

IMPROVING DISABILITY ACCESS: A Municipal Perspective

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The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires equal access to all public spaces for people with disabilities. Today, this law resonates with 12.8% of Arizonans who have a disability. While there have been improvements in the 29 years since the ADA was adopted, individuals statewide still face barriers, such as difficulty entering local businesses or acquiring sign language interpreters. It is up to local officials to pave the way for disability access, but it is not clear how they are doing so. In 2018, the Arizona Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (ADDPC) collected data from 91 municipalities on how they respond to accessibility requests and issues from their residents. ADDPC reviewed all 91 municipal websites and spoke with 80 municipalities to determine which staff position was assigned to addressing ADA accommodations. There were 59 municipalities whose assigned staff provided additional feedback through emails and phone interviews. Results showed inconsistency on how citizen disability accommodation requests and issues were handled at the local level.

ADA Coordinators Uncommon

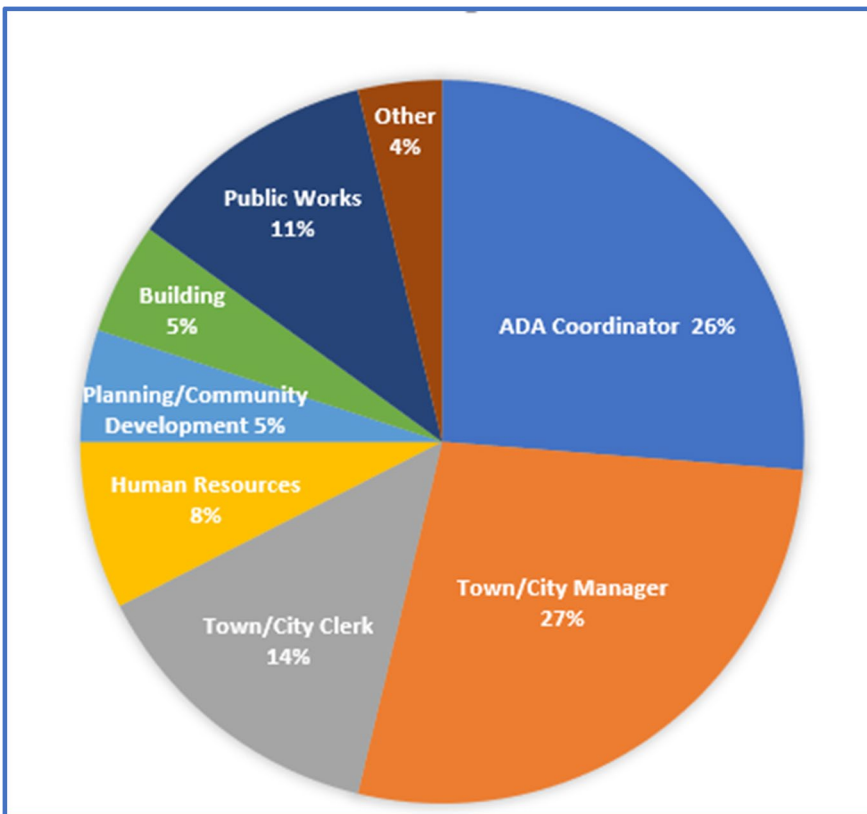


Figure: Arizona Municipal Personnel Positions Assigned to ADA Issues

If a public entity has 50 or more employees, at least one employee must be designated to assist in meeting state and local government requirements as listed under Title II of the ADA. Although this position isn't required for smaller entities, there are many benefits to having a knowledgeable ADA coordinator. For members of the public, having this assigned position makes it easy to identify someone to help them with questions and concerns about disability access or requesting accommodations. For example, the ADA coordinator is often the primary contact when someone wishes to request a sign language interpreter or documents in Braille. This position is also responsible for troubleshooting access issues.

She or he also helps coordinate municipalities' efforts to meet the ADA guidelines and can be instrumental in ensuring plans move forward.

Despite the benefits of having an ADA coordinator, most cities and towns in Arizona don't have them. Only 22 (28%) had formal ADA coordinator positions assigned – half were staffed in small towns and half were in large cities. In places where the position wasn't assigned, ADA coordinator responsibilities often fell to the city/town manager, followed by the city/town clerk, or the public works department.

Informal and Inconsistent Processes Widespread

In most cases, a process to request accommodations to address an accessibility concern was not readily available. Only 22 out of all 91 (24%) municipalities across the state had a formal request process that was located on their websites. Those without a formal process stated they direct the person to the department best equipped to address their request. If municipalities received an accessibility concern regarding a local business, they would refer the resident to the Arizona Attorney General's office. Over half of the municipalities interviewed (56%) stated that they had never received accessibility concerns or requests. When there is no ADA coordinator, these municipalities receive, on average, less than one contact a year pertaining to accessibility. Residents lacked information about who to call and the data was not formally tracked by the city or town to measure progress.

For cities and towns that post on their websites a formalized process for requesting assistance with ADA accommodations, the number of inquiries were reportedly higher. They reported an average of seven requests per year. Some of these cities and towns also took an active interest in ADA issues that impacted not only city buildings, but local businesses as well. They stated they wanted to help these businesses avoid costly and unnecessary lawsuits by supporting them with information and technical assistance. Most of these cities and towns (70%) had an ADA coordinator assigned.

More Information and Resources Needed

Currently, there is no statewide staff position in Arizona that could offer face-to-face technical assistance and support that smaller towns with limited staff and resource need. Many towns and cities requested more support and information to help address ADA questions. Out of 55 municipalities, 16 (29%) wanted additional training and 46 (84%) requested additional resources and information to make their cities and towns more accessible. Through the course of this study, municipalities were encouraged to call the Pacific ADA Center with any questions they had and also to contact Arizona State Parks & Trails for grants to make their recreation areas more accessible. While these contacts were helpful, Arizona would benefit from a statewide position to improve disability accessibility statewide. The position could provide information on how to access funding or other resources, as well as offer additional expertise on the ADA and statewide trainings that would better support municipal staff. After all, most of Arizona's local officials desire to be more inclusive of their residents and visitors with disabilities. They are just asking for some additional support to do so.