

Trustee Topics

Chapter 20: The Library Board and Building Accessibility

Role of the Board / Role of the Director / Role of the Municipality

- As the governing body for the library, the board has a responsibility to ensure that the library and its policies are in compliance with all laws, including the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Although the municipality, as the parent agency for the library, is ultimately responsible for ADA compliance, it is very important that the board and director work closely with the municipality to ensure equitable access to the library for all people in the community.

ADA Background on Building Compliance

- The Americans with Disabilities Act is a federal law passed in 1990.
- Two parts of the law apply particularly to public libraries. Title I requires equal employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Title II prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in state and local government services (including public library buildings and services).

ADA Background on Building Compliance

- The law provides that all people, including those who have disabilities, have essentially the same rights of access to public buildings and services. The law requires certain universal design characteristics to make buildings accessible to people with disabilities.
- Since the 1970s, Wisconsin's building codes for public buildings have followed higher standards than the federal guidelines. For that reason, many Wisconsin library buildings were already in compliance with the federal law when it was passed. However, some older public libraries remain inaccessible.

ADA Background on Building Compliance

- The law requires funding agencies to write and maintain an ADA Accessibility Plan. The first step in developing a plan is to evaluate the building and identify areas that do not meet the standards. Then the plan has to specify how the building will be modified, or in some cases replaced, to attain compliance. Finally, the plan has to indicate a time frame within which the problem shall be addressed, typically within five years. The plan should also be updated regularly.

ADA Background on Building Compliance

- The law requires "reasonable" modifications to buildings. The law permits buildings to remain unchanged if the modifications would be too costly, as long as the plan indicates that the problems are to be resolved if remodeling is undertaken or a new building is built.

General Access Issues

- Your review can start with consideration given to features outdoors. There should be appropriate curb cuts at the sidewalk, and there must be adequate parking reserved for people with disabilities. The law specifies how many parking stalls must be provided, the way the stalls must be painted, the wording on the signs for that parking area and their placement. The law also specifies how buildings must be signed to indicate accessible entrances.

General Access Issues

- The entrance itself is of critical importance to an accessible building. It may be necessary to create a new entrance if a ramp cannot easily resolve the problems steps create. Automatic door openers are not required by the ADA but are certainly very helpful to people who have disabilities.
- The law specifies the acceptable weight limit for the door and the type of door handles that must be used.

General Access Issues

- The federal specifications indicate that all public areas of the building should be accessible to those with physical disabilities; e.g., to someone who uses a wheelchair. However, if a staff person should become disabled, or a person with a disability is hired, all staff areas would have to be modified to make them accessible as well.
- The regulations define an “accessible path” and specify the width of doorways and aisles, turn radius at certain points in the room, requirements for the floor surfaces, and bathrooms’ signage and design, including stalls, toilets, counter tops, legroom under counters and placement of grab bars, mirrors, soap, and towel dispensers. The law specifies the placement and design of water fountains and public telephones. The height of service desks is also specified. Lever door hardware must be used, rather than round doorknobs.

General Access Issues

- All levels of the building must be accessible, and all meeting rooms. The person with a disability should not be expected to leave the building and enter a The Library Board and Building Accessibility TE20-3 lower level from an outside entrance; he or she should be able to get to different levels in the building using an elevator.
- The federal law, updated in 2011, indicates that certain types of permanent directional signs must have certain font size and spacing, tactile characters and Braille, contrast, and positional mounting. The most common ones include labels on rooms, such as bathroom doors, and elevator instructions.ifferent levels in the building using an elevator.

Specific ADA Regulations for Public Libraries

- Reading and Study Areas—A certain percentage of the seating area must be accessible to people using wheelchairs so that they can sit at a table. Specific clearances must be allowed between pieces of furniture so people who use wheelchairs can move between them.
- Checkout Areas—At least one part of the checkout desk has to be a specific height for people who use wheelchairs. Security gates must accommodate wheelchairs.

Specific ADA Regulations for Public Libraries

- Library Catalogs— Accessible workstations must be available for use of an online catalog.
- Magazine and Reference Areas—There must be access to these areas for people who use wheelchairs, and there is a maximum height for shelving in these areas.
- Book Stacks—There is not a maximum height for the general book stacks, but the library staff must accommodate people by helping them get the materials they need. There are width specifications between the book stacks, and there must be a turn radius at the end of each one.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Has the municipality or board completed an ADA Plan and building assessment? If so, has it been updated?
- 2. What accessibility concerns were identified in the early 1990s and what has been done to resolve them? Can more progress be made?
- 3. How many taxpayers in the community are unable to access the services of their public library because they cannot enter or move freely through the building, due to a disability? What would the impact be on the library if it could increase its services to about ten percent more of the community who are not currently being served? (Ten percent is the general estimate of people with disabilities in most communities.)
- 4. Have board members experienced difficulty in getting themselves or family members into non-accessible buildings? Do board members appreciate electronic doors at the grocery store and elevators in multistory buildings? How do these features make life easier for them, and how might an accessible library building benefit the community?
- 5. Are other municipal buildings accessible? Are there community meeting rooms in other buildings that are accessible? Are area stores, doctors' offices, post offices, etc., accessible? How does the library building compare?