

COMPLYING WITH ADA ACCESSIBILITY GUIDELINES IN THE RESTROOM

The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) has become a significant piece of legislation since its enactment in 1990. A primary purpose of the law is to give the estimated one in five Americans with disabilities the same access to buildings, transportation and telecommunications that people without disabilities enjoy. And the ADA is important to business. If the facility you manage or maintain is undergoing renovations to its existing space or if you are involved in a property under construction, compliance with accessibility guidelines in the public restrooms of the facility is mandatory.

You may be called upon to assist in the ADA compliance process by interpreting the ADA and recommending ways to adhere to the law in your restrooms. To aid you in this process, consider the following guidelines. As always, however, it is advisable to review the ADA and its regulations (Americans With Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines) as well as check your state and local codes for any additional requirements. Before you begin anything, make sure you know what type of facility you maintain; a public accommodation or a commercial facility.

Determine Your Facility Type

The ADA guidelines divide buildings and facilities into two categories: “public accommodations” and “commercial facilities.” Public accommodations are hospitals, hotels, restaurants, schools, exercise facilities, public transportation

facilities and other places that people visit, perhaps stay in overnight, and then leave. Commercial facilities are those not intended for residential use. They affect commerce and are for businesses and their employees. An example is a government office building with no public accommodations. Besides office buildings, commercial facilities can also be warehouses, factories and laboratories.

Compliance In Existing Public Accommodations Or Commercial Facilities

Once you are familiar with your type of facility, review the kind of construction you are undertaking. There are no requirements for commercial facilities existing when the ADA was passed unless alterations are made.

However, there are requirements for public accommodations that existed before the ADA was passed. For instance, public accommodations that existed before the ADA was passed must meet ADA requirements for barrier removal, if possible. You should try to meet the precise technical requirements for new construction and alterations. Some examples of required barrier removal in washrooms include relocation of dispensers and the widening of stall partitions (if dispensers and stalls cannot be used by people with disabilities). The ADA barrier removal obligation is an annual obligation to remove "readily achievable" barriers each and every year of operation.

Compliance In New Construction and Alterations

Buildings under construction must meet ADA technical requirements. It's the law. In addition, even minor alterations like the installation of new soap, bathroom tissue, or paper towel dispensing systems must conform to guidelines in both public accommodations and commercial facilities.

Tips For Making Sure You're Accessible

Knowing what is supposed to go where, how high and how wide fixtures must be represents the nuts and bolts of ADA compliance.

Washroom dispensers must be operable with one hand and should not require tight grasping, pinching or twisting of the wrist. The force required to operate controls cannot exceed five pounds. In addition, dispensers must be within the "reach range" and provide clear floor space requirements. There are special requirements for bathroom stalls as well. Here's a look at each in more detail:

Clear Floor Space

The minimum space required in which to operate a stationary wheelchair is 30" by 48". Clear floor space may be arranged to allow either a forward or side approach. Dispensers should be positioned for either a forward or side

approach. Therefore, if the floor space extends more than 24" into an alcove, the minimum alcove width should be 36". If a side-approached clear floor space extends more than 15" into an alcove, the minimum alcove length should be 60".

Reach Range (vertical distance from the floor)

If the clear floor space permits a side approach by a person in a wheelchair, the maximum high side reach should be 54" and the minimum low side reach 9". On the other hand, if the clear floor space permits only a forward approach by a person in a wheelchair, then the maximum high forward reach should be 48" and the minimum low forward reach 15". A general rule for placing any "accessible element" would be: don't place anything above 48" or below 15", this should provide proper placement within the reach range of people with disabilities. Remember, if reaches are interfered with by any obstructions, there are different reach requirements.

Bathroom Stalls

Each public accommodation or commercial facility must provide one accessible stall. Two are required if there are more than six bathroom stalls in a restroom.

Bathroom tissue dispensers should be installed on the nearest side wall, a minimum of 19" above the floor and a maximum of 36" from the rear wall.

Grab bars are required and should be mounted 33"-36" above the floor.

Minimally a 40" grab bar mounted beside a toilet and one 36" behind are required in public accommodations and commercial facilities.

Practical Solutions For Compliance

Purchasing restroom products to comply with ADA requirements need not be a major financial burden. However, if you install any of the products listed below it is considered an alteration and at least one dispenser from that category must be accessible and should be mounted within the accessible stall or near the accessible lavatory if appropriate:

- Paper towel dispensers

- Soap dispensers

- Bathroom tissue dispensers

- Seat cover dispensers

- Facial tissue dispensers

When purchasing new dispensers to comply with ADA technical requirements, make sure reach range and clear floor space requirements are met. One ideal option is to look for hands-free dispensing systems.

Hygienic bath tissue, single interleaved sheets of tissue enclosed within a dispenser, provides for easy, one-at-a-time dispensing and should comply with the ADA because it does not require tight grasping, pinching, or twisting of the wrist. And hands-free soap dispensers that use infrared sensor signals, allow the disabled to simply place their hands under the nozzle and soap will dispense automatically.

In addition, hands-free dispensers can help reduce the risk of cross contamination. Why? Since there are no buttons, cranks, or levers to touch, germs aren't spread due to surface contact with the dispenser and then passed to someone else.

Options to look for in paper towel dispensing include systems that can be operated with one hand. Folded towel dispensers that offer one-towel-at-a-time dispensing or roll systems with one lever to push down for a preset length of towel are good options because they do not require tight grasping, pinching or twisting of the wrist.

Remember, the ADA is not just another layer of government interference to be dealt with at a pass. It is about individual civil rights and dignity.

When undertaking renovations, new construction or alterations in your public accommodation or commercial facility, consult your state and local codes, your architect, contractor and/or paper products supplier. The physically challenged working in or visiting your facility will applaud your efforts.

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