

TECH NEWS

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Designing accessible pedestrian facilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990, and its accessibility guidelines (ADAAG) have been enforceable since 1992. But pedestrian facilities, including newly constructed facilities, are still not as accessible as they should be under ADAAG.

Why compliance has been difficult

The accessible design guidelines known as ADAAG were specifically created for buildings, not for sidewalks and streets.

Also, ADAAG presents minimum or maximum requirements rather than standards. Typically, standards have some degree of plus or minus tolerance. Because of construction variances, transportation agency staff using ADAAG guidelines don't always get an end product that's within the minimum and maximum allowable requirements.

Why design accessible pedestrian facilities

ADA made discriminating against people with disabilities against the law. Courts have ruled that government agencies must demonstrate through their transition plans and through their actions (new construction and alterations) that they're aware of the need for accessible facilities and are providing such facilities to the best of their ability.

Besides complying with the law, providing accessible pedestrian facilities just makes sense. Accessible pedestrian facilities benefit

- the more than 20 percent of the U.S. population that experiences a permanent disability
- runners and walkers
- older adults
- bicyclists
- people pushing carts or strollers

Everyone uses sidewalks, so sidewalks need to accommodate people during their entire lifespans. That means children and

Editor's note

This article, first in a series, addresses the legal requirements that local transportation agencies are subject to when designing accessible pedestrian facilities. The next article, in the March–April 2005 issue of *Technology News*, will cover some of the most critical accessibility issues and typical solutions.



The stone wall on the right is a useful guide for a blind person using a cane. The textured surface (between the street and the main sidewalk) also lets someone with low vision know that s/he has strayed from the main sidewalk.

adults, people with temporary or permanent disabilities, and people with vision, hearing, and mobility impairments.

Accessible pedestrian facilities also help the 70 percent of us who will experience a temporary or permanent disability that makes climbing stairs or curbs impossible.

Not just curb ramps

Accessible facilities are not just for the mobility impaired and include more than curb ramps. A vision-impaired person, perhaps someone with low vision who doesn't use a cane, may use his or her hearing to decide when to cross a street. Longer crossing traffic signal phases and oral traffic signals, for example, would benefit this person.

Accessibility design standards

Transportation agencies receiving federal financial assistance have had two choices with respect to accessibility design standards: the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS) and ADAAG. UFAS will soon be replaced, however.

When that happens, ADAAG will be the sole standard.

New guidelines specifically for sidewalks and streets have been developed by the Access Board, the federal agency that's responsible for developing and maintaining accessibility requirements for the built environment. Once these public rights-of-way (PROW) guidelines make it through the U.S. Departments of Justice's and Transportation's rule-making procedures (in a couple of years), they will supplement the ADAAG.

Some of the minimum pedestrian access design standards according to ADAAG include the following:

- one accessible route that links all facilities and services
- sidewalks with a minimum of 36 inches of clear width
- a curb ramp or other method, if the change of level is greater than 1/4 inch
- cross-slope of no more than two percent

Compliance assistance

To help local agencies better comply with ADAAG, Iowa LTAP and the FHWA, Iowa Division, have joined forces to present workshops on designing pedestrian facilities for accessibility.

For more information

For more information about pedestrian accessibility, contact Becky Hiatt, FHWA, Iowa Division, 515-233-7321, Rebecca.Hiatt@fhwa.dot.gov.

For more information about the workshops, contact Duane Smith, Iowa LTAP, 515-294-8817, desmith@iastate.edu.

For more information about the Access Board's work, see www.access-board.gov/.

Legal history of accessibility

Law

Legal requirements

Architectural Barriers Act (1968)

Required that buildings and facilities designed, constructed, altered, or leased with federal funds comply with Accessible Design Standards (ANSI A117.1).

Rehabilitation Act (1973)

- Prohibited discrimination with federal funds in any program, service, or activity to federal aid recipients (Section 504).

- Required curb cuts on federally assisted construction.

Prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in all aspects of life, regardless of funding source.

Addresses state and local government services (Title II). Basic requirements include the following:

Americans with
Disabilities Act (1990)

- New construction and altered facilities must be free of architectural and communication barriers.
 - Existing facilities, policies, and programs must be evaluated for discrimination and a plan for modification put in place.
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