and sister-in-law because their small and expensive Toronto apartment was just too much for the family to manage with a baby. They haven't seen Aimee since and don't know when they will see her again.

"Sometimes I think we should all just give up and go back to Vietnam," sighs Lu, who moved here about 10 years ago. "But what would happen to Alan? He would not get the care he needs in Vietnam. I am so worried about him. We have to do everything we can."