

Disabilities Project Newsletter

Wheelchair Access to Michigan Courts

Most Michigan court buildings constructed prior to adoption of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) present special access challenges for full-time wheelchair users.

Needs may differ for two categories of wheelchair users - those who use manual wheelchairs and those who use powered wheelchairs. People who use manual wheelchairs may be able to stand and walk short distances or transfer from the wheelchair to conventional seating. A person who uses a power wheelchair is usually not able to stand and walk short distances and is often unable to transfer from the power wheelchair to conventional seating.

Most wheelchair users experience the following types of access issues:

Inaccessible parking

- Handicap spaces located further than necessary from entrances
- Handicap spaces with inadequate room to accommodate wheelchair lifts and ramps
- Parking garages with low height accessibility unable accommodate vehicles built to carry high-back wheelchairs

Inaccessible and unsafe ramps

- Ramps not in compliance with ADA grade requirements, which cannot be used by persons with limited hand and arm strength or exceed the power capacity of motorized wheelchairs
- Ramps too steep for safe exit which increases the risk of loss of control of the wheelchair
- Ramps coordinating with curb cuts running toward or into street traffic patterns, creating the risk of collision
- Ramps lacking protective cover from the elements (especially ice and snow)

Inappropriate spectator seating arrangements

- Railing openings between the spectator and well areas of the courtroom too narrow to allow wheelchair access
- Inadequate space for wheelchairs
- Placement of space for wheelchairs in aisles and in the center of the spectator area

Inaccessible witness and jury boxes

- Inaccessible elevations
- No space for wheelchairs
- Steps between rows of jurors, and from one end of the jury box to the other

Restroom facilities

- Inaccessible doors and restroom stalls
- Lack of accessible sinks, towels, or other drying equipment
- Lack of protective covering on pipes below sinks
- Lack of accessible counter space

General accessibility

- Low counsel tables unable to accommodate wheelchair arms
- Doorways with high sills or steps
- Doorways too narrow for wheelchair access
- Door openers requiring more than 8 pounds of effort
- Inaccessible counters at the clerk and other administrative desks
- Inaccessible drinking fountains

The most convenient and direct access to detailed dimensional information on wheelchair access requirements in public buildings is available at www.ada.gov. There are new efforts underway to provide guidance for building new courtrooms and remodeling others. There is a federal agency known as the Access Board, which is devoted to promoting accessibility in governmental buildings for persons with disabilities. One of its ongoing projects is the development of accessibility standards for courthouses. Progress on the Access Board's courthouse project can be tracked at www.access-board.gov/news/courthouses.htm.

However, it should be noted not all challenges for wheelchair users are structural. Many involve common sense issues, such as allowing adequate recess and break times during court proceedings.

Lastly, wheelchair users are not the only persons with disabilities who have difficulty accessing courthouses. The placement of ramps and handicap parking in locations far from building entrances and/or ramps is also a challenge for ambulatory individuals who have difficulty walking.