

Recommendations for Working with Archives Employees with Physical Disabilities

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Created by the Society of American Archivists Joint Records Management/Archives Management Roundtables Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management

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Joint Working Group Charge

To contact and network with persons with physical impairments in the archives and records management profession (archivists, records managers, and researchers/patrons), identify and study the challenges for them in same, and develop tools to assist them in overcoming these challenges.

Because the group charge explicitly states that this group should consider “physical impairments,” the recommendations in this document are limited to mobility, sight, and hearing impairments.

Several resources for general accessibility guidelines and laws are available, but two are particularly relevant for archives:

Serene, Frank H. *Making Archives Accessible for People With Disabilities*. Washington, D.C. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), 2008.

<http://www.archives.gov/publications/misc/making-archives-accessible.pdf>

DeLatte, Monique, ed. *Library Accessibility: What You Need to Know*. Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA), 2009.

<http://www.ala.org/ala/ascla/asclaprotools/accessibilitytipsheets/>

The Serene document details the relevant legal guidelines concerning buildings and grounds, barrier removal, accessible routes, entranceways, and public facilities (restrooms, telephones, water fountains, etc.). It also includes explanations of reasonable and readily achievable accommodations and undue hardship. In addition to these elements, there is much in this publication that is particularly relevant for archives in their dealings with researchers, employees, and job applicants.

The ASCLA tip sheets address physical as well as cognitive, mental, developmental, learning, physical, hearing, and sight disabilities and are specific to best practices for libraries.

Our intention with these recommendations is not to reproduce information already available in these two publications or the laws and standards that govern accessible building and accommodations. Our aim is to create a checklist of those practices that are specific to archives. Some of the tips recommended for libraries in the ASCLA toolkit are NOT recommended for use in archives. One example: The ASCLA “Tip Sheet 4: Patrons With Mobility Impairments,” suggests having on hand grabbers and tote bags.¹ Because archives materials are often very fragile and because of the security risk involved, we recommend, rather than providing these things, that archives employees assist one another with reaching and carrying materials.

Our Survey

In July 2008, this working group distributed an online survey concerning working with people with disabilities in archives to members of the SAA Archives & Archivists Discussion List. The results of this survey are explained in the following article:

Ganz, Michelle. “Survey Conducted on ‘Accessibility in Archives.’” *Archival Outlook* (Nov/Dec 2008): 8, 24. http://www.archivists.org/periodicals/ao_backissues/AO-NovDec08.pdf

Recommendations

Accessible Buildings and Grounds

ADA Guidelines should be used to ensure that access to parking lots, walkways, utilities, and entrances and exits to buildings and rooms are accessible to people with disabilities.²

Effective Communication

1. Treat everyone normally and, unless asked by a colleague to do otherwise, use normal speech and tones and enunciate clearly.
2. Offer sensitivity training to all archives employees to create an atmosphere that makes everyone feel productive and part of the team, regardless of impairment or disability.
3. Become familiar with, and use, appropriate disability terminology.
4. Rather than assuming, ask colleagues with disabilities what kind of assistance they need.
5. Show patience and encouragement.
6. Make eye contact and be positioned at eye level when talking with colleagues.

¹ Barbara Mates. “Tip Sheet 4: Patrons With Mobility Impairments.” *Library Accessibility: What You Need to Know*. Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA), 2009.

<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/ascla/asclaprotocols/accessibilitytipsheets/tipsheets/4%20Mobility%20Impairmen.pdf>

² Section 4.3: “Accessible Route.” *Americans With Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities* (ADAAG) Washington, D.C.: U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (U.S. Access Board), 1998. <http://www.access-board.gov/adaag/html/adaag.htm>

7. When working with a colleague with a sight impairment, let the person know when you arrive and leave.
8. For the benefit of all employees, signage is clear, non-glare, has high contrast between the letters and backgrounds, is in large print, and when possible has a Braille alternative. Signs that include images have a text alternative for the images.³

Access to, and in, the Archives

1. At least one door should have automatic openers and should be wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters.⁴
2. Clear obstacles that could be tripping hazards for people using canes, scooters, and wheelchairs and for people with sight impairments.
3. Aisles should be wide enough to accommodate passage of wheelchairs and scooters. If they are not wide enough for wheelchairs to turn around, they should be open at both ends to prevent them needing to back up for long distances.⁵
4. Flooring conducive to easier mobility, such as sealed concrete, low pile carpet or carpet tiles, or sealed wood floors in compliance with archival facility guidelines set out by the SAA should be used. ADAAG guidelines for carpeting should be followed.⁶
5. Reasonable provisions should be made to accommodate employees who need service animals to bring them to work.

Accessible Work Spaces

1. Modify workstations to include adaptive equipment and adjustable furniture that meets the needs of employees with disabilities. Examples include, but are not limited to, text-to-speech software, voice recognition software, magnification capabilities, Kurtzweil literacy software, on-screen keyboard capability, alternative keyboard functions for mouse actions, a large, adjustable monitor, and an oversize keyboard.
2. Locate workspaces for employees with disabilities as near as possible to the materials they need to complete their work.
3. Provide TTY or hearing-aid compatible telephone equipment for employees with hearing impairments.

Policies

Modify workplace policies when necessary to accommodate employees with disabilities. Each situation is different. Some possibilities for accommodating employees with disabilities include:

³ ADAAG 4.30: "Signage"

⁴ ADAAG 4.13: "Doors"; 4.14: "Entrances"; 4.3: "Accessible Route"

⁵ ADAAG 8.5: "Libraries: Stacks"; 4.3: "Accessible Route"

⁶ ADAAG 4.5.3: "Carpet"

1. Allow employees with mobility impairments to eat at their desks if necessary.
2. Allow employees with disabilities to work at home when necessary.
3. Allow longer periods for work to be completed.
4. Allow longer and more frequent breaks and be flexible with arrival and departure times.
5. Allow work-sharing. For example, employees with mobility impairments complete a portion of another employee's work in exchange for assistance with lifting and carrying heavy boxes, retrieving materials from high shelves, and/or opening doors and cabinet drawers.
6. Allow employees to take unpaid leave when all paid leave has been exhausted.

Accessible Training

1. All training materials, policies, forms, etc. are created in ways that are accessible and useful to all employees.
2. All meetings, seminars, workshops, and group work is conducted in a way that allows full participation of employees with disabilities. For example, a person with a hearing impairment might require a sign-language interpreter or a special hearing aid with a microphone. A person with a sight impairment might need printed materials in Braille, or to be provided with a reader.

Emergency Planning

1. Emergency evacuation plan includes a list of, and accommodations for, employees with disabilities.
2. Workspaces for employees who need extra time to exit the building are located as near as possible to safe exits.
3. Alarms provide both audio and visual signals.⁷
4. Visual alarms are placed where they can be seen from anywhere in the archives.
5. Emergency communication devices with both audio and visual options are provided in all stairwells and restrooms.
6. All employees are familiar with emergency/evacuation procedures for people with disabilities.

Sustainability

1. Provide resources for employee self-advocacy.
2. A permanent advisory committee on access should be formed to practically address accessibility issues and to advise as new challenges arise. Members of the committee should

⁷ ADAAG 4.28: "Alarms"

represent “as many disabilities as possible.”⁸ Members of institutional, local, and/or regional disability agencies should also be on the advisory committee.

3. Include accessibility needs in budget planning.
4. Annually review grants providing accessibility assistance, technology, and tools and submit applications when appropriate.

Electronic Access

Electronic materials: finding aids, forms, regulations, multimedia presentations, tutorials, newsletters, etc., are designed so that they are accessible to all employees.⁹

⁸ Frank Serene, “Accommodations That Make Exhibit Areas Accessible,” *Making Archives Accessible for People With Disabilities*. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), 2008, 15-16.

<http://www.archives.gov/publications/misc/making-archives-accessible.pdf>

⁹ *Section 508: The Rehabilitation Act Amendments*. Washington, D.C.: The U.S. Access Board, 1998. <http://www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/act.htm>