

Best Practices for Working with Archives Employees with Physical Disabilities

“Best Practices for Working with Archives Researchers with Physical Disabilities” was adopted by the Society of American Archivists Council in August 2010 following review by the SAA Standards Committee. The document was drafted between August 2009 and June 2010 by the Joint Archives Management / Records Management Roundtables Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management. (See the appendix for a list of Joint Working Group participants.)

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In October 2007 the Joint Archives Management/Records Management Roundtables Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management (later renamed the Joint Archives Management/Records Management Roundtables Working Group on Accessibility in Archives and Records Management) was formed with the following 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.

In July 2008, the Working Group distributed to subscribers of the Archives & Archivists discussion list an online survey concerning working with people with disabilities in archives. The results of the 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.

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 provide general accessibility guidelines and laws, but two are particularly relevant for archives:

Serene, Frank H. *Making Archives Accessible for People with Disabilities*. Washington, DC: 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*. Chicago: Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA), 2009.
<http://www.ala.org/ala/ascla/asclaprotools/accessibilitytipsheets>.

In *Making Archives Accessible for People with Disabilities*, Serene details the relevant legal guidelines concerning buildings and grounds, barrier removal, accessible routes, entranceways, and public facilities (restrooms, telephones, water fountains, etc.). He also includes explanations of reasonable and readily achievable accommodations as well as undue hardship. In addition to

these elements, there is much in this publication that is particularly relevant for archives in their dealings with employees, job applicants, and researchers.

ASCLA's *Library Accessibility: What You Need to Know* toolkit addresses physical, cognitive, mental, developmental, learning, physical, auditory, and sight disabilities and is specific to best practices for libraries.

The Working Group's intention in drafting these "best practice" recommendations was to make the information in these two publications – as well as the laws and standards that govern accessible buildings and accommodations – more relevant and applicable to archivists and archival institutions. Their goal was 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 archival materials are often very fragile and because of the security risk involved, the group recommends that archives employees assist researchers with reaching and carrying materials and turning pages when needed.

BEST PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Accessible Buildings and Grounds

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

Effective Communication

1. Treat everyone with courtesy and respect. Unless asked by a colleague to do otherwise, use normal speech and tones and enunciate clearly.
2. Offer to all archives employees sensitivity training focused on addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities 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 may need.
5. Show patience and encouragement.
6. Make eye contact and be positioned at eye level when talking with colleagues.
7. When working with a colleague with a visual impairment, let the person know when you arrive and leave.

¹ Mates, Barbara. "Tip Sheet 4: Library Accessibility: What You Need to Know: Patrons With Mobility Impairments." Chicago: 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 "Accessible Route," 4.3. ADA Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities (ADAAG). Washington, DC: U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board, 1998. <http://www.access-board.gov/adaag/html/adaag.htm>.

8. For the benefit of all employees, signage should be clear and should appear in large print, with high contrast between letters and backgrounds, and on non-glare surfaces. When possible, a Braille alternative should be included. Signs containing images should include alternative text describing the images.³

Access to, and Within, the Archives

1. At least one door should have automatic openers and should be wide enough (i.e., 36 inches) to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters.⁴
2. Clear all 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 (i.e., 36 inches) to accommodate passage of wheelchairs and scooters. If they are not wide enough for wheelchairs to turn around (i.e., 48 inches), they should be open at both ends to prevent the need to back up for long distances.⁵
4. Flooring that is 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. Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities (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:

1. When they are not working with archival materials, allow employees with mobility impairments to eat at their desks when necessary.
2. Allow employees with disabilities to work at home when necessary.
3. Allow longer periods for work to be completed.

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."

4. Allow longer and more frequent breaks and be flexible with arrival and departure times.
5. Allow work-sharing. For example, an employee with mobility impairments might 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., should be created in ways that are accessible and useful to all employees.
2. All meetings, seminars, workshops, and group work should be 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 visual impairment might need printed materials in Braille, or to be provided with a reader.

Emergency Planning

1. The emergency evacuation plan should include a list of, and accommodations for, employees with disabilities.
2. Workspaces for employees who need extra time to exit the building should be located as near as possible to safe exits.
3. Alarms should provide both audio and visual signals.⁷
4. Visual alarms should be placed where they can be seen from anywhere in the archives.
5. Emergency communication devices with both audio and visual options should be provided in all stairwells and restrooms.
6. All employees should be 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 address accessibility issues in practical terms and to advise as new challenges arise. Members of the committee should 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.

⁷ ADAAG, 4.28: "Alarms."

⁸ Serene, Frank, "Accommodations That Make Exhibit Areas Accessible," *Making Archives Accessible for People with Disabilities*. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), 2008, 15-16. <http://www.archives.gov/publications/misc/making-archives-accessible.pdf>.

Electronic Access

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

⁹The Rehabilitation Act Amendments (Section 508). Washington, DC: The U.S. Access Board, 1998.
<http://www.accessboard.gov/sec508/guide/act.htm>.

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ⁱ Includes those individuals who were members of the Working Group or served in other capacities when this document was created.