

DISABILITY REPORT

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In the spirit of an open democracy, nearly three million citizens travel to the House of Representatives each year, but the People’s House may not be accessible to all of them.

In an effort geared toward making the campus more accessible, the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) was tasked with examining the ability of disabled Americans to access the buildings of the House of Representatives.

The CAO worked with the General Accountability Office, the Office of Compliance (OOC), the Office of Congressional Accessibility Services (OCAS) and Rep. James Langevin’s office to formulate the recommendations in this report.

Angel McFadden has been working in the House for three years and she still has trouble getting into the Cannon building from the outside.

“I may know the campus better than anyone, because I’ve had to learn exactly how to get around, where I can and cannot get into,” McFadden said.

McFadden, who is disabled and works in the Payroll and Benefits department, said getting around is always a struggle.

She worries about people who are new to the campus and don’t know their way around as well.” “It’s hard enough for me to navigate the tunnels; they’re difficult for anyone, but what about people who don’t understand the system? How are they going to get around?”

She said traversing the Hill is “frustrating.” “It makes you feel like an afterthought, like the buildings were not constructed with you in mind,” McFadden said.

The institution of the hallway policy, which prohibits objects from being placed in the hallways, stairways and exit paths of House office buildings, is an improvement, she said.

“People have to understand we have to coexist and that measure isn’t just a precaution for people with disabilities, it’s also designed so that everyone can get out of a building quickly during an emergency,” she said.



She feels much safer knowing the Capitol Police keep track of where she is, so they can assist her during an emergency, but she worries about how visitors will fare.

Greater accessibility, she noted, would allow the disabled more freedom to move around the campus.

“You want to have the freedom to come and go. Chart me a course and let me follow it, so I can have the same access and experience that everyone else does.”

What We Knew

A July 2007 report released by the OOC entitled, “Report on Americans with Disabilities Act Inspections Relating to Public Services and Accommodations” showed there is no shortage of opportunities for improvement.

Accessibility was broken down into six categories: accessible building access, emergency procedures, communications access to programs, services and activities and access to offices, hearing rooms and other building features.

The report observed that while advancements had been made in public access, especially in the areas

of evacuation planning, maps and signs, other areas are in need of substantial improvement.

The OOC made a list of recommendations, including installing visual alarms in public rooms and spaces, surveying all sidewalk curb cuts and ramps, posting tactical signs and ensuring brailled signs remain unobstructed.

The OOC also asked the Architect of the Capitol (AOC) to work to decrease door weight for designated accessible restrooms, install accessible communications devices in all staging areas and remove all obstacles in the hallways.

Aaron Welty, a legislative assistant for Congressman Thaddeus McCotter, who is disabled, has invented a novel way to get around town.



His father built him a very compact battery-operated vehicle to navigate the streets of D.C.

But getting around the Capitol campus is something else entirely. For that, Welty relies on a scooter to plot a course through the complex maze of tunnels, elevators and ramps.

In the three years that he’s worked for McCotter, Welty, who has cerebral palsy, said he’s learned how to get around without much incident.

But he wonders how visitors will fare.

“When it’s crowded it’s much tougher to get around and all these people who are disabled and visiting will have some difficulty here,” he said.

Welty said he would like to see wheelchair ramps throughout the campus widened to accommodate disabled employees and visitors who use the ramps.

It also encouraged Members to design accessible web sites.

What We Found

The CAO has determined marked improvement has been made since the 2007 report was issued.

The House's disabled community is safer following the development of a Capitol Police plan to assist disabled people during an evacuation. A public address system has been installed to provide information and direction during an emergency. Primary and alternate elevators, which are marked with a blue mobility-impaired staging area sign, have been designated in each building as emergency evacuation elevators. If the area is safe during an emergency, U.S. Capitol Police will stop the elevator on every floor to pick up people who are waiting at the emergency staging areas.

Hallways throughout the campus are clearer and safer — both for those who are disabled and those who are not. In June 2008, the House Office Building Commission instituted a new hallway policy, which prohibits objects from being placed in the hallways, stairways and exit paths of House office buildings.

For their part, the AOC has made many improvements suggested in the 2007 report, including improving tactile signs, fixing many of the sidewalk curb cuts and decreasing door weight.

Not all of the improvements designed to make the House more accessible are structural. Support for

Tony Titus, who works in ID Services for the Sergeant at Arms, was “stunned” when he began working at the House and discovered the buildings weren’t as accessible as he thought.

the disabled has also been strengthened by the improvement and institution of variety of unique programs.

The OCAS provides services for staff and visitors with disabilities, including adaptive tours of the Capitol building, wheelchair loans and interpreting services for those who are deaf or hearing impaired.

The CAO works in conjunction with the OCAS to assist Committee and Member offices to obtain sign language interpreters or cart services.

Interpreters are available for official Congressional business, including staff meetings, press conferences, instructional classes, job interviews, and so on. Interpreters are available for witnesses, but not for public attendees at hearings.





Technology is also lending a “helping hand.”

OCAS provides brochures and sensory aids for visitors with disabilities. Sound amplification devices are now offered to visitors who may use them for Capitol tours or for a meeting with their Representative.

With each Committee room upgrade, the CAO continues to install infrared assistive listening systems, which transmit sound directly into a headset using light-based technology. The system is designed to aid the deaf and hearing impaired so they can listen to Committee proceedings.

OCAS will train staff on teletypewriters and video relay services to aid hearing impaired staff. The House Learning Center is equipped with accessible computer equipment to provide all staff with the same training opportunities.

“I thought it would be the best because the rules are made here, I thought it would be a Mecca for accessibility,” Titus said. “But I understand there are some challenges with retrofitting an old building like this.”

He said the House overall is accessible, but it still takes more time to get around and certainly could be more convenient.

For example, in many buildings, Titus said, there is only one accessible restroom per floor. To get to the nearest accessible restroom he has to go all the way around his building, which can create a problem when that restroom is broken or occupied.

Titus has learned how to get around, through the tunnels to specific entrances that are accessible and to certain restrooms, but he, to, worries about disabled visitors to the Capitol.

“I’ve been working here for years and still encounter roadblocks,” he said. “What would happen to someone who had never been here before? How would they get around? It could function as a deterrent.”

House Information Resources helps create accessible web sites for Member offices.

Still, the CAO has determined more work needs to be done to make the House accessible to all constituents.

The CAO Recommends

The House should begin posting information on planned construction projects to relevant web sites, including the DC Visitors Center, Chamber of Commerce and travel sites. The information should include suggestions on how routes of travel may be altered to accommodate the disabled.

Every day, Kathy Hicks carefully plots her path through the winding Capitol campus. Where should she park to get closest to her first morning meeting? What elevators should she take? How early should she leave to get to the Capitol in time?

Those are some of the questions Hicks, who lost her left leg more than 40 years ago, routinely asks herself.

“I have to be conscious of my limitations and other people’s general lack of awareness of those limitations all the time, but especially here, when people are using their BlackBerrys or walking quickly,” Hicks, who now walks with crutches, said.

Like McFadden, she was relieved when the House Office Building Commission instituted a hallway policy that prohibited objects from being placed in the hallways, stairways and exit paths of House office buildings.

“I don’t think anything should be out in the hall because it’s a hazard for people like me,” she said. “I want to be able to participate in the world, but the world is going to have to accommodate me a little.”

Large crowds often gather in relatively small spaces in the Capitol, a fact that often makes it difficult for Hicks to get around. “They catch my crutches and trip me sometimes,” she said, noting that wider ramps would help alleviate some of the congestion.

Hicks, who works as a special assistant in the Customer Service Delivery Center, said she would also like more grab bars installed in restrooms.

Instituting a program for staff members and particularly visitors to rent wheelchairs would create a valuable service for the elderly and the disabled, Hicks added.

“We want our country’s Capitol to be as accessible as it can be,” she said.



House employees should find that the House intranet, HouseNet, directs them to Americans with Disabilities Act information on transportation needs, equipment rentals, maps, emergency egress paths, accessible restroom locations and vendor information.

The CAO should continue working to make all Committee daises accessible to permanently and temporarily disabled Members.

Improving not only daises, but also access to parking would help make the House campus easier to navigate for the disabled. More publicly accessible parking is needed, as well as vehicle drop off points that are near accessible entrances. Employees are currently assigned handicapped accessible permit spaces that are as close to their offices as possible.

The entrances should also be clear and all curb ramps, crosswalks and building ramps should be free of ice and snow. In addition to allowing greater ease of access, this approach would also prevent injuries.

The Longworth House Office Building can be difficult to get into for those with wheelchairs, despite the fact that it has two accessible entrances. The cafeteria in Longworth could also be improved. Constructing a second access ramp over the east stairwell in the cafeteria would make one of the busiest eateries on the Hill more accessible to the thousands of employees and visitors who dine there every year. The additional ramp would also provide an alternate egress pathway, which would be invaluable in an emergency, and would eliminate the need for the disabled to pass through loading dock areas to access the cafeteria.

When members of the disabled community are on campus, they should be greeted with improved signs and large maps.

Member and Committee offices can also be redesigned with more public accessibility in mind.

The AOC and the Superintendent could provide more immediate accessibility by adjusting door closure pressures down to five pounds at Member office entrances to ensure constituents with disabilities have easy access to their Members of Congress.

To ensure obstruction-free accessibility, the House should vet all office configurations and redesign

them when necessary using the ADA guidelines currently in use by the CAO's modular furniture program. These improvements would make the layout easier to navigate for those with disabilities.

Ensuring not only openness, but safety, is the primary recommendation of this report. In keeping with this commitment, the House should evaluate the installation of ADA hardware on fire exit doors. Currently, the disabled do not have adequate access to fire stairs and other safe haven locations because excessive door closure pressure makes it difficult to open the doors, creating a potentially dangerous situation.

While the House of Representatives has accomplished much in a few short years there is still more to be done.

The House of Representatives should work to (1) make the campus more accessible to the public, (2) increase the accessibility of restrooms and (3) build more alternative egress paths.

The House stands as a powerful symbol of American democracy, and while it prides itself on being open to the people, a significant amount of work and cooperation still needs to take place to ensure it is safe and accessible to all.

Office of the Chief Administrative Officer

202-225-6969

<http://cao.house.gov>

