

Environmental and Humanitarian Aspects of ADA

It is important to understand the laws under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) and what they require of the organizers of meetings and events. While facilities are responsible for making sure that all space is accessible to people with disabilities, the organization holding the meeting (thus, the meeting planner) is responsible for ensuring that those with disabilities are able to participate in the meeting. This requires the planner to ensure the accessibility of the facility holding the meeting and the facility's compliance with the ADA law. You must know the needs of attendees and make sure that the program itself is accessible.

Attendees with special needs must be able to communicate those needs; registration forms and hotel reservation forms should have a box indicating a need for special accommodations. It is then the planner's responsibility (in the case of registration forms) or the facility's responsibility (in the case of housing or reservation forms) to contact those that have checked the box to determine specific needs. It is against ADA laws to require that the person with the disability contact the organization or facility to further expand upon their needs. This would require disabled attendees to do something non-disabled attendees do not have to do, which goes against the ADA laws.

Understanding What's Required

The organization holding the meeting is responsible for all costs associated with providing reasonable accommodations and accessibility to the program for those with disabilities. However, it is important not to jump to conclusions. The planner is responsible for making sure that the program is accessible to those with disabilities, and there is only one way to do so: Ask the attendee who has checked the special needs box on the registration form.

For example, a hearing-impaired attendee may not need any special equipment that would cost the organization money. He or she might simply need a front row seat in all sessions in order to read the speaker's lips. Likewise, a sight-impaired attendee may not need materials published in Braille. He or she may already own the equipment necessary to fully participate in the program, but may need assistance moving around the meetings, or permission to have a guide dog present. A specially built registration counter to accommodate those in wheelchairs is not necessary; simply making a clipboard available so that a wheelchair-bound attendee can fill out registration forms can suffice.

ADA laws do require that those with disabilities inform the organization of the fact that they require special accommodations in advance. If they do not check the box on the registration form in order to notify the organization ahead of time, but show up on site requiring special needs, the organization is not bound by the ADA laws to accommodate their needs.

There are a number of space considerations when accommodating attendees with disabilities. Setting up session and function rooms for those in wheelchairs (e.g., creating wider aisles, removing seating to allow for wheelchairs) will impact the room set-up and capacities. In addition, if any non-ambulatory attendees must appear on stage, it is important to have adequate ramps. The rule of thumb for determining the length of a ramp is simple: For every inch of rise, there needs to be one foot of ramp. For example,

if the stage is 24 inches in height, the ramp must be 24 feet long. This allows for a ramp that is neither too steep to be safely navigated by someone in a wheelchair, nor so long that it takes an inordinate amount of time for the participant to navigate to the stage.

All aspects of the facility must be in compliance with ADA laws,

including:

- Public areas
- Front desk
- Hallways
- Alarm systems
- Door width
- Barrier free/adapted guest rooms
- Elevator button height (inside and out)

- Vicky Betzig, CMP

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