

CITY CONNECTION

Come On In

If you are like most people, you see doors as the way in to a home, a business, or an office. If you have a disability, doors too often deliver the message “No way!” The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) was designed to change that. Even though the ADA has been in place since 1994, people with disabilities ranging from paralysis to blindness to the use of oxygen are quick to point out that compliance is far from universal. There are three easy to spot issues that can make a big difference in making your doorways accessible. In this case, WWW stands for width, weight, and wedge.

First, width is critical because a door less than 32 inches wide absolutely bars wheelchairs, walkers, and even many infant strollers. Thirty-six inches or wider is preferable. Measure the entrance to a toilet stall and you will understand why handicapped stalls exist. Often home bathroom doors are so narrow that someone returning home from surgery or recovering from an accident has to go to a nursing home because they cannot access their own facilities. A word to the wise, during initial construction, installing wider doors may cost as little as \$15 while renovating narrow doorways later can cost \$1000 or more, if it is even architecturally possible.

Second, weight is important to access. The ADA Architectural Guidelines, ADAAG, states opening a door should be possible with five pounds of pressure or less. That is the same effort used to move a five-pound bag of sugar across a table. You could do it with one finger. Imagine yourself on rollerblades. If you push against a heavy door, you will roll backwards before the door opens. Even without wheels, individuals with arthritis or even a temporary disability such as a broken wrist need the ADA's five-pound rule to gain access.

Door handles make a difference as well. Levers or push bars may be needed instead of knobs due to diminished finger dexterity or hand strength. In fact, the ADAAG specifies a device that “does not require tight grasping, pinching, or twisting of the wrist.” If you have ever manhandled a dolly or carried an armful of packages through a doorway, you can appreciate the ability to activate a lever with your elbow or a push bar with your hip to gain entrance. It is one more way the ADA makes life easier for everyone.

Finally, wedge refers to the angle of the ramp, the height of the doorsill, or even the small step up to the doorway. In reality, there is no such thing as a small step. A power chair or scooter cannot safely navigate a step taller than three inches and a step less than three inches is a genuine trip hazard to individuals with impaired vision or mobility, to say nothing of the rest of the population. ADAAG calls anything higher than a ½ inch a step and forbids them in an accessible entrance.

Ramp specs require a slope no more than 1:12 (you need a foot of ramp for every inch of rise or a twelve foot ramp to accommodate a twelve inch rise), plus a landing in front of the door, and at least 18 inches of maneuvering room on the latch side of the door in order to get out of the way during opening. As for sills, ADAAG says they should not be higher than ½ inch. Three-quarters of an inch is allowed for a sliding door.

Once you take a few minutes to consider the three W's of doors, you will have a new appreciation for access the ADA can provide if your life changes in an instant and you join the ranks of the disabled.

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