

Research In Focus: A Weekly Digest of New Research from the NIDILRR Community

Three Decades After the ADA, Many Local Governments May Still Not Have Strong Plans to Remove Pedestrian Access Barriers

A study funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR).

People with disabilities have long faced challenges in accessing the built environment, including public buildings, sidewalks, and public transportation. Barriers such as stairs without ramps, uneven sidewalks, high curbs without curb ramps, a lack of crosswalks, or inaccessible traffic signals may make it difficult for people with disabilities to get around, particularly if they do not drive or have limited access to public transportation.

Laws such as Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) require local governments to work toward redesigning public walkways so that they are fully accessible to people with disabilities. In the United States, local governments in charge of Public Rights-Of-Way (PROW) are required to develop an ADA transition plan specifying the barriers currently present in the area, a prioritized schedule of plans to remove the barriers, a description of methods that will be used to make the area accessible, and a designated official to lead the transition efforts. Although these transition plans were required to be enacted in the 1990s, many local governments may still not have solid ADA transition plans.

In a recent NIDILRR-funded study, researchers looked at the ADA transition plans of a sample of local governments across the United States. They wanted to find out how many of these local governments had ADA transition plans completed and readily available to the public. They also wanted to assess the quality of the plans as reflected by element such as monitoring progress or providing opportunities for public participation. Finally, for the plans that included an inventory of identified access barriers, the researchers looked at the prevalence of such barriers in the pedestrian environments studied.

Researchers at the [Great Lakes ADA Regional Center](#) identified a sample of 401 local public agencies (LPAs), or city, county, or township governments with at least 50 full-time employees. Most of the LPAs (375) had authority over the local PROW and were thus required to develop ADA transition plans. The researchers reviewed the website of each LPA to look for their ADA transition plan. If a plan was not published on their website, the researchers contacted LPA staff to request a copy of their transition plan. After receiving the transition plans, the researchers carefully reviewed each plan to identify which of the required elements were present. Finally, for those plans that included an inventory of identified access barriers, the researchers calculated the percentage of the sidewalks and curb ramps in the LPA that were identified as not fully accessible.

The researchers found that only 54 of the 401 LPAs (13%) had an ADA transition plan available to the public, while another 28 LPAs (7%) reported having plans in progress. For those LPAs who made their plans available to the public, 32 published the transition plan on their websites while the other 22 made it available upon request to the agency. The researchers noted that many of the ADA transition plans were made available in inaccessible formats, such as document scans that cannot be read by a screen reader. The Midwest region of the United States had the highest percentage of LPAs with transition plans (17%) while the Northeast region had the lowest percentage (3%).

When the researchers looked at the 54 transition plans, they found that only 40 of them addressed public rights-of-way. The other 14 plans only addressed accessibility of government buildings. Of the 40 plans that addressed public rights-of-way, only 7 of them met all of the required minimum criteria of including an inventory of current access barriers, providing opportunities for public participation, including a schedule for removing barriers, specifying methods of removing barriers, and specifying an official designated to lead plan implementation. While most of the plans did include an inventory of barriers and opportunities for public participation, less than half of the plans specified a schedule for removing barriers. More than half of the plans identified a responsible official; however, only 13 of those officials were in positions of authority. On further inspection of the plans, the researchers also found that 12 transition plans included a detailed process for monitoring and periodic reporting on progress toward barrier removal.

When the researchers reviewed the 23 plans that included a detailed inventory of access barriers, they found that many of the inventories did not include all relevant barriers in the pedestrian environment-- which were curb ramps, sidewalks, and traffic signals. Among these 23 plans that reported barriers, the researchers found that more than half of the pedestrian environment posed barriers for people with disabilities. For example, among the plans reporting on curb ramps, more than 65% of the curb ramps assessed had barriers. Similarly, among the plans reporting on traffic signals, 50% of the signals assessed presented barriers to people with disabilities.

The authors noted that, even 30 years after the passage of the ADA, many local governments in the United States still do not have clear plans to remove barriers from the pedestrian infrastructure. People with disabilities may remain limited in their ability to participate in their communities due to persistent access barriers. The authors noted that the Departments of Transportation in some states have stronger requirements for LPAs to develop ADA transition plans. This may explain why, in this study, transition plans were more common in some regions of the country than in others. According to the authors, local governments may benefit from technical assistance and supports to implement ADA transition plans with appropriate accountability. This may include publicizing best practices from LPAs that have successfully removed access barriers and can serve as models. Additionally, the authors noted that mainstream renovation

projects, such as Complete Streets programs, may be able to integrate ADA transition guidelines in order to improve access for people of all ages and abilities.

[To Learn More](#)

The ADA National Network has ten regional centers that provide technical assistance, training, and information services to people with disabilities, public entities, employers, business and facility owners to understand their rights and responsibilities under the ADA. Find the center nearest you online or call 800/949-4ADA to be connected to the center serving your community. Resources available from the ADA Regional Centers include:

- [ADA Title II Actional Guide for State and Local Governments](#) – this website leads public entities through the process to achieve ADA compliance including appointing an ADA coordinator, conducting self-evaluations, and creating transition and action plans.
- ADA-Audio.org webinar, [Planning for pedestrians with disabilities: Sharing successes and gaps from ADA Transition Plans around the US](#), August 18th, 2020. Archived for future viewing.
- For an example of a plan for public rights of way, visit Minnesota State Aid for Local Transportation (templates, examples, resources, presentations) <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/stateaid/ada.html>

The US Access Board publishes guidelines and standards for architectural and environmental access. New guidelines the Board is developing will cover access to public rights-of-way, including sidewalks, intersections, street crossings, and on-street parking. [Learn more about these guidelines](#) and how the Access Board can assist in compliance activities.

[To Learn More About this Study](#)

Eisenberg, Y., Heider, A., Gould, R., and Jones, R. (2020) [Are communities in the United States planning for pedestrians with disabilities? Findings from a systematic evaluation of local government barrier removal plans](#). Cities, 102. This article is available from the NARIC collection under Accession Number J83744.

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