

## **The Continuing Importance of Accessibility in Construction**

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The issue of accessibility is a large and growing concern for nearly every member of the construction industry, from architects and interior designers to general contractors and homebuilders. Not only controlled through numerous codes issued on the federal, state, and county level, accessibility is now becoming ever more important to an increasingly aging population who will not only require greater levels of accessibility in public places but also in their own homes.

There are a number of laws governing accessibility. The most prominent is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which went into effect January 1992. The ADA prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in a wide variety of settings, but much of it deals with the discrimination people with disabilities experience in public buildings, such as restaurants, movie theaters, banks, stores, and transit facilities. To end this type of discrimination, the ADA, through the ADA Access Guidelines (ADAAG), provides guidelines for the construction and alteration of public buildings so that they can provide the same level of accessibility to people with disabilities as they do for the rest of the public.

But the ADA isn't the only standard construction companies must consider. Older laws, such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) of 1968, also make provisions about accessibility, though they limit their requirements to federally funded buildings. State and local jurisdictions have their own regulations as well.

"Accessibility is probably the biggest concern in designing a public building," says Jim Jordan, owner of [Jordan Publishing](#), which publishes compliance manuals describing individual state accessibility requirements for the design and construction of buildings.

Designing for accessibility can be a challenge, and is not made any easier by the numerous laws that govern the issue. Each state offers its own guidelines based on the ADA requirements, and some states have more rigorous regulations than others. Most states also review and revise their own building codes every three years, putting further pressure on members of the construction industry to stay on top of all the regulations. The consequences of not meeting accessibility requirements can be quite severe, ranging from negative publicity and loss of good will in the community to lawsuits by members of the public or government agencies such as the Department of Justice to heavy fines.

The job of keeping up with all the necessary codes is not going to get any easier any time soon. The Access Board, an independent federal agency devoted to the issue of access for people with disabilities, is now revising and updating both the ADAAG and the ABA, and combining them into one rule. The guidelines are still being reviewed, but once they are published in their final form, they will require

other federal agencies responsible for the standards used to enforce the ADAAG and ABA to modify their own standards as well.

While none of these regulations impact residential construction — except for those buildings that receive government funding — Jim says that homebuilders should start paying more attention to accessibility guidelines as well. There is a new and burgeoning segment of the market that is expected to change how homes are built — seniors.

As the U.S. population continues to age, the senior population is expected to become increasingly dominant. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Aging (AoA), people 65 years or older represented 12.3 percent of the U.S. population in 2002. That demographic is expected to increase to 20 percent by 2030. This changing population will place an increasing emphasis on accessibility as aging baby boomers start planning for their retirement years. "They want to design homes they can live in for the rest of their lives," says Jim.

For many, this means homes that are built to meet or exceed the accessibility requirements of public buildings. The National Center for Seniors' Housing Research, a cooperative effort between the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Research Center and the AoA, has demonstrated some of these requirements in its model LifeWise Home. These include features such as ramps and wide hallways and doorways that allow for easy wheelchair access and low-height paddle light switches and levered faucets that are easier for people with arthritis to operate.

An aging population also means that there will continue to be a greater emphasis on accessibility in public buildings over the next few decades as this growing market segment puts it dollars and considerable voting leverage to play.

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