

WHY AND HOW SHOULD AN ARCHIVE
ACCOMMODATE PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITIES?

Frank H. Serene

Good morning. Thank you, Daria, for that introduction. My remarks made at this session are mine and are not statements of the programs or policies of my employer, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA, or the Archives). I want to applaud the effort that made the “Accessibility in Archives” survey possible and urge continuation of initiatives to accommodate people with disabilities.

This morning I want to share with you thoughts and experiences regarding reasonable accommodations, access to public accommodations, and other accommodations without which I, and many other people with disabilities, would not be employed or able to enjoy fairly independent lives. I know that I have benefited from my experience at the Archives, and I trust that I have satisfied the expectations of my employer. In my opinion, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) has, as it should have, language that controls the cost of providing access to public accommodations, and supports an employer’s right to set the standards and conditions of work.

At the National Archives one of my projects was to compile a catalog of motion pictures relating to World War II. The project required evaluating

and selecting entries for the catalog, viewing and describing the film, and preparing each entry for the catalog. These were, in the parlance of the ADA the essential functions of the job, which I was expected to perform. I was able to insert video cassettes into the projector and use the card catalog. The non-essential function, which was critical to the project but which required assistance from the my colleagues, was retrieving reel-to-reel film from the stacks and placing it on a projector. Further analysis reveals other reasonable accommodations. For instance, to accommodate the pace at which I work, I am responsible for managing my own time and completing a project in a timely manner. The development of word processing, and other elements of information technology has, for me, eased the burden of producing written products.

In the context of employment, the only reason for not making adjustments for a disability is when the disability itself is being tested as a factor in employment. Otherwise, unless the reasonable accommodation is too expensive or would fundamentally alter a job, disability should be cancelled out so that it is not a barrier, or becomes a non-factor, in the evaluation for employment or promotion. In other words, employees with disabilities must have the same opportunities for employment and career advancement as their non-disabled colleagues; and the need for an

accommodation is not a valid reason for denying employment or a promotion. Reasonable accommodations range from posting a job announcement in an alternative format (usually Braille or on an audio tape) to the introduction and use of assistive technology.

In the context of public accommodations, when barrier removal is too expensive (or for other reasons), an alternative solution, albeit, temporary, can be implemented until the barrier can be removed. An example of this approach can be found at the National Archives Building in Washington, D. C. For years, as an accommodation to people using wheelchairs and others who had difficulty walking, the National Archives provided an alternative entrance to its primary exhibit area, the Circular Gallery and the Rotunda, at the National Archives Building. The entrance from Constitution Avenue to this exhibit area was approached by a long flight of steps. The alternative was to have people who were unable to navigate steps enter the building at an accessible entrance on the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the building and take an elevator up to the exhibit area. This area was properly ramped so that people could view the current exhibit in the Circular Gallery and the Charters of Freedom in the Rotunda.

With the now-complete renovation of the National Archives Building, the removal of barriers and the installation of accessible features are actions

that are readily achievable and usable by people with disabilities. Elevators and ramps have been installed so that people with disabilities can use the same entrance as is used by the general public. Children and people using wheelchairs can view the Charters of Freedom because they will be displayed in cases with a front at 28 inches above the floor and a display area rising at a 25-degree angle when viewed from the front.

All new construction must be barrier free, i.e. accessible. Barrier removal pertains to older construction that is being altered, renovated, or refurbished. If barrier removal is not readily achievable (easily accomplished, without much difficulty or expense), an archives is permitted to implement accessible alternatives. Thus, moving an exhibit from an inaccessible area to one that is accessible, which is called program access, is acceptable when removal of architectural barriers is not readily achievable. The point is to create a physical environment so that people with disabilities receive goods and services that are not inferior to the products available to the general public.

In the research room avoid situations that may result in unequal treatment. A delicate issue that the research room staff may face is when to withhold a document because of concern it might be damaged. A rule of thumb to follow is to concentrate on the record and not the individual using

the record. Suppose, for instance, that a researcher with dexterity problems requests records. The document cannot be withheld because of anticipation it might be damaged. A photocopy might be offered; or the document could be enclosed in a polyester (Mylar) sleeve. Withholding the original from public use and having a photocopy ready for all researchers is another possibility. The latter solution eliminates all questions about equal access.

In my view an archives is both an employer and a public accommodation. My booklet *Making Archives Accessible for People with Disabilities* contains suggestions or recommendations for reasonable accommodations in employment and making public accommodations accessible. At this point I want to interject a “Thank You” to my employer and supervisors for allotting the time for me to write the manuscript and then endorsing it so that it was printed. My goals for this booklet are to make the elements of accessibility understandable to the average person and to show how these elements can be implemented. These goals, I am satisfied, have been accomplished. Anyone wishing to obtain a print or a PDF version of the booklet should see me after this session.

An initial step toward making your archives accessible is to survey the facility and to note public areas that are not accessible. Survey forms, whose use is voluntary, are available online at the Access Board web site.

In conjunction with the survey, an advisory committee, that includes members with disabilities, representing as many disabilities as possible, should to be established early in the process; the committee and the archives should plan a long-term and permanent relationship. After the architectural barriers are removed the committee should continue to function and be available to give advice as changes in the population, social and cultural attitudes, the physical environment, financial resources, and in technology create new challenges for accommodating people with disabilities.

All public areas must be connected by an accessible route. The accessible route begins at public transportation stops or parking lots and can include all curb ramps, walks, doorways, research rooms, exhibit areas, lecture halls, ramps, elevators, platform lifts, halls, corridors, aisles, skywalks, tunnels, and other elements that connect the services and other public accommodations of a facility. Loading docks, kitchen facilities, or similar locations should not be designated as accessible entrances, unless it is normally used as an entrance by the general public. In public areas, especially in research rooms and exhibit halls, an archives should be prepared to meet and deal with a variety of disabilities that may involve restricted abilities for walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, perceiving or understanding, or physical coordination.

Providing access is good practice and the right thing to do. The overriding concern is to have a physical and attitudinal environment in which people with disabilities can function and interact with colleagues and friends who are not disabled. People with disabilities must have the opportunity to obtain the full benefit of employment and access to public accommodations. Access to public areas and reasonable accommodations in employment are the means to a goal; but, in and of themselves, they are not the goal. The goal is to ensure that people with disabilities receive and benefit from the goods and services of an archives; and that qualified people with disabilities have the same or equal opportunities for employment, career advancement, and other benefits and privileges of employment as their non-disabled colleagues. Access to public areas and reasonable accommodations in employment for people with disabilities must be, as much as possible, integrated with the facilities available to patrons and employees who do not have disabilities.