



**Accommodating Patrons with Disabilities:
A Survey of Ticket and Accommodation Policies
for Performance Venues, Theaters and Sports Arenas**

Executive Summary

National Center on Accessibility
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Executive Summary

I. Introduction

Creating accessible ticket and accommodation policies inclusive of patrons with disabilities has long been a challenge for operators of performance venues, theaters and sports arenas. Since the passage of both Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, little guidance specific to these types of venues has been set forth by the federal enforcement agencies. Technical assistance and guidance materials that do exist are written in very general terms, leaving application to these specialty venues up to the interpretation of the facility administrators and their membership organizations.

In February 2002, the National Center on Accessibility initiated a survey of performance venues, theaters and sports arenas in partnership with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the ADA/504 Coordinators for the Arts and the Indiana Institute for Community and Disability. The purpose of the survey was to identify policies and procedures common to accommodating patrons with disabilities in performance venues and sports arenas, while also identifying exemplary practices and issues without clear guidance or solutions. This project addresses the issues inclusive of the needs of people with physical, sensory and cognitive impairments attending performance venues and sports arenas.

An on-line survey was developed in collaboration with staff of the Collaborative Work Lab at the Indiana Institute for Community and Disability at Indiana University. The survey was developed using GroupSystems™ software and posted on the Institute's "Polling Place" website (www.thepollingplace.org) from February through May 2002. Survey participants were also given the option of either completing the survey over the phone or via mail or fax with a paper survey. Survey participants were recruited through e-mail, listserv and newsletter announcements of the National Center on Accessibility and e-mail distributions through the ADA/504 Coordinators for the Arts and the Kennedy Center.

Survey participants were asked questions about the size and nature of their facility, job responsibility and specific policies for accommodating patrons with disabilities. This report summarizes survey responses and conclusions. In addition, recommendations for venue operators are made based upon the research findings and NCA staff expertise in the field of designing facilities, programs and services inclusive of people with disabilities.

II. Data Analysis

About the Respondents

Approximately 114 professionals from performance venues, theaters and sports arenas participated in the on-line survey.

Types of Venues Represented	N	%
Performing Arts Center	30	30%
Theater	30	30%
Sports Arena	20	17%
College/University Performing Arts or Cultural Center	15	15%
Cultural Arts Center	5	5%
Other (Opera company, government entity, arts council)	3	3%

The size of represented venues ranged from 95 seats to 65,000 seats.

What is the size of your venue?	Total Number of Respondents
50 seats or less	0
51 to 299 seats	11
300 to 999 seats	21
1,000 to 9,999 seats	48
10,000 to 19,999 seats	12
Over 20,000 seats	7

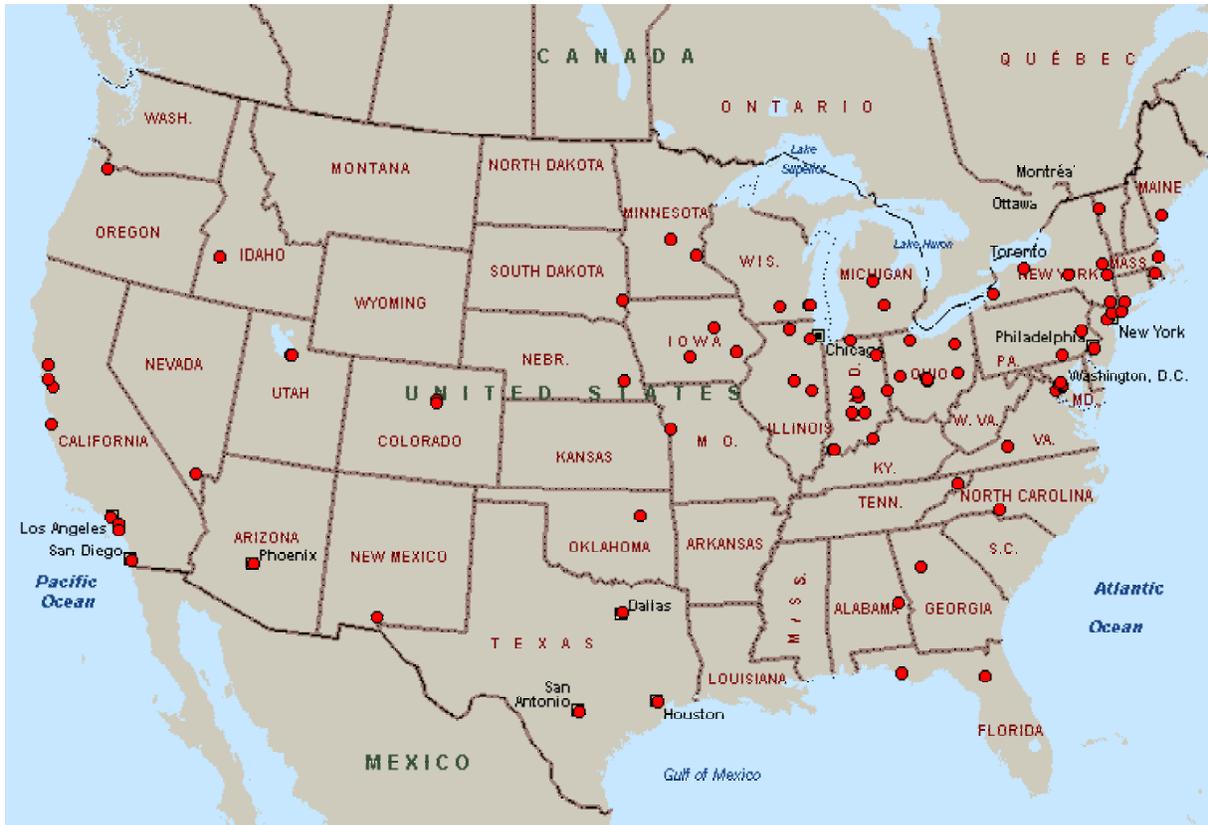
Seventy two percent (72%) of respondents represented non-profit entities owning or operating these types of facilities. Sixty percent (60%) of the respondents represented entities of state or local government with these types of facilities, while 40% of those responding represented privately owned facilities. No respondents reported representation of a facility of a federal agency.

Respondents varied in primary job responsibilities.

Role/Job Responsibility	N	%
Box Office Manager	41	42%
Director	19	19%
Facility Manager (and/or Audience Services Managers)	15	15%
Administrator (including Communication and Event Coordinators)	14	14%

Accessibility Coordinator (ADA/504 Coordinator)	7	7%
Other (Designers)	3	3%

Fifty six percent (56%) of the respondents were responsible for compliance with either the Americans with Disabilities Act or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act or both. Forty six percent (46%) reported that they had a person at their facility specifically assigned to ADA/504 compliance.



Survey Respondents by Zip Code

Written Policy Statement Welcoming Patrons with Disabilities

Forty five percent (45%) of the respondents reported having a written policy statement welcoming patrons with disabilities to their venue, while the majority 55% of respondents reported having no written welcome statement. Many reported using the welcome statements for patrons with disabilities in brochures, programs and other marketing publications. Respondents used the welcome statements not only to welcome guests to their facilities, but also give information on accessible features of the venues and available auxiliary aids or services. Some welcome statements also included staff contact information in the event a patron needed additional information or to request specific accommodations. Examples of welcome statements provided by respondents include:

“The [name of venue] is dedicated to enriching our State, community and region; reaching out to an ever –changing population through quality education programs, accessibility services and a diverse array of the finest performing arts presented at our state-of-the-art facilities that both compliment and enhance the patron experience.”

“Opening Worlds to Everyone. In an effort to provide arts for all, the [name of venue] offers numerous programs for people of all abilities. Whether you take a class, attend a play or concert, visit our galleries, or help as a volunteer, we want you to feel comfortable here. If you’re visiting for the first time, WELCOME! Come on in.”

“[Name of venue] is committed to making its facility and programs accessible to all patrons. Each request is viewed on a case-by-case basis and reasonable efforts will be made to make such accommodations whenever possible.”

“We welcome the opportunity to assist guests with disabilities to enjoy all [name of organization] facilities, programs and services. For assistance and information on accessibility, contact [name of service department] at (XXX) XXX-XXXX (voice or TTY).”

Instead of answering the question with a welcome statement, many respondents listed the accessibility features within their venues such as accessible parking, elevators, wheelchair seating and companion seating, interpreter services, etc.

Wheelchair Accessible Seating

All of the respondents reported wheelchair accessible seating is provided at their venue. However, based on the total number of seats and the total number of wheelchair accessible seats/spaces reported for each venue, 30% of the respondents did not have the required number of wheelchair accessible seats/spaces required under the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines. (ADAAG).

Seventy percent (70%) of the respondents reported they did indeed have a policy for selling wheelchair accessible seats. When asked to describe their policy, of those respondents with a policy, 70% voluntarily stated their policy allows for the accompaniment of one companion seat adjacent to the wheelchair accessible seating. Only 3% stated their policy allows for the accompaniment of multiple companion seats adjacent to the wheelchair accessible seating. Samples of policies provided:

“One wheelchair space and one companion seat per order.”

“Wheelchair accessible seats are only sold when the customer specifically requests them and may have one companion accompany them (free-standing chair).”

“Basically we try to screen people who purchase tickets at our box office as to what their needs are. If we can determine that they only need an aisle seat or just can’t climb stairs, then we will try to accommodate them in another location rather than using our accessible seating areas. Unfortunately we cannot control that with our ticket outlets, phone sales and internet sales.”

“Wheelchair seats are only sold upon request. They are not offered if not requested.

“If the patron is confined to a wheelchair and cannot transfer into a regular seat, we usually sell one seat to the wheelchair patron and a second seat to his guest. If the patron has to remain in their wheelchair, then we have to pull out two seats in the front row to accommodate the wheelchair.”

“Patrons must request accessible seating when purchasing tickets. They are allowed to purchase two accessible seats, one for the person requiring the accessible seating and one seat for someone to accompany them. Under certain circumstances we will sell more than two seats, but typically it is only two seats.”

“Our policy is quite detailed about saving wheelchair accessible areas to sell until last if not needed by a wheelchair bound patron. Our policy explains how to sell ‘removable’ seat locations as well as ‘transfer’ locations. We provide guaranteed seating for one companion to each wheelchair. Other companions may sit next to or near the rest of their party as space allows. We also have a ‘manager’s calendar’ where all wheelchair sales are recorded so that we may alert our house managers before each performance about the impending patron needs.”

Survey participants were asked “How long prior to an event do you hold open the wheelchair accessible seating?”

How long prior to the event do you hold open the wheelchair accessible seating?	N	%
Held open until show time	28	30%
Released immediately once all remaining seats are sold	26	27%
Released the morning of the event	14	15%
Always held – never released to general public	8	9%
Release some on sellout, but not all wheelchair seats	7	8%
Released one hour prior to show time	4	4%
Released 3 - 10 days in advance of the show	4	4%
Other (depends on promoter’s request)	3	3%

Seventy percent (70%) of respondents provide wheelchair accessible seats at various ticket price levels. Policy examples include:

“Wheelchair patrons are offered the lowest priced seats available, after which the next price scale is offered.”

“Accessible seats are reserved until 24 hours prior to the performance, companion seats are adjacent. If accessible seating is not open at patron’s chosen price, they are upgraded without additional charge.”

Service Animals

Seventy percent (70%) of the respondents reported having a policy permitting service animals. Generally, policies permitted the service animal to sit beneath the patron, not in the aisle. Some policies were specific to state service animals were permitted as long as they do not disturb the performance. Examples of policies included:

“Disabled patrons who are accompanied by a service animal may be seated in any available theater seat. The patron will be advised that their animal may be more comfortable in seats that allow more legroom (box seats, far left or far right), but no seat will be denied them.”

“Guide dogs and other service animals are welcome in all parts of the [name of venue]. Service animals-in-training are permitted, when possible, in exhibit areas and performance spaces upon request with one week prior notice.”

Personal Care Attendants

Respondents were asked about their policies permitting the admission of personal care attendants to accompany a patron with a disability. Thirteen percent (13%) of the respondents reported they either did not have a set policy or handled the issue on a case-by-case basis. Some open-ended responses stated very strong opinions such as “it is unfair to every other paying customer to comp [provide a complimentary ticket to] a [personal] care attendant.”

What best describes your policy about the entrance of personal care attendants?	N	%
Our policy requires personal care attendants to purchase a full-admission ticket	69	73%
Our policy permits personal care attendants to accompany the person they are caring for and attend the performance free of charge	12	13%
No set policy, issue has never come up	8	8%

We address the issue on a case by case basis	6	6%
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Auxiliary Aids and Services

Auxiliary aids and services such as sign language interpreters, audio description, and other alternate formats are sometimes required to facilitate program access for patrons with disabilities. Respondents were asked what types of auxiliary aids or services are provided at their venues.

Which of the following auxiliary aids or services do you provide? (check all that apply)	N	%
Assistive listening devices	80	70%
Sign language interpreters/oral interpreters	63	55%
Public TTY/text telephones	39	34%
Large print programs	36	32%
Other: Check the box to the right, then describe "other" in the text box below	28	25%
Audio description (for people with visual impairments)	27	24%
Braille programs	15	13%
Captioning or transcription devices	9	8%

Twenty five percent (25%) of those responding offered additional information about the nature of their auxiliary aids and services.

“Typically we do not provide interpreters for sporting events but do upon request for other events.”

“[We provide] advance script service.”

“If there is a request for any of the above [auxiliary aids or services], we will hold a special showing to meet those needs or will hire someone during a performance to meet those needs.”

“Sign language, captioning, audio description is done depending on the production. Each user signs a contract addendum agreeing to accommodate those with disabilities.”

Forty one percent (41%) of respondents provide auxiliary aids and services both upon the request of the patron and specifically for scheduled performances. Thirty two percent (32%) of the respondents only provide auxiliary aids or services upon request, while 13% schedule the auxiliary aids or services for specific performances.

Of the respondents that provided auxiliary aids or services, 92% requested advance notice while 8% reported that requests can be made up until show time.

If you provide auxiliary aids or services, such as sign language interpreters, upon request, how much advance notice do you require?	N	%
More than 2 weeks	14	23%
2 weeks	24	39%
72 hours	15	25%
24 hours	3	5%
Requests can be made up until show time	5	8%

In terms of accommodations for specific disability populations, 44% reported having specific policies for accommodating patrons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

“We offer one signed performance during the run of each show. Assistive listening devices are available for every performance.”

“We offer regularly scheduled ASL interpreted performances of Broadway musicals, family shows, and education-related events; other performances are upon request. We’re about to offer our second open captioned performance of a Broadway musical and hope to offer on a semi-regular schedule in the near future.”

“Guests must request the sign interpreter three weeks in advance, in order to provide sufficient time to retain a signer and give the signer adequate preparation time. In all cases, providing a signer is subject to availability of qualified signer and the ability to obtain from the event the necessary information to allow adequate preparation. The placement of the signer is determined on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration such things as the seating configuration and stage set up, to allow for effective communication. We offer one companion seat to accompany the guest who has requested the interpreter. Additional companion seats may be purchased based on availability.”

“We provide assistive listening devices and second row seating for the hard of hearing. We provide an interpreter and assigned seating section for the Sunday matinee of Broadway shows. Other events can be interpreted if a request is made by a patron.”

Fifty eight percent (58%) of the respondents indicated they had assigned seating sections for patrons who are deaf or hard of hearing at events that are captioned or have sign language interpreters. Designated sections included sections up front so that

patrons had views of both the stage and interpreter and sections to the side so interpreter placement would not obstruct the views of other patrons. Some respondents indicated that the designation of seating areas to accommodate views of the interpreter and performance were determined based on the number of patrons requesting interpreters or based on the type of event.

Forty two percent (42%) of the respondents indicated they had a designated TTY phone line to accept ticket orders.

Forty six percent (46%) of respondents reported having specific policies for accommodating patrons with visual impairments. Accommodations included the provision of audio described performances, large print or Braille programs and written or audio synopses. Thirty nine percent (39%) of those that reported having specific accommodations for patrons with visual impairments described either holding locations in front, seating in the same section as those that need the sign language interpreter or seating as close to the stage as possible.

Eleven percent (11%) reported they had specific policies for accommodating patrons with cognitive impairments.

Staff Training

Forty eight percent (48%) of respondents reported providing staff training or staff resource materials on interacting with patrons with disabilities. Respondents with staff training reported either utilizing an annual or semi-annual training program where ADA and disability awareness were included in the curriculum. Respondents also reported training specific to ticket agents and audience services staff. Only one respondent reported inclusion of sensitivity training and ADA policies in their new employee orientation training, while another respondent stated information on accommodations was included in their staff manual.

Outreach

Seventy four percent (74%) of respondents reported they had a governing or advisory board. However, only 32% of those respondents reported having representation of people with disabilities on their board.

Sixty one percent (61%) of respondents reported they did not actively market to people with disabilities.

“We market the signed performances. Response is almost always very poor.”

“All events are marketed to the general public. No individual group is specifically excluded.”

“To deaf and hard of hearing community with ads in local newsletters and house programs of area deaf theatre company, presence at annual trade show for deaf consumers, direct mailing of brochures.”

“We direct-mail to area agencies that serve people with disabilities and send [news] releases to media who serve people with disabilities.”

“All ads for our organization feature the wheelchair symbol. Target marketing is done for programs such as sign, caption and audio description.”

“We make sure that all of our marketing materials point out that we are accessible and available and may be contacted if there are any special needs.”

Respondents were asked “Is there anything else you would like us to know about how your facility accommodates visitors with disabilities?” Some responses follow:

“Whatever the disability is, it is our policy to make it work for the patron. We go to extraordinary efforts to get everyone in who wishes to attend.”

“We try to be as accommodating as possible while maintaining a fair environment to those who do not have special needs.”

“All of our staff members share a philosophy of inclusion and nurturance and respect for all persons, including those with disabilities.”

“Our overall policy is to make every effort to be as welcoming as possible to the entire community. We are a service organization for this community and this constituency is an important part of this community. If this means going the extra mile to accommodate someone (even at the last minute), our policy is to say ‘Thank you for letting us serve you.’”

“We are an older facility and lack the modern design that addresses these issues. We are willing to go to most any extreme to accommodate patrons with disabilities to make their experience at our facility a pleasant one.”

“The accommodations that are required by the ADA far exceed the requests we receive from patrons.”

III. Conclusions

- **Welcome statements.** Fifty five percent (55%) of the respondents did not have welcome statements, while many respondents listed the accessibility features within their venues such as accessible parking, elevators, wheelchair seating and companion seating, interpreter services, etc. These types of responses coupled with the 55% of the respondents that did not have welcome statements at their venues indicates the lack of awareness of what a welcome statement is and its value in marketing accommodations for patrons with disabilities.
- **Legal obligations.** Open-ended survey responses on policies for service animals and sign language interpreters raised the most concern on the lack of awareness of legal obligations under the ADA and Section 504. In addition, as is evident with survey responses some 12 years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, 30% of those reporting venues did not have the required number of wheelchair accessible seating.
- **Terminology.** Peppered throughout the survey open-ended responses were out-of-date, inappropriate, and sometimes derogatory references for people with disabilities, auxiliary aids and accessibility features such as: *the handicapped, confined to wheelchair, wheelchair bound, handicapped seating/parking, ADA seating, handicapped-accessible, seeing eye dogs, animal aids, sight dogs, helper dogs, signer, and visually impaired seats.*
- **Wheelchair accessible seating.** Two general issues are apparent from the survey in terms of wheelchair accessible seating policies: companion seating and length of time wheelchair accessible seating is held open prior to an event, especially for events that may sell out quickly. While 70% of the respondents reported their wheelchair accessible seating also accommodates for a companion seat, industry organizations such as the International Ticketing Association (INTIX) report the average group size ranges from 2.2 to 3.4 people. A patron using a wheelchair is also likely to be traveling with more companions than just one. Thus there is a need for the venue to have more than one companion seat per wheelchair accessible seating space. In terms of holding wheelchair accessible seating, some advise to sell those tickets as soon as the general tickets are sold out, others advise waiting two weeks, 24 hours or all the way up to show time before releasing the tickets. By the varied responses, it is clear that there is not enough federal guidance or consistency within the industry recommending the length of time wheelchair accessible seating should be held open prior to an event.
- **Ticket prices.** There was not enough information from the open-ended responses on offering wheelchair accessible seats at various ticket price levels and discount ticket policies to identify common policies amongst venues. More research needs to be conducted to develop guidance on offering tickets at various price levels.

- **Service animals.** A number of the responses provided discussing policies permitting service animals illustrate the lack of knowledge of the ADA and Section 504 requirements among venue operators. Some responses clearly demonstrate the venue policy does not comply with the ADA and Section 504: *“We allow service animals in the building. If the animal is large or cannot be comfortably seated next to the patron, they have the option of purchasing the seat next to them for the animal.”* *“There is box tier seating and for patrons with service animals, we request advance notice and we will seat them there.”* *“Due to possible allergic reactions, service animals are generally not permissible.”*
- **Sign language interpreters.** Some responses on the provisions of sign language interpreters or other auxiliary aids and services raise issue to the lack of clear guidance on the requirements of the ADA and Section 504 for these types of venues: *“It is our understanding that if a run is a certain length of time (is it 6 weeks?) ADA requires us to provide a signed performance. We do not provide individual interpreters.”* *“Interpreters are provided at the discretion of the event promoter.”* *“We have scripts to follow with—as we are small, the stage lighting usually are fine for the patron. They seem to enjoy this option. I can do large print programs on request.”*
- **Program access.** The research findings indicate that auxiliary aids and services are not provided at the same level of service or frequency as accommodations for physical access. While 100% of respondents reported providing wheelchair accessible seating, only 55% reported the provision of sign language interpreters, 32% provided large print programs and only 24% provided audio description. The ADA and Section 504 require the provision of both physical access and program access. The accessible seat is as important to the wheelchair users as the audio describer is to the person who is visually impaired. Both of these provisions enable people with disabilities the opportunity to benefit from the program.
- **Advance notice.** Responses ranged from requiring more than two weeks notice to 72 hours notice for the request of auxiliary aids or services such as sign language interpreters. Additional federal guidance could clarify what is a reasonable time frame for requesting auxiliary aids or services.
- **Disparity of treatment of accommodations for different disability populations.** While close to half the total number of respondents reported accommodations and specific policies for people with physical impairments, hearing impairments and visual impairments, only 11% reported they had specific policies for accommodating patrons with cognitive impairments. However, those respondents made no mention of accommodations such as interpretive services or educational programs before the event to prepare people with cognitive impairments for the performance or discuss/explain further afterward. Instead respondents pointed to policies as to how staff responds if someone has a

“severe emotional outburst” or causes disruptions during the performance. One respondent reported that if this happens, “in some instances, a cab is called and the teacher and student return to school.” Stereotypical responses allude to the prejudice that the only accommodations needed for people with cognitive impairments have to deal with behavior issues. This further illustrates the disparity of treatment and lack of awareness for serving patrons with developmental disabilities, Alzheimer’s, stroke, traumatic brain injury, etc.

- **Staff training.** Only 48% of the respondents reported including disability awareness in their existing training programs. This further illustrates the lack of emphasis or importance placed on legal obligations and methods to successfully accommodate patrons with disabilities at venues.
- **Outreach.** Only 32% of the respondents having a governing or advisory board actually had representation of people with disabilities on their board. In addition, in the United States where one in five people has some type of disability, only 39% of respondents reported they actively marketed to people with disabilities. In a 1998 report to the President, people with disabilities were reported to have \$175 billion in discretionary income. In short....that’s a lot of tickets! People with disabilities want to go to the theater, performances and sporting events with their families and friends the same as people without disabilities. However, outreach to people with disabilities is essential in any industry or area of parks, recreation and tourism in order to increase participation.
- **Good faith effort.** As is evident by the last open-ended question, many respondents had positive attitudes about serving people with disabilities at their venues. However, it is important to consider that this was a voluntary survey. In a random sample survey, the frequency of positive responses may not be at the same level.

IV. Recommendations

Develop Policies Inclusive of Patrons with Disabilities. All venues serving the public should develop policies that promote inclusion of patrons with disabilities so that they may enjoy all of the same opportunities and benefits as patrons without disabilities. Consider seeking input from consumers with disabilities and local disability advocacy organizations in the development of policies. From providing information via TTY, to selling tickets for wheelchair accessible seating, to providing a sign language interpreter or audio description, all staff should be trained on the venue policies and procedures for selling tickets and accommodating patrons with disabilities. Staff should be especially well trained on issues that often lack clarity such as entrance of service animals, ticket hold and release procedure, eligibility criteria, etc. Sometimes staff is put in a precarious position to have to make on-the-spot decisions. When policies, procedures and legal obligations are clear for staff, decisions are easy.

Designate an Accessibility Coordinator to Ensure Compliance with Federal Requirements. Venues should also designate one staff member to coordinate ADA and/or Section 504 compliance. A designated accessibility coordinator should be well-trained on the federal requirements while ensuring that all policies and procedures of the venue are in compliance. The designated accessibility coordinator should also have direct access to decision makers and planners. The Accessibility Coordinator should play an integral role in the development of policies and regularly contribute to staff training.

Identify architectural and programmatic barriers and develop a plan for barrier removal. As is evident with survey responses, some 12 years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, 30% of those reporting venues did not have the required number of wheelchair accessible seating. Moreover responses to open-ended questions regarding interpreters and service animals illustrated some venue operators were still not clear on the legal requirements under the ADA and/or Section 504. Venue operators should identify architectural and programmatic barriers and develop a plan for barrier removal. Citizens with disabilities should be included in the planning process.

Write a Welcome Statement, Say It Loud and Proud. All public entities and places of public accommodation should develop statements welcoming visitors, patrons and guests of all abilities. Welcome statements in venue publications, brochures, programs, advertisement and so forth can be especially valuable communication tools as the first point of contact with patrons with disabilities. The welcome statement not only says “Welcome, we are here to serve you,” it also states how to request an accommodation or a specific staff contact at the venue. The welcome statement can serve as the public notice requirement under Title II of the ADA, simply stated we understand your rights and our legal obligation. However, the public notice/welcome statement should be stated in a friendly, non-legal language. It should also include enough contact information in the event an individual needs to make a request for accommodation.

Use Appropriate Terminology When Referring to People with Disabilities.

Peppered throughout the survey open-ended responses were out-of-date, inappropriate, and sometimes derogatory references for people with disabilities, auxiliary aids and accessibility features such as: *the handicapped, confined to wheelchair, wheelchair bound, handicapped seating/parking, ADA seating, handicapped-accessible, seeing eye dogs, animal aids, sight dogs, helper dogs, signer, and visually impaired seats*. Terminology is a reflection of attitude. Use of appropriate terminology when referring to people with disabilities can project a positive attitude of customer service. When referring to people with disabilities, “People First” language should be used. Appropriate terminology should be reflected in all aspects of business activities including welcome statements, written publications, signage, and all other communications between the venue staff and customers.

Develop Guidelines for Inquires About Accommodations. The ADA prohibits unnecessary inquiries into the existence of a disability (*Technical Assistance Manual Title III: 4.1300*). Inasmuch an entity is restricted from asking such questions as “what’s your disability?” However, in order to effectively and efficiently provide accommodations for patrons with disabilities, it may be necessary at the time of ticket purchase or request of accommodation that staff ask questions specific to the accommodation itself. While two patrons may be categorized as people with physical disabilities, one may use a wheelchair and one may be ambulatory using either a cane, crutches or walker. Thus, their requirements for accessible seating are very different. The ambulatory patron may only require a seat on shorter route or with few steps whereas the wheelchair user will need space to accommodate his or her wheelchair. Some wheelchair users may even prefer transferring to a comfortable seat and temporarily storing their wheelchair during the performance or sporting event. In addition to asking “Do you require accessible seating,” box office staff might also ask “Do you require wheelchair accessible seating or would a seat on a shorter route or with limited number of stairs also meet your needs?” Instead of asking patrons if they are deaf or hard of hearing, it would be more appropriate to ask “do you require a sign language interpreter, assistive listening system, captioning or other type of accommodation?” Venue managers should work with professionals and consumers with disabilities versed in the requirements of the ADA and Section 504 to develop a set of questions for box office and audience services staff to use in order to determine the appropriate accommodation for each patron.

Develop a Ticket Hold and Release Procedure. A reoccurring theme amongst venues with reserved seating is how long to hold open the wheelchair accessible seating especially for events that may sell out quickly. Some advise to sell those tickets as soon as the general tickets are sold out, others advise waiting two weeks, 24 hours or all the way up to show time before releasing the tickets. Venues should develop a procedure tailored to meet both the needs of the venue and the event-going public with disabilities. In any event, venues should consider holding “emergency tickets” perhaps all the way up until show time for those unexpected occasions when a patron arrives for a performance or event with a ticket for an inaccessible seat and requires an accessible seating location after all. This can happen for a variety of reasons including events

during a radio contest where the ticket giveaway goes to an individual with a disability, occasions when a season ticket holder passes their tickets to a friend or family member who may use a wheelchair, to the unfortunate instance of miscommunication with the box office at the time of purchase. Developing a procedure and making it known to both staff and the public can avoid confusion when the doors open at the time of the event.

Develop Specific Policies or Staff Guidance on the Entrance of Service Animals.

All venue staff should be aware of the legal obligations to permit entrance of service animals in places of public accommodations. In addition to stating the legal obligation to staff, venue administrators should develop specific policies or staff guidance on how to accommodate patrons with service animals within the facility (i.e. can the service animal sit in the aisle or should the patron be encouraged to situate the service animal under their seat, how should staff address a patron when the service animal becomes disruptive, etc.). Numerous resource materials are available on this subject including the U.S. Department of Justice’s “Commonly Asked Questions About Service Animals” (www.ada.gov). Consider using this handout or others in staff resource materials or training manuals.

Develop a Policy Regarding the Admission of Personal Care Attendants. Consider using the local center for independent living in the creation of a policy about the admission of personal care attendants. Some federal enforcement agencies have provided informal guidance on this issue stating that if the person benefits from the program, they too should pay the cost of admission.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities in Contractual Agreements. Contracts with promoters and production companies should be specific on roles and responsibilities for meeting ADA and Section 504 compliance. Who will be responsible for the provision of sign language interpreters, audio description, wheelchair accessible seating, programs in alternate format, etc?

Identify Effective Auxiliary Aids and Services and Develop Procedures for Distribution. It is critical to develop procedures and policies for the provision of auxiliary aids and services. How should the auxiliary aids and services be requested? Who is responsible for setting up the services? Who is responsible for maintenance of equipment and methods of distribution, etc? It should also be noted that a public accommodation may not impose a surcharge on a particular individual with a disability to cover the costs of the provision of an auxiliary aid.

Ensure Auxiliary Aids and Services Are Available and Working. Auxiliary aids and services such as assistive listening devices should be tested regularly to ensure they are working and properly charged, staff know where they are located and how to operate special devices. This includes testing wheelchair lifts. Also consider periodically surveying patrons with disabilities about the use of the auxiliary aids and services. Was the captioning or audio description effective? Was information about

advance request, notifications and signage clear and concise? Patrons may be able to provide suggestions for improving services for future performances or events.

Training, training, training. From the front-line box office and audience services staff all the way to the executive director and board members, training is an essential component for effectively serving patrons with disabilities. General training on disability awareness and appropriate terminology is beneficial to staff at all levels. Additionally, training should be tailored to job responsibilities. This is where programs can be more specific on procedures such as taking requests for accommodations at the box office, greeting and seating patrons with disabilities when the doors open, maintaining equipment like assistive listening devices, etc.

Tap the Market. People with disabilities want to go to the theater, performances and sporting events with their families and friends the same as people without disabilities. Use all current marketing materials as a primary method to market to potential patrons with disabilities. This can be done simply by adding a welcoming statement in marketing materials. Also, consider marketing specifically to different disability populations within the community as a secondary approach. When adding new services such as audio description, be sure to market the services to user groups such as area centers for independent living. Word of the new service is sure to spread like wild fire and generate new business for the venue.

For venues to successfully include people with disabilities in all facets of their facilities, programs and services, they must tap into the market. As in all aspects of marketing, venue operators should know who their patrons are, and in this case, who their patrons with disabilities are. How are they using their facility? What features (architectural and programmatic) are accessible to them? What features remain inaccessible? While 70% of respondents reported their wheelchair accessible seating policy allows for one companion seat adjacent to the wheelchair seating, other market data shows that theater-goers travel in groups averaging in size from 2.2 to 3.5 people. If this is the case for a venue such as an outdoor amphitheater with a summer concert series, venue operators should consider increasing the number of companion seats either adjacent to the wheelchair seating or in the adjacent rows. Implementing policies that embrace the principles of universal design is beneficial to patrons of all abilities, the venue and surrounding community.

V. Summary

Participation in community events, cultural arts and recreation activities is essential for people with and without disabilities to carry out healthy, balanced lifestyles. Action needs to be taken on a national level. Many of the recommendations set forth in this report are targeted towards the operation of individual venues. Information gathered in this survey is only a small sampling of existing policies and procedures common to accommodating patrons with disabilities in performance venues and sports arenas. Within this report, specific recommendations on policy issues could not always be provided due to the lack of federal guidance and consistency within industry practices. The next steps of involvement on the national level should include: 1) follow up to this preliminary study. Further research should be conducted to gather more specific information on issues such as ticket buying policies, hold/release policies, ticket price policies and others that were only briefly addressed in this initial survey. 2) In addition, a national survey of people with disabilities should be conducted to determine how well venues are responding to their disability-related needs and what barriers still exist. 3) Finally, in order to address the accessibility issues that most challenge venue operators, a national dialogue needs to be established among the industry, enforcement agencies and people with disabilities so that we can continue to move toward full inclusion of people with disabilities in the performing arts and sports entertainment communities.