

Athletic Facility Managers' Knowledge of Access and the Americans with Disabilities Act

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Physical barriers prevent people with disabilities from participating in social activities such as attending sporting events, and there is disconnect between facility managers' interpretation of accessibility versus the interpretation by a person with a disability (Burgdorf, 1991; Hirst, 1989; Jackson, 2005; Mazumdar & Geis, 2003; McClain, Medrano, Marcum, & Schukar, 2000; Saito, 2006). The purpose of this pilot study was to develop an instrument to survey national collegiate and professional athletic facility managers with the aim of understanding their knowledge of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines for accessibility. The ADA helps ensure people with disabilities have access to and can enjoy facilities of varying use (Mazumdar & Geis, 2003). An existing survey examining ADA Title III (accessibility to public accommodations) was slightly modified and used for this study (Redick, McClain, & Brown, 2000). Four athletic facility managers from universities in a Bowl Championship Series conference in the Southeast completed the survey to provide feedback on creating the best possible instrument for a national study and validate the study's purpose. One athletic facility manager from a large university in the Southeast and one athletic facility manager from a large university in the Southwest also participated in unstructured interviews.

Results from the study gave the researchers an initial understanding of what athletic facility managers may know about the ADA with regard to accessibility to public accommodations. Participants were well-established employees at their place of employment, predominantly male, and mostly of the Baby Boomer generation that is facing greater accessibility issues as it gets older. The participants mostly work with someone with a disability, and therefore accessibility issues have a greater chance of being top of mind. The participants acknowledged equal access should be provided to individuals, therefore revealing their understanding of need for access. It was unclear to them, however, as to whom should provide that access or inform individuals with disabilities of their rights to equal access.

Participants indicated that facility managers may be knowledgeable of specific ADA requirements for facilities such as concessions counter height, door width, and toilet seat height. However, facility managers may not have a firm grasp on more general issues patrons with disabilities face and that have often been the point of contention in the courts such as parking, entranceways, seating, and sightlines (*Christman v. Tymaco Inc.*, 2008; *Lara v. Cinemark USA, Inc.*, 2000; *Oregon Paralyzed Veterans of America v. Regal Cinemas Inc.*, 2003; *Paralyzed Veterans of America v. Ellerbe Becket Architects*, 1996; *United States v. Cinemark USA, Inc.*, 2003; *United States v. Hoyts Cinemas Corporation*, 2004). That these issues have been argued in the courts indicates they are perhaps the most important issues people with disabilities face in regards to, for example, attending a sporting event. Yet facility managers, from what this pilot study indicates, may lack knowledge in these very areas.

Physical barriers and structural constraints keep people with disabilities from attending sporting events, and facility managers must educate themselves on these precise issues. The gap of knowledge between corporate missions, employees, and perceptions of accessibility by people with disabilities exists because organizations and their employees have met measurable requirements of accessibility knowledge (e.g., toilet seat height) but not maintained a specific knowledge base in regards to the most important needs of a segment of the population (e.g., best accessible parking or seating location). Advancements have been made in desegregating and preventing isolation for minorities and women, and the same must be done for people with disabilities. No longer are crowds and athletes segregated by color of skin, and women, who were once prevented from sport participation, have leagues and hold administrative positions running athletic facilities. It is time for athletic facility managers to recognize a segment of the population, people with disabilities, is being segregated and isolated because of physical barriers that some facility staff may not acknowledge.

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