



ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITIES: The impact of the ADA, 21 years later

For most people, their major concern when running errands or shopping is whether they can fit all they need to do into the time available. For people with disabilities, however, particularly for those who have physical disabilities, their major concern is whether they can get into the stores or buildings in the first place and, once in, whether they have access to the goods and services they need.

Stores, theaters, and other buildings were never deliberately intended to shut out people with disabilities—but the built environment has been highly effective in denying access to people who have limited use of hands or legs. A single step, a one-inch threshold, a heavy door, or a round doorknob can make entry into a building difficult, if not impassible. And once someone with a mobility impairment has struggled to get inside, cluttered aisles or objects blocking call buttons on elevators can significantly impede their ability to do what others may take for granted, whether that is to buy a new shirt or visit a physician's office.

"For the most part, the bigger retail stores—like Wal-Mart, Kohl's, TJ Maxx—have plenty of room for me to get around," says Dylan Brown, of Nashville, Tenn. "But I still run into problems in malls and strip malls with the amount of items they try to put into the very small stores. Overstocking in the small stores means that I can't get through the aisles, so I don't go in."

Brown has quadriplegia as the result of an automobile accident in 2002 and uses a powered chair. He drives an adapted van and can usually get around Nashville and do what he wants to do except when it comes to some places that are unclear on the concept of accessibility.

"There's a newly renovated, posh bar in town. It has access into the bar and the restrooms are accessible. But there is not one seat in the place where I would be eye-level with my peers. Even the booths have a step up at end of booth," he says. "I went out to the smoking patio but that was built up also, with wood high rise seating all around the edge. There was no way I could have a drink and be at eye level with my friends; I couldn't even put my drink down without reaching up to the table. It's like they went out of their way to make it inaccessible."

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed nearly unanimously by both houses of Congress and signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on July 26, 1990, mandates places that offer their goods and services to the public must be accessible to people with a variety of disabilities. Effective January 26, 1992, all places of business have been required to make their goods and services available to and useable by people with disabilities to the extent that it is readily achievable (e.g., that changes can be accomplished without much difficulty or expense). Furthermore, all new construction and renovations to existing buildings must be accessible to and usable by people with disabilities to the fullest extent possible.

Lack of access is more than an inconvenience for people with disabilities; for many, accessible stores, professional offices, theaters, libraries, state and local government offices, and medical facilities can mean the difference between a life of independence and full immersion in the community and one of dependence and restrictive living situations.

Living Independence for Everyone (LIFE) of Mississippi, the statewide Center for Independence (CIL) in Mississippi, believes so strongly in promoting independence for people with disabilities that the CIL uses AmeriCorps Volunteers to do community access surveys to ensure that people leaving nursing homes or other congregate facilities will be able to move about effectively within the community.

The AmeriCorps members in Project LINC focus on those places that individuals with disabilities are most likely to want to use. When doing a Project LINC site survey, the AmeriCorps volunteers introduce themselves to the places they want to survey, provide information about the ADA and explain that their purpose is to make places more accessible for people with disabilities, not to report anyone for failure to comply with the ADA. They then ask permission to conduct the survey and to return at a later date for a follow-up visit.

Desmeon Thomas, of Jackson, Miss., was both an AmeriCorps volunteer conducting the surveys and a beneficiary of increased access in his immediate community. Thomas sustained a spinal cord injury in 2002, when he was 19 years old. He approached LIFE Center for assistance in learning how to live with a disability. When he learned about AmeriCorps and Project LINC, he signed up as an AmeriCorps volunteer, receiving a stipend for his work on the project and becoming eligible for \$4,000 a year for his two years of service to put toward his education.

As Thomas explains, “we would survey places that are just around the corner from where someone moving into a community would be living. That means places like corner stores, dollar stores—we surveyed a lot of dollar stores; that’s where we can afford to shop!—fast food restaurants and grocery stores.

"I'm quadriplegic, so I need a lot of help with everything. I use a power chair so I can get around on my own, but I'm not the lightest person in the world, and my parents are getting older. I didn't want to have to go into a nursing home but I knew I couldn't stay with my parents much longer either. So I looked for a way to live on my own. LIFE hooked me up with the Medicaid Waiver* program that pays for personal attendants to help me eight hours a day, seven days a week. I use them for four hours in the morning to get me up and dressed and ready for the day, for four hours at night to get me ready for bed.

"Now I rent my own house, drive a Dodge Caravan and can do most of my own shopping. Grocery stores have been great! I can get around easily, and they always send someone to help me if I ask. My power chair helps raise me up so I can usually reach things on the shelves. If not, the grocery store clerks help me.

"And the other places I need to go are also pretty accessible, thanks to the survey work we did. Well, sometimes I need to go into a side or back entrance to some places...and the movie theater near me only has accessible seats right in the very front row, which is too close to the screen and makes it hard to watch without getting a stiff neck. But for the most part I can get where I need and want to go."

*The Medicaid Waiver: Section 1915 (c) of the Social Security Act enables states to request a waiver of applicable federal Medicaid requirements to provide enhanced community support services to those Medicaid beneficiaries who would otherwise require institutional care.