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## BULLETIN 95-2

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Subject: Elder Cottage Housing Opportunities (ECHO) Units  
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In several municipalities, alternative housing for senior citizens, known as Elder Cottage Housing Opportunity (ECHO) units, are appearing. Typically, these are small, manufactured housing units installed on the same lot as a single-family dwelling occupied by the family of the elderly person or couple. The intention is to allow senior citizens to live independently, but in close proximity to family members who can provide assistance as needed.

In an effort to make the use of this type of housing a viable option for families, the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) has been involved in discussions with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) regarding the connection of ECHO units to existing septic systems that are functioning properly without the need for upgrading the system to current standards, which would be cost prohibitive for many families.

As a result of these discussions, the DEP has agreed to make an accommodation in its rules to allow the connection of ECHO units to existing individual subsurface sewage disposal systems, subject to certain terms and conditions. The accommodation is extremely important as a means of keeping this housing option affordable to senior citizens and their families.

As part of this agreement, the DEP will rely on the local construction code enforcement agency to verify that a number of these conditions are met. As with all installations of manufactured housing, the plumbing subcode official will have responsibility to review the plans for installation of the unit and to inspect the installation for compliance with the Plumbing Subcode. Additionally, the plumbing subcode official will verify the items marked "(Plumbing)" below. The building subcode official will verify the items marked "(Building)" below, in addition to the other responsibilities of the building subcode official for such installation. The construction official will issue a conditional Certificate of Occupancy. He will verify that the ECHO unit continues to be occupied by not more than two occupants and that the unit is only on site for the tenure of the original occupant(s).

The DEP intends to allow these connections through a "Permit-by-Rule." Each ECHO unit must meet the following requirements in order for the connection to qualify.

1. The unit shall be federally or State labeled. (Building)
2. The unit shall not exceed 720 square feet gross floor area. (Building)

3. The unit shall not have more than two bedrooms or more than one bathroom. (Building)
4. The unit shall not be equipped with a garbage grinder. (Plumbing)
5. The unit shall not be occupied by more than two persons. At least one of the two occupants must be elderly (62 years of age or more) or disabled. (Construction Official)
6. The use of the unit shall be limited to the duration of the occupancy of the original user(s). (Construction Official)

Additionally, the following conditions shall be met for the construction itself:

1. Where the connection can be accomplished by gravity, a drop manhole with a cleanout shall be provided at the point of connection. The connection of the unit to the existing individual subsurface sewage disposal system shall be made at the existing building sewer and shall be done in accordance with the Plumbing Subcode. (Plumbing)
2. The connection into a cesspool is prohibited. (Plumbing)
3. Where the connection cannot be accomplished by gravity, one of the two options below shall be followed:
  - a. Conveyance of sewage from the ECHO unit to the existing subsurface disposal system can be facilitated through the use of a grinder pump. Use of a grinder pump in this circumstance is exempt from the need for Treatment Works approval. The connection shall follow the requirements for gravity connection above; or (Plumbing)
  - b. An individual septic tank and pump chamber can be installed adjacent to the ECHO unit which will convey effluent into the connection pipe of the existing individual subsurface sewage disposal system. Use of this option shall be in accordance with plans and specifications prepared by a licensed professional engineer. (Plumbing)

The location of the ECHO unit shall meet the following distance setbacks to the existing individual subsurface sewage disposal system (to be verified by the local health department):

1. Ten feet or more to a septic tank;
2. Ten feet or more to a distribution box;
3. Fifteen feet or more to a disposal bed or trench;
4. Thirty feet to a seepage pit; and
5. The distance from the building sewer to the ECHO unit shall be twenty-five feet or more from the reservoir, well, or suction line and five feet or more for a water service pressure line.

In the event that the existing individual subsurface sewage disposal system malfunctions at any time during which the ECHO unit is connected, the system shall be repaired or altered in accordance with the provisions of N.J.A.C. 7:9A-3.3.

Obviously, the installation of an ECHO unit is subject to local zoning approval and requires a permit under the Uniform Construction Code. The construction official should ascertain that the above conditions have been or will be met for issuance of the permit. The approval will consist of a letter or other documentation issued by the administrative authority (county or local health department). This should be treated as a prior approval for issuance of the permit.

Upon completion of the installation, a conditional Certificate of Occupancy should be issued reflecting the terms and conditions listed above for occupancy of the unit. Periodic (every six months) inspections should be made to ensure that the unit continues to be occupied as allowed under the terms of the DEP Permit-by-Rule.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding the installation of an ECHO unit, please call the Code Assistance Unit at (609) 984-7609.