

It's not enough to slap a ramp on the end of a sidewalk. Avoid costly upgrades by understanding what's required before you start designing solutions.

Ramping up for compliance

Editor's note: While cities are working to make sidewalks more accessible, many are learning that their curb ramps don't comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This article, the first in a three-part series, explains what the law requires and why. Parts two and three will cover product selection and real-world examples, respectively.

Crossing the street, entering a building, using the restroom—most of us don't give a second thought to these daily activities. For people with physical disabilities, however, these tasks present unique challenges.

The federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law 15 years ago to ensure that everyone, regardless of physical limitation, has equal access to public facilities and programs. Since then, designated parking spaces, curb ramps, and accessible restrooms have become standard in government buildings. Also, any alteration made after Jan. 26, 1992, to a place of public accommodation or commercial





Left: ADA compliance may include changing curb ramp configuration to add truncated domes and a slope, such as in this sidewalk in Columbus, Ohio. Above: Inspecting the final construction work is key to ensuring that all requirements are met. Engineers will measure for pitch and width, along with other parameters specific to a curb ramp location. Photos: H.R. Gray

Dispelling the **myths**

Three tips to ensure every project is compliant.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a civil rights protection law that leaves many (often ambiguous) decisions to local officials and design engineers. While we're using curb ramps as an example, applying the following principles to any ADA-related project can help a team troubleshoot and plan accurately—ultimately saving time and money.

1. There's no such thing as a "standard corner"

If your city has just one drawing for curb ramps, there's no way it can be correctly applied to every single curb. Trees, slope difference, signs, fire hydrants, inlets, and utility poles affect the design of a curb ramp for any particular location. Recognizing the uniqueness of curbs, many cities have created multiple "standard" drawings to apply on a case-by-case basis.

2. Educate the entire team before undertaking an ADA-compliance project

While the city engineer may be well-read on the law, such knowledge may not translate through to the design engineer, contractor, and inspectors.

Before embarking on a compliance project, send the entire team to an ADA-compliance training course. They exist, and they provide valuable knowledge on exactly what makes a project compliant. Starting an ADA compliance project with all players having the same knowledge reduces questions and variances as the design and installation move forward. If everyone on the team has the same compliance goal, mistakes are difficult to miss.

Using ADA advocacy groups as a partner in any project also ensures a successful result. Bring them into the project as early as possible.

3. Keep ADA a priority, regardless of the project

Curb ramps are only one example of how the ADA impacts the public domain. For any project, it pays to have complete understanding of the ADA's policy on that particular feature before design, planning, and execution. Finally, treat every project as unique. Just as each corner is unique in the world of curb ramps, each construction project is also unique. By thoroughly researching similar previous projects, one can learn from mistakes, find positive examples, and create a guide for moving forward. Remembering the uniqueness of each, and following the above reminders, can create a method that averts design flaws and saves resources.

facility should ensure that the altered portions of the facility are easily accessible to the disabled whenever possible.

Title II of the ADA addresses public entities, which are defined as "any state or local government and any of its departments, agencies, or other instrumentalities." The law applies to all the activities of state and local governments regardless of whether they receive federal funds, and does not exempt small municipalities.

Public entities with fewer than 50 employees are exempt from record-keeping requirements such as maintaining self-evaluations for three years and designing a grievance procedure for ADA complaints, but there is no general exemption. All public entities, regardless of size, must comply with Title II's requirements.

There's no grandfathering in, either—although the law is open to interpretation. Cities aren't required to take any action

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people with disabilities receive the benefits and services of the program or activity. An example of an alternative method would be relocating activities to accessible locations.

This determination can be made only by the head of the public entity or a designee and must be accompanied by a written statement of the reasons for reaching that conclusion. The determination that undue burden would result must be based on all resources available for use in a program.

that would fundamentally alter the nature of a service, program, or activity, or that would result in undue financial and administrative burdens. If an action would result in such an alteration or such burdens, a city government must take any other action that it can to ensure that

Cities must provide services in an integrated setting unless separate or different measures are necessary to ensure equal opportunity. Requirements that tend to screen out individuals with disabilities, such as requiring a driver's license as the only acceptable means of identification, also are prohibited.

The ADA's goal is to make services accessible for everyone, not just a particular group, so projects must be designed accordingly. A ramp that can be navigated by wheelchairs presents a different problem for the blind—and vice versa.

Therefore, enlisting the aid of qualified consultants or local advocacy groups can be invaluable to a project's success. Experts can help define "reasonable accommodations," assisting all parties in coming to a satisfactory resolution.

Attempting to make decisions without this input can and probably will result in a misguided direction of budget and resources. **PW**

—Sexton is construction manager with H.R. Gray, Columbus, Ohio.

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