

ACCESS-FRIENDLY NYC



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The Office of the Brooklyn Borough President Eric L. Adams, in partnership with Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled (BCID), American Institute of Architects NY (AIA NY), Age-Friendly NYC, and The New York Academy of Medicine, launched the Access-Friendly NYC initiative in February of 2015 to improve accessibility in New York City public buildings. The Office of the Brooklyn Borough President recognizes that more must be done to create building designs that allow for the broadest range of people possible, including seniors and people with disabilities, to fully participate in their communities. Borough President Eric L. Adams has opened the “People’s Building” to all corners of Brooklyn, which means that more and more Brooklynites are attending events, meeting, and forums at Borough Hall. For this reason, it is important that Borough Hall improves its accessibility for people of all ages and abilities.

HOWEVER, IMPROVED ACCESSIBILITY CAN'T STOP AT THE DOORS OF BOROUGH HALL.

According to the 2010 US Census, the elderly population 60 years and older living in New York City was 1,407,635, representing 17.2% of the City’s population.¹ Approximately 30% of persons 60 and over are between ages 60 and 64, one-in-three are 75 and over, and one-in-ten are 85 and over.² In Brooklyn there are about 300,000 people aged 65 years and over, representing 28% of New York City’s total senior population. The senior population is 12% of Brooklyn’s total population.³ Nearly half of people 65 and over live alone, leaving them at increased risk for social isolation. Of older people living in Brooklyn, 41% identify as having a disability and 32% report ambulatory difficulty. Overall, nearly 10% of Brooklyn’s population reports some form of disability.⁴ Modifications to the physical and social infrastructure of buildings in Brooklyn and across New York City will help ensure seniors and people with disabilities remain active participants in society.

In addition to public buildings, healthcare institutions need to make improvements to facilities and diagnostic equipment to improve access for people with disabilities. A report by Independence Care Systems and New York Lawyers for Public Interest, “Breaking Down Barriers, Breaking the Silence: Making Health Care Accessible for Women with Disabilities”, states that individuals with disabilities are far less likely to access health care services than individuals without disabilities. In particular, women with disabilities are significantly less likely to seek or receive quality health care in a timely way, especially in the area of cancer screening.⁵ This lack of access to critical services leads to poorer health outcomes for women with disabilities, including higher mortality rates.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) celebrates 25 years in 2015.⁶ This law has revolutionized how our government improves accessibility for people of all ages and abilities, but more must be done to allow all members of society to fully participate in their communities.

On June 9th, 2015, the Office of the Brooklyn Borough President hosted a public hearing for community feedback on accessibility issues. Approximately twenty people testified to a hearing panel that consisted of Brooklyn Borough President Eric L. Adams, BCID, AIA NY, Age-Friendly NYC, New York Academy of Medicine, the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, NYC Commission on Human Rights, NYC Department of Transportation, NYC Department of Citywide Administrative Services, NYC Department for the Aging, and Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA). The comments and feedback from the hearing can be found in the appendix of this report. Among the trending issues addressed were the lack of accessibility in public and private buildings, lack of accessibility in the transit system, chronic issues with Access-a-Ride, and sidewalks that are not navigable.

Input from the hearing was used to make substantive policy recommendations to improve accessibility throughout the city. This report also outlines a checklist for public buildings in four core accessibility areas: physical, visual, auditory and social.

ACCESS-FRIENDLY NYC RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations fall into two categories: policy recommendations and standards recommendations. Policy recommendations request reforms to policies that ensure access to New York City for all residents. Standards recommendations aim to improve the quality of lives for people with disabilities as they navigate through New York and go above and beyond today's ADA standards. These standards should be viewed as goals to meet as construction and design of buildings are in the planning process and/or when upgrades and modifications are made.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Too many public buildings in New York City fail to meet ADA-accessible requirements. To ensure that New York City is open for business to all, we must meet these critical measures. As part of the Access-Friendly NYC initiative, Brooklyn Borough Hall requested and received a "walk-through" audit from the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) and disability and senior advocates. As a result, DCAS made tangible improvements and quick fixes to make Brooklyn Borough Hall more accessible. Changes included the implementation of more visible and no-slip strips on entry staircases, the replacement of signage throughout the exterior of the building that clearly indicates accessible entrances, and the removal of gates in the basement hallway to widen doorways for improved maneuverability by a person with a wheelchair or other mobility device. More must be done to identify and rectify similar issues in other New York City buildings. To do so:

- DCAS should conduct audits using the Access-Friendly NYC checklist to identify and implement tangible improvements to the remaining 49 buildings under their management.
- Hospitals and health institutions should make necessary accommodations, where needed, to accommodate people with disabilities and proper diagnostic equipment should be purchased.
- To help facilitate this process, the Mayor's Office and the New York City Council should allocate additional funds in the FY17 budget.

In addition, too many private buildings in New York City still fail to abide by the ADA standards and provide barriers to people living with disabilities. To counter these barriers:

- New York City should create and enhance incentive and grant programs for small businesses and landlords of small units to make modifications for improved accessibility.
- An interagency task force should be created to form new regulations that go above ADA standards.
- Funding should be increased for the New York City Commission on Human Rights, specifically for the Equal Access Program and Law Enforcement Unit, to assist people with disabilities in acquiring reasonable accommodations.

Access-Friendly NYC is not limited to the interior of buildings but also includes the surrounding physical environment and how individuals get in and around NYC. Brooklyn Borough Hall has dedicated capital dollars to CROSS Brooklyn (Connecting Residents on Safer Streets) to improve accessibility and safety for seniors around senior centers. However, more must be done. To improve these aspects of accessibility:

- MTA NYC Transit must fast-track projects to make the New York City's transit system truly ADA accessible.
- MTA's Access-a-Ride system must improve its pick-up and drop-off times, as well as improve sensitivity training for staff and drivers.
- NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) must ensure that curb cuts are available and properly maintained on city streets with proper incline, traction, and visible paint.
- NYC DOT should increase funding for the Safe Streets for Seniors program.
- The New York City Council should support efforts to make all taxis wheelchair accessible by 2020.

STANDARDS CHECKLIST RECOMMENDATIONS

PHYSICAL:

The public building you work in or visit is Access-Friendly NYC if it provides:

- Automatic door openers.
- Smooth, slip resistant flooring with high contrast at change in levels (including ramping).
- Comfortable places to sit; "comfortable" includes an arm rest and back rest (resting against a wall is also acceptable).
- Walk-off mat edges that lie flat on the floor and do not create a tripping hazard.
- Temperature control (heat and air conditioning) in any areas where seniors or people with disabilities will rest or exert.
- ADA compliant restroom adjacent to accessible entrance.
- A 36" wide clear path along the entire route.
- Passenger elevator access (not freight elevator) to upper floors.
- Minimal steps as possible to change levels or places to rest if the route is long.
- ADA compliant water fountains or water coolers.
- Access to public phones.

VISUAL:

The public building you work in or visit is Access-Friendly NYC if it provides:

- A clear visual connection to the person at the security or reception desk upon entry.
- A visual connection to the security or reception desk from the seating area and to outdoor drop off areas.
- Adequate, low-glare lighting (note: seniors and people with sight impairments require more lighting than younger eyes, err on the side of brightly lit).
- Printed maps of the building if the route to the destination takes longer than 5 minutes to traverse to help remind the visitor of the directions as well as assist in others helping them find their way.
- Clear signage indicating restroom locations from the security or reception desk.
- Clear, eye level (not above 60”) way-finding in the entire building in multiple languages.

AUDITORY:

The public building you work in or visit is Access-Friendly NYC if it provides:

- A low enough noise level that individuals can clearly hear the security guard or receptionist and use the phone if necessary.
- A public address system that is clearly audible and is delivered in multiple languages, clearly and slowly.
 - * Note that sounds with “F”, “S”, “Sh” and “K” are difficult to distinguish and should be spoken clearly and slowly.
- Acoustic absorption for excessive noise whether originating from indoors or outside.
- Acoustic separation from outer areas (for privacy).

SOCIAL:

The public building you work in or visit is Access-Friendly NYC if it provides:

- A security guard or receptionist to greet visitors, answer questions regarding the office or building, and provide directions.
- Training for staff to understand and effectively interact with seniors and people with disabilities; show respect, provide privacy when needed, be helpful when physical or cognitive impairments are making communication challenging, be sensitive; educate staff on the concept of ageism (any discrimination based on age) and on discrimination based on disability.

CONCLUSION

As we celebrate 25 years of the signing of the American with Disabilities Act in 2015 and recognize how it has greatly improved the lives of people with disabilities, we must strive to do more. This report should be used as guide to go above and beyond the required standards to improve the lives of all residents. Our goal is to create a city where every person, of every ability, can feel safe, comfortable, and welcome in all facets of society.

ACCESS-FRIENDLY NYC DO'S AND DONT'S

Access does not stop with the physical constructs of our city. Social acceptance and inclusion are just as important in making sure a person with a disability is engaged in the community. In an effort to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities, it is important that society is aware of the proper etiquette to be used when interacting with a person with a disability. There are acceptable and unacceptable terms and behaviors that people may or may not be familiar with.

A person should never be identified solely by their disability. Always use “people first” language.

Proper	Person with a disability, has a disability, has a condition
Avoid	Handicap, handicap person, cripple, victim, deformed, defective
Proper	Person who has a mental or developmental disability
Avoid	Retarded, moron, slow, imbecile, etc. These are highly offensive terms.
Proper	Person who is blind, person who is deaf
Avoid	Blind person, deaf person
Proper	Uses a wheelchair or crutches, a wheelchair user, walks with crutches
Avoid	Confined to wheelchair, wheelchair bound
Proper	People who do not have a disability, able to walk, able-bodied
Avoid	Normal, healthy – when used to describe opposite of disabled. This implies that a person with a disability is abnormal or unhealthy.

IN ADDITION, HERE ARE A FEW ACCESS-FRIENDLY NYC SOCIAL INTERACTION TIPS:

- If you want to help someone with a disability, always ask first. Do not assume they need help. They may or may not, so simply asking will provide clarity.
- You should not ask about someone’s disability unless it is relevant or if they bring it up first. If you must ask, be respectful, polite and sensitive about the matter. If you are unsure about how to talk about it, let the person know about your uncertainty. It may help with the conversation or situation.
- When talking to a person who is blind announce your presence with a greeting. In conversation, speak directly towards them.
- Do not pet guide dogs or other service animals, unless you are allowed.
- When talking to a person who is hearing impaired, make direct eye contact. Speak to the person directly and not through the interpreter, if there is one present.
- Remember, people with disabilities are people who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

SUMMARY OF ACCESS-FRIENDLY NYC PUBLIC HEARING TESTIMONY

Borough Hall hosted a public hearing on June 9th, 2015. 20 people submitted testimony either in person or via email. Below is a summary of the issues discussed:

- It can be very difficult to be outside in a wheelchair. More curb cuts are needed on sidewalks. It can be dangerous and hazardous when they are missing.
- Access-A-Ride is always late and takes too long to get to its destination. They do a poor job at dispatching vehicles and their drivers can be very rude. They don't care about where they drop people off, or if they are at an accessible entrance. Consumers get penalized when they are no shows, but Access-a-Ride drivers don't always look for them and that is why they are missed. A complete overhaul of their protocols is necessary because chronic complaints and systematic problems have become the norm.
- Access-a-Ride has newer vehicles that are quieter, but make it difficult for a blind person to hear. Drivers should call all passengers, especially blind ones, when they are at pick-up sites.
- Accessible entrances in schools are very often in the back of the building and are kept locked. The whole school needs to be accessible, not just the first floor, which is often the case. People that use wheelchairs or that has difficulty with stairs need to access the entire building.
- Businesses need to be wheelchair accessible, with proper entry ways and wider aisles.
- Street signals (walk/don't walk) should also be audible, especially in busy intersections. People with vision impairments cannot see them.
- Trains stations lack accessibility and can be dangerous for a person who uses a wheelchair.
- Braille signs on street corners would be extremely helpful.
- Dignity is important for the community, and sometimes people with disabilities get treated like dirt.

¹ NYC Department for the Aging: US Census 2010 Changes in Elderly Population
http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/downloads/pdf/demographic/elderly_population_070912.pdf

² NYC Department for the Aging: US Census 2010 Changes in Elderly Population
http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/downloads/pdf/demographic/elderly_population_070912.pdf

³ 2013 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/36047.html>

⁴ "Disability Characteristics, Kings County, NY," 2013 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates,
http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_13_1YR_S1810&prodType=table

⁵ Breaking Down Barriers, Breaking the Silence: Making Health Care Accessible for Women with Disabilities.
<http://www.icsny.org/sitemanagement/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/BreakingBarriers.pdf>

⁶ "ADA Anniversary Toolkit," National Network, <http://www.adaanniversary.org/>