

Physical Accessibility to Programs and Services

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Executive Summary

More than one in four adults in the United States have some type of disability and more than one in 10 have a mobility disability with serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs.¹ According to the *ADA Update: A Primer for State and Local Governments*, “by the year 2030, approximately 71.5 million baby boomers will be over age 65 and will need services and surroundings that meet their age-related physical needs.”² In New York State, almost 27 percent of adults, or about 4 million New Yorkers, have some form of disability.³

Physical barriers to accessibility may exclude individuals with disabilities from participating in basic civic activities like voting, attending governing board and committee meetings, borrowing a library book or having a meal at the senior center. It is important that individuals with disabilities can participate in their local government’s programs and services and have physical access to the facilities where those programs and services are offered.

Using the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Checklist for Existing Facilities⁴ as a guide, we assessed the physical accessibility to programs and services at selected buildings, including access to department offices, public meeting spaces and restrooms located within these buildings as well as their respective parking lots (together “facilities”) for 20 municipalities, including seven Cities, 12 Towns and one Village (together “the Municipalities”), based on four categories of accessibility:

Approach and Entrance – Such as access to parking, routes to the buildings and accessible exterior entrances.

Restrooms – Such as maneuvering space, access to lavatories and the configuration of stalls.

Access to Services – Such as interior routes, interior doors, signs, seating and service counters.

Additional Access – Such as access to water fountains and public phones.

The checklist was used as a tool to identify potential improvements to physical accessibility. The use of the checklist, however, is for informational purposes only and should not be construed as the Office of the State Comptroller (OSC) opining on the legality of any of the Municipalities’ facilities under, or the Municipalities’ compliance with, the ADA. See Appendix A for more information on the ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities.

The selected facilities at the Municipalities were generally physically accessible; however, we identified 1,491 of the 11,916 applicable accessibility components (13 percent), primarily in restrooms, where local officials could consider taking additional steps to increase physical accessibility to programs and services (Figure 1).

1 <https://www.cdc.gov/disability-and-health/articles-documents/disability-impacts-all-of-us-infographic.html>

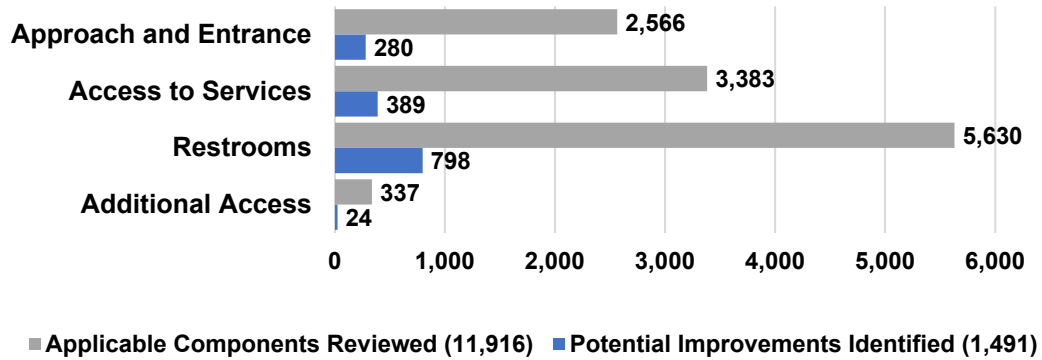
2 <https://www.ada.gov/resources/title-ii-primer/>

3 <https://dhds.cdc.gov/SP?LocationId=36&CategoryId=DISEST&ShowFootnotes=true&showMode=&IndicatorIds=STATTYPE,AGEIND,SEXIND,RACEIND,VETIND&pnl0=Table,false,YR7,CAT1,BO1,...,AGEADJPREV&pnl1=Chart,false,YR7,DISTYPE,VISDIS,...,PREV&pnl2=Chart,false,YR7,DISSTAT,...,AGEADJPREV&pnl3=Chart,false,YR7,DISSTAT,...,AGEADJPREV&pnl4=Chart,false,YR7,DISSTAT,...,AGEADJPREV&t=1743536085783>

4 <https://www.adachecklist.org/checklist.html>

FIGURE 1

Physical Accessibility Components and Potential Improvements Identified



For a further breakdown of potential improvements by category, see Appendix B. For more details on the Municipalities, see Appendix C.

Local officials should consider the feasibility of taking additional steps to increase the physical accessibility to programs and services at their existing facilities. Providing accessible facilities demonstrates a commitment to equality of access, ensuring that a broader range of residents have the same opportunities to participate fully in public life, including those with disabilities, the elderly and individuals with temporary injuries.

Physical Accessibility to Programs and Services

Potential Physical Accessibility Improvements to Approach and Entrance

People with certain disabilities need more space than is available at a typical parking space. Accessible parking spaces should include a level access aisle to provide adequate maneuvering space for people who use wheelchairs or other mobility devices to get in and out of their car or van. Accessible spaces and access aisles should be identified with signs and markings. Accessible parking spaces should be as close as possible to an accessible building entrance and be connected to that entrance by an accessible route.

An accessible route is a continuous, unobstructed path through a building or facility designed for a person with a disability to pass through safely. It should be wide, smooth, as level as possible and can include ramps but not stairs. If the main entrance is not accessible, an alternative, accessible entrance should be provided. There should be signs at inaccessible entrances indicating the location of the nearest accessible entrance. An accessible entrance should be designed to be used independently, with sufficient clearance for a wheelchair to maneuver when operating the door, and with doors that meet accessibility standards for ease of opening, closing speed, and width of the opening.

We identified 2,566 accessibility components applicable to the approach and entrance at the selected facilities within the Municipalities. Of these components, we identified 280 potential improvements (11 percent). Some of the potential improvements included:

- Parking spaces with no access aisles, no van accessible parking spaces and no signs identifying accessible spaces,
- Ramps that did not have railings or had railings only on one side along exterior accessible routes, and
- Insufficient space for maneuverability while opening doors, doors that were difficult to open or that closed too fast, and mats or rugs that were not secured at building entrances, increasing tripping hazards.

In a few instances, buildings were not accessible because of stairs, or the alternative entrance did not provide access to all services available to other residents. In one instance, the only public entrance at a City's police station did not provide wheelchair access to the main floor (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Approach and Entrance Potential Improvement Example^a



a) Photo taken by OSC auditors in October 2024 with permission from local officials. For additional examples of approach and entrance improvements we photographed see Appendix B.

Potential Physical Accessibility Improvements to Access to Services

Hallways, doorways and other interior spaces should be wide enough and free from obstructions to allow people with mobility or visual impairments to navigate them comfortably and safely. Inadequate clearance can create barriers to access. At least one accessible route should connect all accessible spaces of a facility. The route should be level and slip-resistant and mats or carpeting should be secured to prevent trip hazards. Doors should open with less than five pounds of force and have accessible handles to make doors easier to operate for people who rely on wheelchairs or mobility aids or have limited hand strength or dexterity. Signs identifying department offices and meeting rooms should be mounted at an accessible height and have raised lettering and Braille. If seating is available, space for wheelchairs and a companion should be provided. Service counters should have a section at an accessible height, no more than 36 inches high, and intercoms or other controls should be at an accessible height.

We identified 3,383 accessibility components applicable to the access to services at the selected facilities within the Municipalities. Of these components, we identified 389 potential improvements (11 percent). Some of the potential improvements included:

- Signs that did not contain raised lettering and Braille, and signs mounted too high,
- Doorknobs that required grasping or twisting,
- Doors that required too much force to open or closed too rapidly,
- Service counters that did not have a section at an accessible height,
- Waiting areas and meeting rooms that did not have spaces for wheelchairs, and
- Floors within buildings that were only accessible by stairs.

In one instance, the interior doors to the study rooms at a public library had inadequate door clearances, limiting access (Figure 3).

Potential Physical Accessibility Improvements to Restrooms

Accessible restrooms should have an entrance wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs and mobility devices and a layout with enough space for maneuvering inside the restroom. Accessible sinks and counters should be lower in height, and with clearance

FIGURE 3

Access to Services Potential Improvement Example^a



a) Photo taken by OSC auditors in October 2024 with permission from local officials. For additional examples of access to services improvements we photographed see Appendix B.

underneath to allow individuals in wheelchairs to comfortably reach them. Mirrors, soap dispensers and hand dryers should be mounted at an accessible height. Accessible toilets should be installed higher and equipped with grab bars for stability. Stalls should be wide enough to allow maneuverability and stall doors should close automatically. Clear signage with accessibility symbols helps individuals locate accessible restrooms easily.

We identified 5,630 accessibility components applicable to restrooms at the selected facilities within the Municipalities. Of these components, we identified 798 potential improvements (14 percent). Some of the potential improvements included:

- Inadequate signs,
- Lavatories that had exposed pipes increasing the risk of injury from contact,
- Rooms and stalls did not have sufficient maneuvering space for wheelchairs or other mobility devices, and
- Grab bars that were not long enough, not installed at the proper height or were missing.

In several instances, soap dispensers, hand dryers and other fixtures were mounted too high or otherwise out of reach by individuals in wheelchairs (Figure 4).

Conclusion

Local officials can strive to ensure individuals with disabilities have the same ability to participate in decision-making and the same access to programs and services as everyone else by considering taking additional steps to increase the physical accessibility to programs and services at their existing facilities. Some of these physical improvements are relatively easy to make (e.g., installing accessible signs) and may substantially increase the accessibility of programs and services for those with disabilities.

The Municipalities generally agreed with our findings and have planned corrective action. Many indicated they would consider the feasibility of the improvements and prioritize them based on cost and the scope of work. Several indicated they had already implemented some of the improvements we identified such as installing accessible signs, adjusting the closing speed of doors and other low-cost improvements that should make an immediate impact.

FIGURE 4

Restroom Potential Improvement Example^a



a) Photo taken by OSC auditors in October 2024 with permission from local officials. For additional examples of restroom improvements we photographed see Appendix B.

Appendix A: Background and Relevant Standards

Cities, towns and villages (together “municipalities”) are governed by an elected council or board, generally composed of a Mayor or Supervisor and council or board members. The council or board is responsible for managing and overseeing municipal operations. Evaluating physical accessibility to the municipality’s facilities may be the responsibility of more than one official or administrator, and should be an ongoing process of evaluating, planning and maintaining physical accessibility, often at multiple facilities within a municipality.

We used the ADA Checklist For Existing Facilities⁵ as a tool to identify potential improvements to physical accessibility of existing local government facilities. The checklist indicates it “was produced by the New England ADA Center, a project of the Institute for Human Centered Design and a member of the ADA National Network. ... The checklist is based on the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design.”⁶

The Standards set minimum scoping and technical requirements for newly designed and constructed or altered state and local government facilities, public accommodations and commercial facilities to be readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities. For any new construction or alteration that began on or after March 15, 2012, the project must comply with the Standards.

Although the Standards apply to new construction and alterations that began on or after March 15, 2012, we used the Standards as a tool to help identify where local officials could consider taking additional steps to increase physical accessibility to programs and services at selected existing structures within each Municipality, whether built before or after March 2012. The potential improvements to physical accessibility identified in this report, however, are intended for informational purposes only and should not be construed as OSC opining as to either the legality of any of the Municipalities’ facilities under, or the Municipalities’ compliance with, the ADA.

⁵ <https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/design-standards/2010-stds/>

⁶ <https://www.adachecklist.org/doc/intro/checklistintro.pdf>

Appendix B: Potential Physical Accessibility Improvements

Figure 5: Potential Physical Accessibility Improvements by Category

Accessibility Component Groups	Applicable Components Reviewed	Potential Improvements Identified
Approach and Entrance		
Parking	745	119
Exterior Accessible Route	330	6
Curb Ramps	284	18
Exterior Ramps	306	51
Exterior Entrances	901	86
Access to Services		
Interior Accessible Route	577	6
Ramps	61	4
Elevators	177	24
Platform Lifts	20	6
Interior Signs	214	143
Interior Doors	1,407	126
Rooms and Spaces	309	3
Controls	25	9
Seating	252	6
Sales and Service Counters	337	62
Food Service Lines	4	0
Restrooms		
Accessible Route	141	0
Signs	145	65
Entrances	930	94
Toilet Rooms (Bathrooms)	687	91
Water Closets (Toilets)	1,496	270
Toilet Compartments (Stalls)	915	122
Lavatories	1,026	85
Soap Dispensers and Hand Dryers	290	71
Additional Access		
Drinking Fountains	332	20
Public Phones	5	4
Totals	11,916	1,491

FIGURE 6

Potential Physical Accessibility Improvements to Approach and Entrance Examples^a



Parking spaces without signs or access aisles at one City's senior center.



Not enough clearance on the latch side of the door to accommodate a wheelchair at a Town's recycling center.



The mats at the entrance to a Town's highway department were not secured to prevent tripping hazards.



The level landing at the top of a curb ramp along the accessible route at a City's police facility was obstructed by a generator.

a) Photos taken by OSC auditors between July and December 2024 with permission from local officials.

FIGURE 7

Potential Physical Accessibility Improvements to Access to Services Examples^a



Conference room door at a City Hall has a doorknob, and not an accessible handle such as a latch or lever that can be operated without grasping or twisting.



Service counter at a Town's public safety center without an accessible portion that is no higher than 36 inches.



Permanent seating in the public viewing area of a Town's courtroom does not include wheelchair accessible spaces.



The upper-level of a public library is only accessible by a stairway.

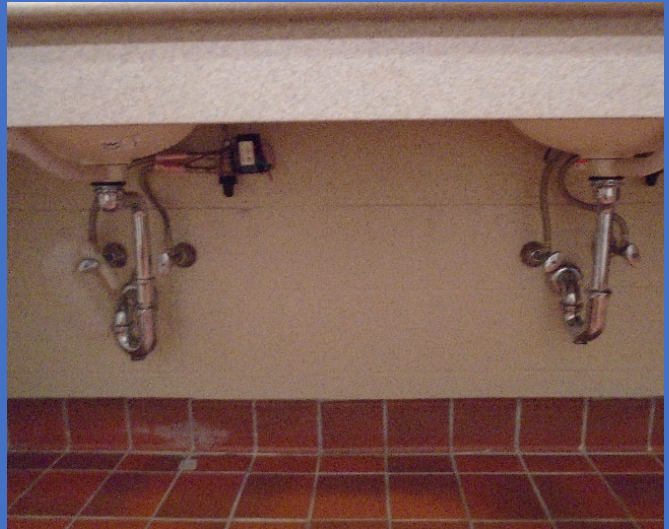
a) Photos taken by OSC auditors between July and December 2024 with permission from local officials.

FIGURE 8

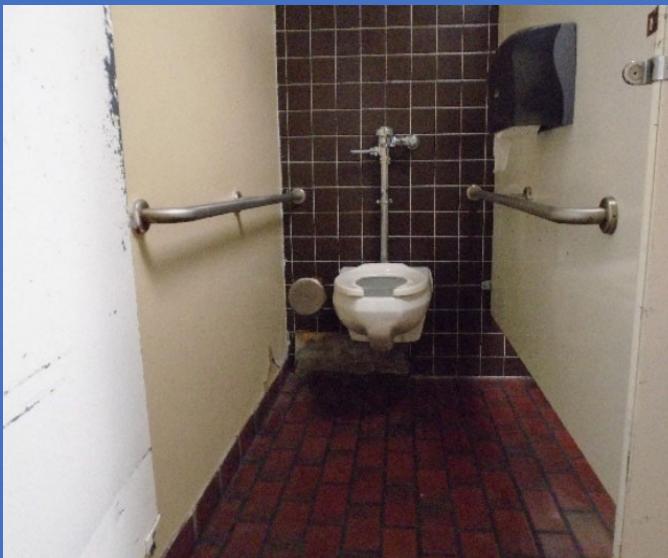
Potential Physical Accessibility Improvements to Restrooms Examples^a



The public restroom sink, mirror and soap dispenser in a Town's police station are too high.



Pipes under lavatories in a Town court restroom were not insulated to prevent potential injury from sharp or abrasive surfaces or contact with hot or cold pipes.



The designated accessible stall and its door are not wide enough for wheelchair access and there is no rear grab bar in a City library's men's restroom.



Doors to accessible stalls in restrooms at a Town Hall do not have automatic door closers making wheelchair use difficult.

a) Photos taken by OSC auditors between July and December 2024 with permission from local officials.

Appendix C: Selected Municipalities – Facts and Results

Figure 9: Facts and Results for Selected Municipalities

Municipality	Population	General Fund Expenditures in Millions ^a	Applicable Accessibility Components Assessed ^b	Potential Improvements Identified	Percentage Improvements for Applicable Components
City of Auburn	26,866	44.1	538	70	13%
City of Batavia	15,600	19.2	297	21	7%
City of Cohoes	18,147	21.9	293	49	17%
City of Long Beach	35,029	80.6	500	86	17%
City of New Rochelle	79,726	164.5	895	171	19%
City of Norwich ^c	7,051	10.7	317	30	9%
City of Rome	32,127	67.7	463	79	17%
Town of Babylon	218,233	77.2	1,290	139	11%
Town of Big Flats	7,791	2.6	541	100	18%
Town of Brookhaven	485,773	102.6	1,022	66	6%
Town of Chili	29,123	11.8	781	24	3%
Town of Clifton Park	38,029	17.9	562	47	8%
Town of Colonie	85,590	63.3	814	67	8%
Town of Columbia	1,569	0.25	77	13	17%
Town of Grand Island	21,389	9.3	668	111	17%
Town of Penfield	39,438	20.1	679	58	9%
Town of Tonawanda	72,636	29.1	865	132	15%
Town of Trenton	4,297	1.5	144	14	10%
Town of Woodbury	12,197	4.7	595	131	22%
Village of Floral Park	16,172	28.9	575	83	14%
Total	1,246,783	\$778	11,916	1,491	13%

a) Expenditures at December, 31 2023 except for Auburn (June 30, 2023), Batavia (March 31, 2024), Floral Park (May 31, 2023) and Long Beach (June 30, 2023).

b) Applicable components vary depending on number, size and design of facilities at each Municipality.

c) Estimated expenditures for fiscal year 2023.

Appendix D: Resources and Services

Regional Office Directory

www.osc.ny.gov/files/local-government/pdf/regional-directory.pdf

Cost-Saving Ideas – Resources, advice and assistance on cost-saving ideas

www.osc.ny.gov/local-government/publications

Fiscal Stress Monitoring – Resources for local government officials experiencing fiscal problems

www.osc.ny.gov/local-government/fiscal-monitoring

Local Government Management Guides – Series of publications that include technical information and suggested practices for local government management

www.osc.ny.gov/local-government/publications

Planning and Budgeting Guides – Resources for developing multiyear financial, capital, strategic and other plans

www.osc.ny.gov/local-government/resources/planning-resources

Protecting Sensitive Data and Other Local Government Assets – A non-technical cybersecurity guide for local government leaders

www.osc.ny.gov/files/local-government/publications/pdf/cyber-security-guide.pdf

Required Reporting – Information and resources for reports and forms that are filed with the Office of the State Comptroller

www.osc.ny.gov/local-government/required-reporting

Research Reports/Publications – Reports on major policy issues facing local governments and State policy-makers

www.osc.ny.gov/local-government/publications

Training – Resources for local government officials on in-person and online training opportunities on a wide range of topics

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