



CURRENT NEWS FROM THE UNITED STATES ACCESS BOARD

# ACCESS CURRENTS

Volume 15 No.4

July/ August 2009

[Subscribe](#)

- [Board to Release Draft of Final Guidelines for Federal Outdoor Sites](#)
- [U.S. Signs U.N. Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities](#)
- [New Research Examines Effects of Cross Slope on Wheelchair Travel](#)
- [GAO Finds Limited Gains in Polling Place Access](#)
- [Charles Washington Named Board's Information Technology Specialist](#)
- [Web-Based Screen Reader in Development](#)
- [Disability.gov Launches Revamped Website](#)
- [National Council on Disability to Host National Summit on Disability Policy](#)

## Board to Release Draft of Final Guidelines for Federal Outdoor Sites

The Board will soon release for public review a draft of final guidelines covering access to outdoor sites managed by the Federal government, including national parks and recreation areas. These guidelines address how to achieve accessibility in outdoor developed areas and take into account challenges and constraints posed by terrain, the degree of development, and other factors. They specify where compliance is required and provide detailed technical criteria for new or altered trails, beach routes, and picnic and camping facilities. The guidelines will apply to sites developed or altered by Federal land management agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Army Corps of Engineers, among others.

The Board is finalizing the guidelines based on public comments it received in response to a proposed version published in 2007. The final version will include revisions made to clarify various provisions and exceptions. Conditions that necessitate departures are recognized, including situations where meeting certain provisions would compromise natural features, require prohibited construction methods or materials, or be infeasible due to terrain.

The Board is releasing a draft of the final guidelines to allow interested parties the opportunity to comment on the revised format. As initially proposed, the guidelines were organized as a stand-alone document. The Board has restructured the final version for integration into the Board's existing guidelines for facilities covered by the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA), which were issued jointly with guidelines updated under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA and ABA guidelines cover a variety of elements and spaces that are often part of outdoor developed areas, including parking, restrooms, drinking fountains, and recreation facilities. Integrating the criteria for outdoor sites into the existing guidelines will be beneficial for many users by bringing all relevant information together in one source. However, to preserve some of the benefits of a stand-alone document, the Board plans to prepare a companion guide on the final rule in cooperation with Federal land management agencies.

The draft final guidelines will be available for review for 60 days and will be posted on the Board's website at [www.access-board.gov/outdoor/](http://www.access-board.gov/outdoor/). For further information, contact Bill Botten at the Board at [outdoor@access-board.gov](mailto:outdoor@access-board.gov), (202) 272-0014 (v), or (202) 272-0082 (TTY). The Board intends to develop similar guidelines for outdoor developed areas controlled by non-Federal entities at a future date.

## U.S. Signs U.N. Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

On July 30th the U.S. signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, a comprehensive global treaty to guarantee equality for people with disabilities. To date, 141 other nations have signed the Convention with the intention to pursue ratification or have already ratified it. The purpose of the Convention, as stated in its first article, is to "promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental

freedoms by all persons with disabilities." It is estimated that more than 650 million people worldwide, approximately 10% of the population, have some type of disability and that this population is growing due to medical advances and increases in life expectancy.

According to U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice, the Convention "urges equal protection and equal benefits under the law for all citizens, rejects discrimination in all its forms, and calls for the full participation and inclusion in society of all persons with disabilities." The treaty establishes global legal standards on disability rights and a framework for international cooperation. Countries that ratify the Convention are required to implement laws, policies, and other measures to ensure equality and ban discrimination based on disability. A survey cited by the U.N. indicates that two thirds of countries do not currently have disability rights laws in place. The Convention specifically calls for the identification and removal of barriers to ensure access to the built environment, outdoor facilities, transportation, the workplace, public services, and information and communication technologies.

"The Convention promotes equality for people with disabilities across the globe," noted Access Board Member Nancy Starnes who was present at a signing ceremony at the U.S. Mission to the U.N. "It also encourages cooperation and information sharing among nations to help make accessibility a worldwide reality."

President Obama intends to promptly submit the treaty to the Senate for ratification, according to Ambassador Rice. The Administration also announced the creation of a senior State Department post on disability rights. The person named to this position will serve as a lead diplomat on disability policy, develop a comprehensive strategy to promote disability rights internationally, and coordinate a process for ratifying the Convention among Federal agencies. Further information on the treaty is available on the U.N.'s website at [www.un.org/disabilities](http://www.un.org/disabilities).

---

### **New Research Examines Effects of Cross Slope on Wheelchair Travel**

Various factors affect the accessibility of outdoor surfaces, among them firmness, stability, smoothness, slope, and weather conditions. Surface slopes that run perpendicular to the direction of travel, often referred to as the cross slope, have been identified as a key factor in usability according to several human factor studies involving people who use manual wheelchairs. The Board has initiated further investigation into the impact of cross slope on wheelchair travel through a project undertaken by the Human Engineering Research Laboratory (HERL) at the University of Pittsburgh. Under this project, investigators reviewed existing research and surveyed people who use wheelchairs to gain insight into this issue, including the interaction of slope, surface, and weather conditions on wheelchair travel. Based on the information collected, researchers developed a protocol for a follow-on human factors study to be undertaken at HERL facilities with additional support from the Veterans Administration and Paralyzed Veterans of America.

In the Board's preliminary project, researchers found that while studies show that cross slopes make wheelchair travel more difficult, there was little consensus on methods or protocols for measuring these effects. Further, they determined that the measures used in most studies, such as energy consumption and perceived effort, cannot fully assess the complex effects of cross slope. Few studies were found that investigated wheelchair propulsion in outdoor environments over a range of surfaces. Results from the project survey confirmed that terrain features interact in complex ways and that the effects are more pronounced among certain populations. Findings suggest that older adults, women, and people with progressive conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, or upper extremity impairment are most likely to experience difficulty negotiating cross slopes. This can be further aggravated by wheelchair design, such as configurations enhancing rearward stability.

Based on the results of the Board study, the project team developed a protocol to measure the effects of cross slope using a cross sectional group of test subjects. Testing is currently underway on a range of cross slopes, running slopes, and surface conditions, including those that are smooth, irregular, and slippery. Devices developed by HERL to measure work, energy, distance-per-stroke, and pushrim forces are being used to capture data. Results of this research, including the preliminary study, will be posted on the Board's website once published. For further

information, contact Lois Thibault, the Board's Research Coordinator, at [thibault@access-board.gov](mailto:thibault@access-board.gov).

---

### **GAO Finds Limited Gains in Polling Place Access**

A newly released study by the Government Accounting Office (GAO) indicates that more polling places are accessible nationwide, but that challenges remain. On election day last year, GAO surveyed 730 randomly selected polling places in 31 states and 84 counties across the country to assess the accessibility of polling places, including voting systems. GAO compared these findings against those of a similar survey conducted during the 2000 election. Based on its survey, GAO estimates that 27% of polling places had no access barriers, including at parking, building entrances, or on the route to voting areas. This represents an increase from 16% as determined by the 2000 study. Of those polling places with potential access problems, 45% offered curbside voting.

The study indicates that the number of potential barriers per location was down. Most access issues pertained to parking areas or the path from parking to building entrances. The greatest degree of improvement occurred at entrances; between 2000 and 2008, the number of polling places with accessible entrances increased from 41% to 75%. Virtually all polling places were found to have at least one accessible voting machine, as required by the Help America Vote Act of 2002. However, while these systems were considered accessible to voters with sensory impairments, 29% were found to be inaccessible to voters who use wheelchairs due to their location or configuration. Further, almost a quarter of accessible voting systems did not offer the same degree of privacy as other systems at the polling place. The report, "Voters with Disabilities: More Polling Places Had No Potential Impediments than in 2000, but Challenges Remain," is available on GAO's website at [www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-685](http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-09-685). The released findings are part of a broader GAO study on voting access to be released in late September.

The Election Assistance Commission, which was established to implement the reforms of the Help America Vote Act, provides resources on voting accessibility on its website at [www.eac.gov/voter/accessibility](http://www.eac.gov/voter/accessibility). In addition, the Department of Justice, which enforces access requirements for polling places under the ADA as well as the Help America Vote Act, offers an accessibility checklist for polling places at [www.ada.gov/votingck.htm](http://www.ada.gov/votingck.htm).

---

### **Charles Washington Named Board's Information Technology Specialist**

Charles Washington was recently named the Board's new Information Technology Specialist. Washington will oversee the maintenance and upgrade of the Board's IT and communication systems, including its network and computer and phone systems. These responsibilities were previously outsourced under a seat management contract. He also will be responsible for ensuring compliance with the Section 508 standards for electronic and information technology and the acquisition and maintenance of assistive technologies. Washington has over 15 years of experience in the field as an IT specialist, project manager, and network administrator. He has worked with private firms, Federal clients, and the U.S. Navy.

---

### **Web-Based Screen Reader in Development**

A web-based screen reader has been designed to provide access to websites while browsing on any computer or other device equipped with a sound card. Developed by Jeffrey Bigham, a Ph.D. candidate in computer science at the University of Washington, the new program provides text-to-speech translation as a web-based application without the need to install additional software. Referred to as WebAnywhere, it is designed to work with all browsers and operating systems. Users can try out an Alpha release of the WebAnywhere application, an open source project supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation, at <http://webanywhere.cs.washington.edu/>.

---

### **Disability.gov Launches Revamped Website**

The [www.disability.gov](http://www.disability.gov) website (formerly DisabilityInfo.gov) has been revamped to include social media tools and other upgrades to improve information sharing and networking on the site.

Established by the U.S. Department of Labor, the website integrates information on disability policy from 22 Federal agencies. Other features of the new site include RSS feeds, a Twitter feed, a blog, and easier ways for users to obtain information and answers to questions on a range of disability-related topics.

---

**National Council on Disability to Host National Summit on Disability Policy**

The National Council on Disability (NCD) will hold a national summit July 25 - 27, 2010, in Washington, D.C. to develop recommendations to guide Federal disability policy and programs over the next decade. The National Summit on Disability Policy will also commemorate the 20th anniversary of the ADA's enactment. Over 300 leaders and stakeholders will be invited and selected to discuss and present information on a range of topics, including civil rights, employment, education, health care, transportation, housing, telecommunications and technology, international affairs, homeland security, and demographics. For further information, including application forms and scholarship opportunities to attend the invitation-only event, visit NCD's website at [www.neweditions.net/ncd2010/index.html](http://www.neweditions.net/ncd2010/index.html).

---

**Access Currents is a free newsletter issued by the Access Board every other month by mail and e-mail. Send questions or comments to [news@access-board.gov](mailto:news@access-board.gov) or call (800) 872-2253 ext. 0026 (voice) or (800) 993-2822 (TTY). Mailing address: 1331 F Street, N.W., Suite 1000; Washington, D.C. 20004-1111.**

---