

# Best Practices for Working with Archives Researchers with Physical Disabilities

*“Best Practices for Working with Archives Researchers with Physical Disabilities” was adopted by the Society of American Archivists Council on August 9, 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 Accessibility 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 to 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](http://www.archivists.org/periodicals/ao_backissues/AO-NovDec08.pdf).

Because the group charge explicitly stated 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 researchers, employees, and job applicants.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Guidelines should be used to ensure that access to parking lots, walkways, and utilities and entrances to and exits from buildings and rooms are accessible to people with disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

### **Effective Communication**

1. Treat everyone with courtesy and respect. Unless asked by a researcher 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 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 may need.
5. Show patience and encouragement.
6. Make eye contact and be positioned at eye level when communicating with researchers.
7. Provide paper and pencils for communicating with researchers with hearing impairments.

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<sup>1</sup>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>.

<sup>2</sup>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. When working with a researcher with a visual impairment, let the person know when you arrive and leave.
9. Ensure that signage is clear and that it appears 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.<sup>3</sup>
10. Ensure that tour and research appointment request forms include a question about special needs.

### **Access to, and Within, the Research Room**

1. At least one door should have automatic openers and should be wide enough (i.e., at least 36 inches) to accommodate wheelchairs and scooters.<sup>4</sup>
2. When a public elevator is not available, researchers should be permitted to use employee elevators.
3. Clear all 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 (i.e., 36 inches minimum and 42 inches preferred) 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. If the stacks are open at both ends, the space at the ends needs to be at least 48 inches wide to permit a wheelchair or scooter to turn the corner. When installing compact shelving, manually operated shelving should be avoided unless it is possible to ensure that someone with a disability can turn the crank arms. Otherwise, it is recommended that electrically operated compact shelving be installed. The same aisle widths noted above need to be enforced as well.<sup>5</sup>
5. Flooring that is conducive to easier mobility (such as sealed concrete, low-pile carpet or carpet tiles, or sealed wood floors that are in compliance with archival facility guidelines set out by the Society of American Archivists) should be used. ADAAG guidelines for carpeting should be followed.<sup>6</sup>
6. For research rooms that are not accessible for people in wheelchairs or scooters and/or that 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 to bring service animals into the archives.

### **Accessible Research Room Furnishings**

1. At least 5% of study table space should follow ADA guidelines for accommodating wheelchairs.<sup>7</sup>
2. All chairs should be ergonomically correct and adjustable.

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<sup>3</sup> ADAAG, 4.30: "Signage."

<sup>4</sup> ADAAG, 4.13: "Doors"; 4.14: "Entrances"; 4.3: "Accessible Route."

<sup>5</sup> ADAAG, 8.5: "Libraries: Stacks"; 4.3: "Accessible Route."

<sup>6</sup> ADAAG, 4.5.3: "Carpet."

<sup>7</sup> ADAAG, 8.2: "Libraries: Reading and Study Areas"; 4.3.2: "Fixed or Built-in Seating and Tables."

3. An extra wheelchair should be available in the archives or for use from another on-site area.
4. The research room monitor desk (also referred to as the "central desk" or "reference desk") should be 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 the desk should be at a lower height to allow wheelchairs to approach the desk and attendant. In research rooms in which 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 should be available in the archives. When possible and necessary, materials should be scanned and made available on a computer with adaptive software.
2. If computer terminals are not available in the research room, online finding aids should be reformatted upon request to allow researchers to read them.
3. Sign language interpreters and note-takers should be available by appointment for researchers working with collections.
4. When necessitated by sight impairments or learning disabilities, archives employees should assist researchers by summarizing materials or reading materials to them.
5. Public access materials should be on shelves that are 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 should assist researchers with retrieving desired public access materials.

### **Accessible Research Room Technology**

1. At least one computer should be 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 computers also should be equipped with a large, adjustable monitor and an oversize keyboard.
3. The reference computer could have dual screens so that a 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 should be trained in the use of assistive equipment and adaptive software.
5. Researchers should be permitted to bring in their own assistive equipment and adaptive software.

### **Accessible Exhibit Areas and Public Programming**

Exhibit areas and public programs should be accessible to everyone. When creating a display or 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. Remove architectural barriers to allow wheelchair access.
2. Adjust the height and angle of an exhibit so that it can be viewed by a person using a wheelchair.
3. Use alternative formats, such as Braille or audio recordings, to describe exhibits for patrons with low or no vision.
4. Have sign-language interpreters available for tours that may include people with hearing loss.
5. Provide program access by moving an exhibit from an inaccessible area to an accessible one.<sup>8</sup>

### **Emergency Planning**

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

### **Sustainability**

1. 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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. Accessibility needs should be incorporated into budget planning.
4. Grants providing accessibility assistance, technology, and tools should be reviewed annually and applications submitted when appropriate.

### **Electronic Access**

Electronic materials (finding aids, forms, regulations, multimedia presentations, tutorials, newsletters, etc.) should be designed so that they are accessible to all researchers.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>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>; ADAAG 4.33: “Assembly Areas.”

<sup>9</sup> ADAAG, 4.28: “Alarms.”

<sup>10</sup> Serene, “Establishing a Committee on Access,” *Making Archives*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> The 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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### Advisors:

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SAA President: Frank Boles (2008-2009), Mark Greene (2007-2008)

Chair, SAA Diversity Committee: Terry Baxter, CA (2008-2011), Thomas Battle (2007-2008)

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