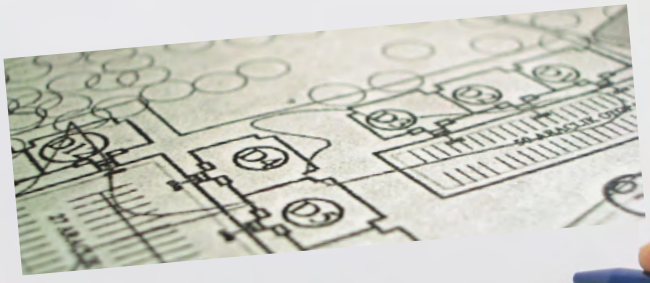
Checklist for an Elder-Friendly Law Office



- ☐ Office Location
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The American Bar Association
Commission on Law and Aging

by David Godfrey, Adrienne Lyon Buenavista, and Danielle Valdenaire

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Checklist for an Elder-Friendly Law Office

The American Bar Association Commission on Law and Aging

David Godfrey, Adrienne Lyon Buenavista, and Danielle Valdenaire

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION
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Checklist for an Elder-Friendly Law Office

As the American population ages, accommodating the needs of older Americans becomes more and more important to a myriad of businesses. An elder-friendly office is one that provides spatial and social accommodations for disabilities prevalent among older persons such as hearing loss, visual impairment, and mobility limitations. In order to better provide legal services to an older population, your office floor plan, lighting, furniture, and staff procedures need to be designed so elders with disabilities can easily navigate your office. By complying with the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) Accessibility Guidelines and making other practical design decisions, you can improve an older client's experience in your office.

ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG)

The ADA Accessibility Guidelines contain technical and design standards for facilities. The guidelines include dimensions and installation details of accessible elements such as parking spaces, accessible routes, ramps, stairs, elevators, doors, entrances, drinking fountains, bathrooms, signs, and fixed seats and tables.

Virtually all office, retail, and service establishments open to the public—including law offices—are expected to comply with ADA requirements (*see* 42 U.S.C. § 12181(7)(F)). However, this does not mean that each organization must fulfill all ADA Accessibility Guidelines because the ADA distinguishes between "barrier removal" in existing facilities and "new construction and alteration" of facilities.

Existing facilities must remove structural barriers and make the space ADA compliant where "readily achievable" (*i.e.*, easily accomplished without much difficulty or expense). Examples of barrier removal measures include installing ramps, widening doorways, installing grab bars in toilet stalls, and rearranging furniture. Necessary barrier removals are determined on a case-by-case basis in light of an organization's resources—generally, its size and budget. When barrier removal is not possible, the facility must provide alternative measures to make services accessible. For instance, law offices might consider providing home visits or relocating activities to accessible locations.

When constructing a new building or altering an existing building, all spaces are required to be in accordance with the ADA Accessibility Guidelines unless providing access would be impracticable or infeasible. However, these limitations will only apply in rare circumstances where terrain makes fully accessibility unusually difficult. Thus, law offices in new or modified facilities typically must comply with ADA Accessibility Guidelines.

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About this Checklist

The following checklist will assist you in making your workspace accessible for older persons. Although this list identifies key ADA provisions, it is not exhaustive. The checklist also includes good practices to make a law office elder-friendly; these suggestions are not mandated by law, but would make your office more accessible to older clients. This checklist is organized around three key topics:

- External Access to Your Office,
- Internal Accessibility of Your Office, and
- Comfort and Communication in Your Office.

For more information on accessible design guidelines, visit the U.S. Department of Justice 2010 ADA Standards website at http://www.ada.gov/2010ADAstandards_index.htm.

External Access to Your Office

Office Location

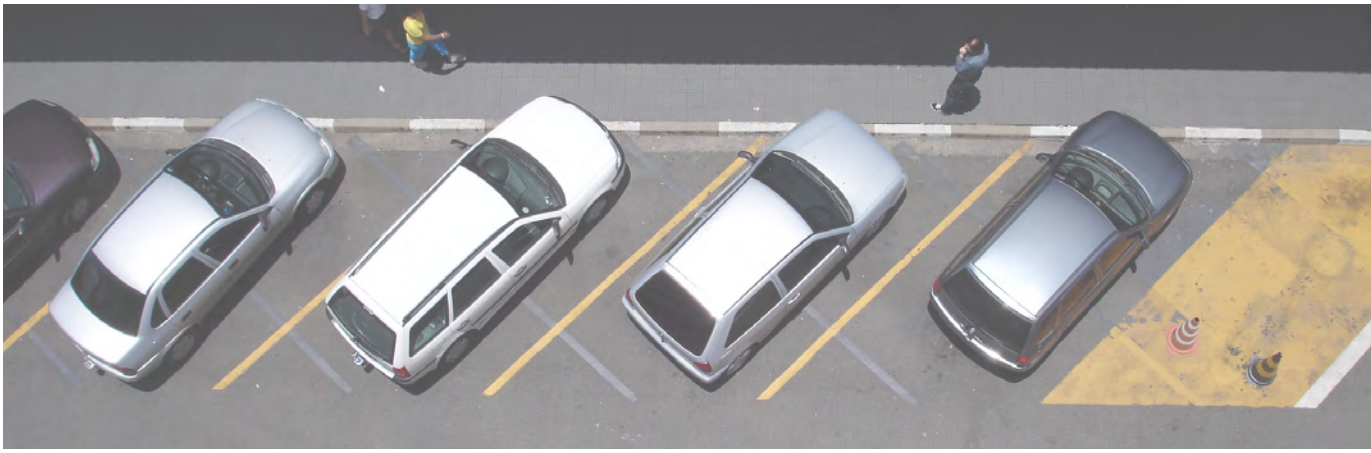
In order for older clients to utilize your legal services, they need to be able to access your office.

ADA Accessibility Guidelines

1. Generally, you should have one accessible parking space per 25 total parking spaces provided (ADAAG 208.2).
2. A parking space (for a car) should have a minimum width of 96 inches and an adjacent accessible aisle with a minimum width of 60 inches (ADAAG 502).
3. Design sidewalks to avoid steep slopes, steps, and irregular surfaces (see ADAAG 403 and 405 for specific dimension and slope requirements for sidewalks and ramps).
4. There should be at least one accessible route from accessible parking, accessible loading zones, public sidewalks, and on-site public transportation stops (ADAAG 206.2.1).

Good Practices

1. Locate your office near older consumers so they only have a short distance to travel to your office. Look for office facilities near retirement communities, senior centers, libraries, shopping centers, or places of worship.
2. Situate your office near a public train or bus stop. If there are no stations or stops near your office, consider providing shuttle service to your office from a major bus or train stop.
3. Avoid locating your office near high-traffic areas, as traffic congestion can be stressful and dangerous for older clients.
4. Have accessible parking spaces as well as a drop-off area in front of your office.
5. Construct wide parking lot entrances to make it easier to enter and exit. If possible, locate your office so parking can be both entered and exited using right hand turns.



Office Visibility

It may be difficult for an older client to locate your office's address and entrance, especially when visiting you for the first time.

Good Practices

1. Be sure your office has clear, easily visible signage. Signs should clearly state the name of your organization and the street address. The sign should be written in large letters so it can be seen from all approaches.
2. On your web page and in hard copy, provide clear directions, maps, public transportation information, and anything else that can guide your client to your office.

Internal Accessibility of Your Office

When entering a building, a client has to navigate the interior space by moving through hallways, doors, elevators, and stairs. When designing your office interior, it is critical to consider how older clients will circulate through the office spaces.

Doors

ADA Accessibility Guidelines

1. Interior doors should not require an opening force of more than five pounds. (ADAAG 404).
2. In order to give a disabled client time to move through a door, exterior and interior doors should not close too quickly. If your door has an automatic closer, the door should take at least five seconds to close (ADAAG 404).
3. Doors should be wide enough to permit wheel chairs to navigate easily. The ADA Accessibility Guidelines require a door to be at least 32 inches wide, but generally 36 inches is ideal for wheelchair access (ADAAG 404).
4. For specific ADA dimension and clearance requirements, see ADAAG 404.2.4.1 through 404.2.4.6.

Good Practices

1. To avoid injuries, all doors need to be easy to open. On exterior doors, you should install automatic openers.
2. On interior doors, you should use levered door handles or simple push/pull devices instead of knobs so clients will not have to struggle to open a door.

Interior Navigation

Navigating through a building can be confusing, especially if it is unfamiliar. Pay special attention to maps, signs, and directions.

ADA Accessibility Guidelines

1. Walking surfaces must be at least 36 inches wide (ADAAG 403), but 48 inches is ideal to allow for turning space.
2. Objects such as mailboxes and water fountains should not extend more than 4 feet into a passageway (ADAAG 307); a person using a cane due to a visual impairment will have difficulty detecting objects that stick out into the hallway.

Good Practices

1. A building directory should clearly indicate in large type which floor or area of the building you are located.
2. Floor plans or building maps are helpful. Use contrasting colors to differentiate lobbies, offices, and hallways. Avoid putting together colors that hard to distinguish (like blue and green or orange and yellow).
3. Signs should be easily visible from both the perspective of a person standing and a person using a wheel chair.
4. Hallways should be well lit and should be wide enough to navigate a wheelchair.
5. If the corridor is particularly long, provide benches along the walls so your client can sit and rest if their endurance is limited. However, take care that these benches do not obstruct the path of a person in a wheelchair.
6. A receptionist should greet and, if needed, assist clients. It may be necessary for you to meet clients in the lobby and accompany clients from the building entrance to your office.

Elevators

Although elevators make circulating in your office easier for clients with mobility problems, elevators can be challenge for older clients with visual impairments.

ADA Accessibility Guidelines

1. Elevators are not required in facilities with fewer than three stories or facilities with fewer than 3,000 square feet per floor, unless the building is a shopping center, health care provider's office, or public transportation station (ADAAG 206.2.3). However, it is still best practice to include an elevator in a multi-story law office.
2. For specific dimension requirements for elevator cars, see ADA Accessibility Guidelines figure 407.5.1.

Good Practices

1. Elevator buttons should be legible (written in large, tactile text and braille), large, well-lit, and in a color that contrasts with the elevator walls.
2. Make sure the light in the elevator is bright enough.
3. There should be no level change or large gap between elevator floor and building floor. If a gap is unavoidable, you should indicate the danger with a warning sign that states "Caution! Watch Your Step."

Comfort & Communication in Your Office

Office elements that impact your client's comfort and communication include: seating and table type, restroom design, heating and air conditioning, lighting, and acoustics.

Seating

Good Practices

1. You should avoid sofas and other plush seats as your client will have a harder time getting up without assistance. Instead, you should install chairs with firm arms (*e.g.*, wood) and supportive seats.
2. Chairs with a shallow seat (17 inches to 24 inches depth) are easiest for older persons to get in and out of.
3. Four-legged chairs with a sturdy frame and stable base are preferable. Be careful of chairs on wheels—they can roll out from under clients as they are getting in and out of them.

Hint: rolling a wheeled chair up against a wall can make it easier to get in and out of.

Furnishings

ADA Accessibility Guidelines

1. Use tables high enough so that clients don't have to bend far to reach objects. Tables and counters should be 26 inches to 30 inches high (ADAAG 902).

Good Practices

1. You should use tables, cabinets, and any other furniture with rounded corners to prevent injures if your client bumps into an object.
2. Do not over-decorate a room with knickknacks, baskets, or other items that can cause falls.
3. Do not use complex decorative patterns that can generate visual or spatial confusion. It is best practice to use solid colors for walls, floors, and ceilings.

Heating and Air

Good Practices

1. If you can choose or change the level of a room's temperature, always ask your client if the temperature is comfortable.
2. If you can't control the temperature of your office, you can offer your client a fleece blanket for warmth or offer to open a window or turn on a fan to cool down the room.
3. You should situate your client's chair so the air is not blowing directly on it.

Lighting

To make lighting more effective in your office, keep in mind that many clients will have decreased visual acuity, increased sensitivity to glare, reduced contrast sensitivity, and diminished color perception.

Good Practices

1. To reduce glare in a room, use light, non-glossy colors for the walls, floor and ceiling.
2. Avoid glare-causing objects inside your office such as reflective furniture or tables made out of glass, mirror or chrome. The reflections can exacerbate visual problems and spatial confusion.
3. Avoid positioning clients in any location that has them looking at a window; this creates back lighting and glare.
4. Avoid conventional incandescent lamps. High-quality fluorescent lamps work best with older clients.

Hint: For further details about lamps, read this report published by the Lighting Research Center: http://www.lrc.rpi.edu/programs/lighthealth/aarp/pdf/aarpbook1.pdf).

Acoustics

Background noise can be a serious barrier to good communication with a client who has even a low level of hearing impairment. A quiet meeting space and good acoustics are important.

Good Practices

1. Meeting rooms or offices should be adequately sound insulated or in a quiet part of your office complex. Additionally, for offices in more urban locations, window sound proofing will help keep out exterior noise.
2. Even if you find background music relaxing, turn it off when meeting with your client.
3. Air conditioning, fans, and heating systems can be noisy. Minimize the noise and, if necessary, turn the system down or off. If possible, install a quieter mechanical system.

Restrooms

Restrooms can be dangerous for persons with mobility limitations if they are not adapted for people with disabilities.

ADA Accessibility Guidelines

1. Restrooms should be large enough that a client with a wheel chair or walker could easily move through the space. Refer to figure 604.8.1.1 (wheelchair accessible compartments) in the ADA Accessibility Guidelines for specific dimension requirements.
2. Every public and common-use bathroom should be accessible. Only one stall must be accessible, unless there are six or more stalls, in which case two stalls must be accessible (one wheelchair, one ambulatory) (ADAAG 213.3.1).
3. Grab bars are required on the back and side of a wheelchair-accessible stall and on both sides of an ambulatory-accessible stall (ADAAG 604).
4. For particular fixture and dimension requirements, refer to figures 604.2 (toilet location) and 604.3.1 (toilet clearance) in the ADA Accessibility Guidelines.

Stairs

Stairs should be avoided if at all possible. Even a step or two will present a major barrier for someone with limited mobility. If the entry requires clients to ascend stairs, you should strive to construct a ramped entrance. If this is not possible, you should have plans in place for meeting clients in a more accessible location.

ADA Accessibility Guidelines

1. Assure that adequate handrails are installed on both sides of the steps. Handrails must be 34 inches to 38 inches high (ADAAG figure 505.4) and extend 12 inches beyond the top and bottom of the stairs (ADAAG figure 505.10.1 through 505.10.3).
2. Stairs should be designed to prevent any accumulation of water (*i.e.*, they should "shed" water) (ADAAG 504).
3. Stairs must have uniform riser heights (4 to 7 inches) and tread depths (11 inches minimum) (ADAAG 504).
4. Stairways are not permitted to have open risers under the ADA guidelines (ADAAG 504).

Good Practices

1. If you have exterior stairs, make sure they remain clear of debris, snow, and ice.
2. Mark the stair edges with a contrasting color and avoid curved stairways.

Flooring

Flooring choices are important so that clients do not trip on carpet or uneven surfaces. For older or disabled adults, falls often lead to a decline in health and even death. Safety should trump decorative aspects when selecting flooring.

ADA Accessibility Guidelines

1. ADA Accessibility Guidelines require that floors are stable, firm, and slip resistant (ADAAG 302).

Good Practices

1. Flooring should be level (without bumps and cracks) so clients will not trip.
2. Height changes between hard floors and carpeting or at door thresholds should be minimized.
3. Carpet is the preferred flooring surface, but make sure it is low-pile (to reduce friction for wheelchairs), wall-to-wall, and firmly glued to the floor to eliminate bumps and wrinkles.
4. If you use hard-surface floors, you should use a level, anti-slip flooring surface (*e.g.*, non-skid ceramic tile or hardwood). When there is wet weather, you should secure low-pile runners.

Auxiliary Assistance

Law offices are only required to provide auxiliary aids such as interpreters, devices for deaf persons, readers, brailled materials, and large print materials when they are necessary to ensure effective communication with individuals with hearing, vision, or speech impairments.

Good Practices

1. Try to obtain access to a Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) for the office.
2. Written documents should be available in large print (14-point font or larger).
3. Sign language interpreters or similar services can be provided for if requested by clients who are hearing impaired.
4. If walking distances are significant, you should consider providing a wheelchair at the entrance.

Office Congeniality

Good Practices

1. Always make water accessible in the waiting room and in meeting rooms. The availability of other drinks is a plus (*e.g.*, coffee, tea, fruit juices, and sodas) as long as you provide a wide range of choices, so clients with allergies or medical restrictions will have options.
2. Pictures of your family or pets and memorabilia of your personal interests can help clients connect with you, encouraging conversation by putting them at ease.

Personal Note:

While working on this checklist, my mother began using a walker and I realized how the smallest obstacle limited her ability to move about.

When researching accessible design standards, it struck me that because of these standards my mother can participate in every day life with a greater degree of comfort and safety.

Little differences such as grab bars in restrooms or curb cuts on a sidewalk can make a great difference in the life of an older adult.

-David Godfrey

Checklist

As you complete each of the sections in this publication, check off its category below to keep track of your progress.

- ☐ Office Location
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About the Commission on Law and Aging…

The mission of the ABA Commission on Law and Aging is to strengthen and secure the legal rights, dignity, autonomy, quality of life, and quality of care of elders.
It carries out this mission through research, policy development, technical assistance, advocacy, education, and training.

The Commission consists of legal professional staff and a 15-member interdisciplinary body of experts in aging and law, including lawyers, judges, health and social services professionals, academics, and advocates.

The Commission examines a wide range of law-related issues, including:

- Legal Services to Older Persons
- Health and Long-Term Care
- Housing Needs
- Professional Ethical Issues
- Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and other Public Benefits Programs
- Planning for Incapacity
- Guardianship
- Elder Abuse
- Pain Management and End-of-Life Care
- Dispute Resolution
- Court-Related Needs of Older Persons and Persons with Disabilities

For more information, visit http://www.americanbar.org/aging.