

Recommendations for Working with Archives Researchers 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/asclaprotocols/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 in place of providing these things that archives employees assist researchers with reaching and carrying materials and turning pages when needed.

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 researcher 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 welcome, regardless of impairment or disability.
3. Become familiar with, and use, appropriate disability terminology.
4. Rather than assuming, ask researchers with disabilities what kind of assistance they need.
5. Show patience and encouragement.
6. Make eye contact and be positioned at eye level with researchers.
7. Provide paper and pencils for communicating with researchers with hearing impairments.

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>

8. When working with a researcher with a sight impairment, let the person know when you arrive and leave.
9. 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 text alternative for the images.³
10. Tour and research appointment request forms include a question about special needs.

Access to, and in, the Research Room

1. At least one door should have automatic openers and should be wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters.⁴
2. When a public elevator is not available, permit researchers to use employee elevators.
3. Clear obstacles in public areas that could be tripping hazards for people using canes, scooters, and wheelchairs and for people with sight impairments.
4. 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
5. 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
6. For research rooms that are not accessible for people in wheelchairs or scooters and/or do not provide adapted computers, researchers should be permitted to sign out materials to alternative secure on-site locations that are accessible.
7. Reasonable provisions should be made to accommodate researchers who need service animals to bring them to the archives.

Accessible Research Room Furnishings

1. At least 5% of study table space should follow ADA guidelines for accommodating wheelchairs.⁷
2. All chairs are ergonomic and adjustable.
3. An extra wheelchair is available in the archives or for use from another on-site area.

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"

⁷ ADAAG 8.2: "Libraries: Reading and Study Areas"; 4.32: "Fixed or Built-In Seating and Tables"

4. Research room monitor desk/s, also referred to as the "central desk" or "reference desk" are designed to allow wheelchairs to approach the attendant at eye level at some portion of the desk. If the desk is raised to allow monitoring of the room then some portion of it is at a lower height to allow wheelchairs to approach the desk and attendant. In research rooms where the desk is not accessible for people in wheelchairs, the attendant should come around from the desk and meet with the researcher in a more accessible location within the room.

Access to Research Materials

1. Magnification tools are available in the archives. When possible and necessary, materials are scanned and made available on a computer with adaptive software.
2. If computer terminals are unavailable in the research room, online finding aids are reformatted upon request to allow the researchers to read them.
3. Sign language interpreters and note-takers are available by appointment, for researchers working with collections.
4. When necessitated by sight impairments or learning disabilities, an archives employee assists the researcher by summarizing materials or reading materials to him/her.
5. Public access materials are on shelves low enough to be reached by persons in wheelchairs and scooters. (This is not required by ADA.)
6. When low shelving levels are not possible, archives employees assist researchers with retrieving desired public access materials.

Accessible Research Room Technology

1. At least one computer is equipped with adaptive technology. Examples include, but are not limited to, text-to-speech software, voice recognition software, magnification capabilities, Kurtzweil literacy software, on-screen keyboard capability, and alternative keyboard functions for mouse actions.
2. Assistive computer is also equipped with a large, adjustable monitor and an oversize keyboard.
3. The reference computer could have dual screens, so that the researcher can follow what the staff member is doing. The reference computer could also include a chat option for alternative communication for researchers with hearing impairments. (This would require a second computer available to the researcher in close proximity to the reference computer.)
4. All archives employees are trained in the use of assistive equipment and adaptive software.
5. Researchers are allowed to bring in their own assistive equipment and adaptive software.

Accessible Exhibit Areas and Public Programming

Exhibit areas and public programs are accessible to everyone. When creating a display or a program, include information in a variety of formats (words, visual representations, audio, etc.).

Frank Serene, author of *Making Archives Accessible for People With Disabilities*, recommends the following:

1. Removing architectural barriers to allow wheelchair access;
2. Adjusting the height and angle of an exhibit so that it can be viewed by a person using a wheelchair;
3. Using alternative formats, such as Braille or audio recordings, to describe exhibits for patrons with low or no vision;
4. Having sign-language interpreters available for tours that may include people with hearing loss; or
5. Providing program access by moving an exhibit from an inaccessible area to an accessible one.⁸

Emergency Planning

1. All emergency/evacuation plans include provisions for researchers with disabilities.
2. Alarms provide both audio and visual signals.⁹
3. Visual alarms are placed where they can be seen from anywhere in the research room.
4. Emergency communication devices with both audio and visual options are provided in all stairwells and restrooms.
5. All archives employees are familiar with emergency/evacuation procedures for people with disabilities.

Sustainability

1. 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 represent “as many disabilities as possible.”¹⁰ Members of institutional, local, and/or regional disability agencies should also be on the advisory committee.
2. Policies should be created that help archives employees to understand how to assist patrons with disabilities.
3. Include accessibility needs in budget planning.
4. Annually review grants providing accessibility assistance, technology, and tools and submit applications when appropriate.

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>; ADAAG 4.33: “Assembly Areas”

⁹ ADAAG 4.28: “Alarms”

¹⁰ Serene, “Establishing a Committee on Access,” *Making Archives Accessible*, 5.

Electronic Access

Electronic materials: finding aids, forms, regulations, multimedia presentations, tutorials, newsletters, etc., are designed so that they are accessible to all researchers.¹¹

¹¹*Section 508: The Rehabilitation Act Amendments*. Washington, D.C.: The U.S. Access Board, 1998. <http://www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/act.htm>