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Ensuring Facility ADA Compliance

Ever since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) went into effect on Jan. 26, 1992, it has dramatically improved the lives of disabled individuals by working to make all public places in the United States both accessible and hospitable. Even though the ADA has greatly helped achieve a better quality of life for disabled people during the past 17 years, the changes didn't happen overnight; in fact, they are still under way today.

In June 2008, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) published proposed changes to the Accessibility Guidelines of the ADA, which, if enacted, would force existing properties to pay for retrofits and have significant implications for new properties. While these draft regulations were withdrawn in January 2009, the proposed rules are undergoing renewed review by the DOJ.

It's important for building owners and contractors to realize that ADA compliance is a process, with requirements that must be considered on an ongoing basis.

PARKING

One of the most recognizable hallmarks of the ADA is designated handicapped, or "accessible," parking. Whether a contractor is constructing a new facility or currently occupies one that hasn't been fully updated to ADA standards, the parking area must meet the following guidelines.

- To determine how many parking spaces should be designated for disabled clients, customers or employees, count the facility's total number of parking spaces. The general rule of thumb is that one parking spot in every group of 25 or fewer spaces must be handicapped-accessible. That means dedicating one accessible spot per every 25 or fewer spaces, two accessible parking spaces for lots ranging from 26–50 spaces, and so on.
- Each accessible parking space must be marked with a sign bearing the international symbol of accessibility.
- Accessible parking spaces should be closest to a wheelchair-accessible entrance and located on level ground.
- Accessible parking spaces should be bordered on the right or left by a clearly

marked access aisle that gives disabled individuals room to enter and exit their vehicle, and comfortably transition to a wheelchair or other mobility device. Access aisles for van-accessible spaces should be at least 8 feet wide, while those adjacent to car-accessible spaces should be 5 feet wide.

- A flat, stable, slip-resistant, stair-free accessible route must lead from each access aisle to the nearest accessible building entrance. If the access route must cross through an area with vehicular traffic, a marked crosswalk is required.

ENTRANCES

The most vital element of an ADA-compliant facility is an accessible entrance with no stairs. Even a single shallow step can be enough to discourage, or deter, the entry of a person who is wheelchair-bound or has other mobility limitations.

Here are some additional guidelines to follow when creating accessible entrances.

- Not every entrance has to be handicapped-accessible in a building with multiple entrances. However, all

non-accessible entrances must have clear signage directing the way to the nearest accessible entrance.

- In multi-entrance facilities, accessible entrances must be open or unlocked during business hours. If an accessible entrance needs to be locked because of security concerns, it must be equipped with an intercom or doorbell so staff can be alerted when someone needs to enter. In such cases, the intercom, buzzer or bell needs to be mounted no higher than 4 feet above the ground.

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- The removal of steps generally requires the installation of ramps or lifts. When replacing steps with a ramp, the ramp

should have as shallow a slope as possible, never exceeding a rise/run ratio of 1:12.

- If the slope of a ramp is 1:20 or steeper and its total vertical rise exceeds 6 inches, the ramp must be equipped with handrails, both for the stability of those traversing the ramp and to prevent people from falling off—or rolling over—the edge.
- If possible, grade the ground adjacent to a ramp to match the ramp's slope to prevent steep drop-offs and increase the overall safety of the ramp.
- All accessible ramps must be a minimum of 36 inches wide.
- Any type of door handle that requires tight grasping, twisting or use of a thumb-latch can deter entry, particularly for people with mobility issues or arthritis. Lever and loop handles are easiest for everyone to use.
- Large stores, entertainment venues and other facilities equipped with turnstiles or security gates should be built or modified so people who use wheelchairs, canes, crutches or walkers can easily enter and exit. Suitable options include removing a turnstile or providing an accessible gate adjacent to standard turnstiles.

CORD COVERS AND RAMPS

In addition to creating accessible entrances, ramps help those with disabilities cross ground and floor obstructions like cables, hoses and air lines. When such objects need to be routed across halls, pathways and other public-access areas of a facility, maintain ADA-compliance in the following ways:

- Cover extension cords, data cables and hoses with a low profile, heavy-duty cord cover that complies with ADA standards.
- If low-profile cord protectors aren't appropriate for the application, use heavy-duty polyurethane cord protectors that can be connected to ADA-compliant ramps.
- When handrail assistance is needed, rail barriers can be added to ADA-compliant crossings over cables and hoses.

For a complete list of ADA compliance guidelines, view the U.S. Department of Justice's ADA Standards for Accessible Design at www.ada.gov/stdspdf.htm.

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