
Beyond the Ramps:

CREATING AN ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENT

A Project Access
White Paper



**PROJECT
ACCESS**

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Mandating access to museums and other cultural centers open to the public has created more accessible arts and cultural experiences for people with disabilities. However, while many of the physical access features are obvious, such as accessible entrances and restrooms, those specific to cultural institutions, such as display cases and protruding objects, may be less obvious to staff tasked with creating the exhibit spaces. Access into and throughout the building is essential in getting individuals with disabilities into museums and cultural facilities, but access to the exhibits and programs is key to ensuring individuals with disabilities enjoy the cultural experiences being offered.

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Access to individuals with disabilities who are limited in their ability to walk may mean accommodating individuals who use a cane or a walker, a wheelchair or scooter, or other types of mobility devices, such as a Segway. In 2010 the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) updated the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) regulations and specifically addressed the definition of mobility device. Basically, DOJ created a two-tiered approach. The first tier is “wheelchairs and other devices designed for use by individuals with mobility disabilities,” such as canes, crutches, walkers, wheelchairs, and scooters. The second tier is “other power-driven mobility devices,” which are devices not primarily designed for use by individuals with mobility disabilities, such as Segways. The devices in the first tier must be accommodated while devices in the second tier must be accommodated if they can be operated in accordance with legitimate safety requirements. Factors to consider include the type, size, weight, dimensions, and speed of the device; the facility’s volume of pedestrian traffic; the facility’s design and operational characteristics; and legitimate safety requirements.

Issues addressed include entrances, routes of travel within the museum, accessible displays and program areas, and accessible restrooms and other ancillary spaces. This paper is based on existing facilities and focuses on how to make them more accessible to individuals with mobility disabilities. Since new construction must comply with applicable building codes and access laws, a barrier-free environment should be created.

Identifying barriers

Museums and other cultural centers should undergo a complete site review to determine the level of access to people with disabilities. The issues identified in this paper address physical barriers, which should be reviewed in any site assessment and barrier removal plan.

Entrances

Entrances into the facility must be reviewed for access. In existing facilities at least one entrance serving the facility needs to be accessible. If more than one entrance is provided to the public, the entrances that are accessible must have a sign with the International Symbol of Access and inaccessible entrances must have a sign indicating

directions to the accessible entrance. Any materials distributed, via print or Internet, must identify the location of the accessible entrances.

An accessible entrance is one that does not have any level changes more than ½ inch high, so it is either at grade or provides a ramp or lift. The doorway must be at least 32 inches wide when the door is open to 90 degrees; door handles must be able to be operated without the person having to tightly grasp or turn their wrist. If the door is heavy and hard to open, an automatic door may be needed to make the entrance usable.

Route of travel

A minimum width for an accessible path of travel is 36 inches wide for one-way traffic and 60 inches for two-way traffic. As museums and cultural facilities often have a two-way flow of traffic a minimum of 60 inches should be provided. Consideration should also be taken into account for individuals stopping to view the exhibits.

If the width of the path of travel is less than 60 inches wide, there must be passing space at least every 200 feet; such passing spaces must be at least 60 inches wide and 60 inches long. In addition, if the path is less than 60 inches and it turns around an obstruction that is less than 48 inches wide, such as a display case, the path would need to be a minimum of 42 inches. Finally, if a path ends at a dead end, turning space must be provided so a person using a wheelchair does not have to back up for a distance greater than 36 inches.

The surface of the path of travel must be smooth and slip resistant. For example, a surface of cobblestones is uneven and difficult for individuals using wheelchairs, canes, and walkers, as well as individuals with low vision or who are blind.

The path of travel must also be free of overhead objects and objects protruding into the path of travel. Specifically, any object hanging above an area where people walk must be at least 80 inches above the floor. Examples of objects that may pose a problem are stairways, escalators, and displays and signs hanging from the ceiling or protruding from the wall more than 4 inches when mounted more than 27 inches and less than 80 inches above the floor. Examples of protruding objects are public telephones, drinking fountains, lights, signs, display cases, works of art, and fire extinguishers.

Ticket booths, information desks, checkout counters, coat check counters, and all other counters where the public is conducting a transaction or receiving information or services are required to be accessible. This means that a counter with a maximum height of 36 inches above the finished floor for a width of 36 inches must be provided. A best practice in this case, is to provide the entire counter area at 36 inches above the finished floor so as to service everyone equally.

Signs and labels

Signs identifying the accessible route should be provided in order to clearly mark the way when parallel inaccessible routes are also provided. This eliminates a person's need to backtrack after arriving at a barrier such as steps. As individuals who are blind or have low vision may not be able to identify these visual cues and signs, way finding that is accessible to these individuals should also be provided.

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Signs and label designs are not only an issue for individuals with low vision, but also for individuals seated in mobility devices and individuals of short stature since the placement and angle affect the usability. Exhibition labels should be mounted at the front of exhibits and angled at a height that accommodates individuals in a seated position and those standing. The lettering and the background it is printed on should have color contrast (dark print on light background) so it is easy to read.

Exhibits

Exhibits must be accessible. The exhibits are the reason the visitors are in the museum or cultural facility, thus it is paramount to have the exhibits accessible to all. Exhibits mounted on the wall or in wall-mounted display cases should be at a height that is usable by both a person standing and a person in a seated position. Floor-mounted cases should have the top of the case no more than 36 inches above the floor so a person sitting can look into the case. Having cases with clear sides also makes the viewing easier for individuals seated in a mobility device, individuals of short stature, and children. If floor-mounted cases can be designed to provide legroom for an individual seated in a mobility device, the person will then be able to look down at the display and have a similar experience to a person standing and looking down at the case. Exhibits with simple backgrounds are easier to see for individuals with low vision and focus on the exhibit itself.

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If an exhibit is free standing and must be placed behind a barrier or rail to deter people from touching it, mount the barrier no higher than 36 inches above the finished floor so it does not block the view of individuals seated in a mobility device, individuals of short stature, and children.

If an exhibit is interactive the height of buttons, levers, etc. must be within reach of all individuals, including those using mobility devices. If the devices are at the front of the exhibit, they should be no more than 48 inches above the finished floor; if visitors are required to reach a distance of 24 inches back from the front edge of the exhibit, then the devices should be no more than 36 inches above the floor. Also, levers and buttons must be able to be operated without tight grasping, pinching, or twisting.

Program areas

Program areas – including classrooms, auditoriums, theaters, and lecture halls -- must be accessible. Places of assembly must provide locations for individuals using wheelchairs. The number of wheelchair seating locations required by the ADA depends on the size of the venue. If fixed seating is provided in the theater or assembly space, seats with removable or movable aisle armrests need to be provided.

Assistive listening systems for people who are hard of hearing must also be provided. If a program takes place in a small meeting room or classroom, tables and desks must provide knee clearance so a person sitting in a wheelchair can pull up and sit at the table.

Theaters

Seating in theaters must provide access to individuals with disabilities. The required number of wheelchair seating locations depends on the number of seats provided in the theater. For example, a theater that has 51 to 150 seats must have 4 wheelchair seating locations while a theater with 151 to 300 seats must have 5 wheelchair seating locations, and a theater with 301 to 500 seats must have 6 wheelchair seating locations. A wheelchair seating location includes the space for the individual using a

wheelchair or scooter and a companion seat.

If admission fees vary by location of seats, then wheelchair locations must be offered in the various price ranges. In addition, if the theater contains more than 300 seats, locations for wheelchair seating must be dispersed. Stadium-style movie theaters are required to place wheelchair seating in the rear 60 percent of the theater seats or where viewing angle is at least in the 40th percentile.

Finally, at least 5 percent, but not less than one, of the total number of aisle seats provided shall have no armrest on the aisle side or have a removable or folding armrest. Designated aisle seats must be the aisle seats located closest to accessible routes.

In addition to accessible seating locations, assistive listening systems are required where audible communication is integral to use of the space and audio amplification is provided. The number of assistive listening devices is based on the seating capacity of the theater. For example, a theater with 200 seats is required to have eight receivers, two of which are hearing-aid compatible.

Benches

Many museums and cultural facilities have benches or other seating areas throughout the space. Benches with back support and armrests should be provided.

Restrooms

Restrooms must be accessible. Attending an exhibition, show or event at a facility that does not have accessible restrooms in many cases may prevent the individual with a disability from attending the event. As with entrances, if not all restrooms are accessible the ones that are must be identified with the international symbol of access and those that are not accessible must have signs indicating the location of the nearest accessible restroom.

Removing barriers

For an existing facility, the most effective way to remove barriers is to perform a complete assessment of the facility and its information material. Once this is done, an organized plan can be created to remove barriers, provide effective communication, and create a user-friendly environment.

Another factor to include to ensure barriers are removed and new barriers are not created is staff training. If staff understands the need and reason for the accessible features set forth above, they will be more apt to create and maintain a barrier free facility.

Conclusion

In places such as museums and cultural centers, where displays and programs change periodically, a review of the exhibits, programs, and facilities should occur periodically to ensure that the above practices are being followed and that new barriers are not being created. Furthermore, whenever an exhibit changes an assessment for access for individuals with disabilities should be done to ensure that new barriers have not been created. Every program and exhibit coming into the facility should be scrutinized for access issues at the onset, rather than as an afterthought once everything is in place.

If staff understands the need and reason for the accessible features set forth above, they will be more apt to create and maintain a barrier free facility.

While providing access to people with disabilities is mandated by law, it is also good business. More than 56 million Americans have disabilities, and that number is growing as our population ages. Indeed, the Administration on Aging projects that by 2030 there will be more than 69 million people aged 65 or over – it is the fastest growing segment of our population. Of course, what benefits people with disabilities, such as wide aisles, well-placed and easily read signage, and the absence of overhead obstacles, also benefits all visitors.

“A long journey starts with a first step.” (Laotse) You have already taken a few or many steps. Good luck on your journey!

Resources

Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design found at <http://accessible.si.edu/pdf/Smithsonian%20Guidelines%20for%20accessible%20design.pdf>

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