

## Accessibility at American Library Conferences

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper outlines the background and history of accessibility concerns and barriers facing attendees with disabilities at American Library Association Conferences throughout the United States, and discusses the recent work of the ALA Conference Accessibility Task Force charged with drafting recommendations for improvement of conference and virtual meeting accessibility. The author summarizes broad categories of accessibility covering the task force report of 81 specific recommendations, and several important appendices relating to overall accessibility guidelines, terminology, survey methodology, tip sheets for vendors and hotels, and master training document for staff, administration, presenters, and various conference volunteers.*

### **Keywords:**

Accessibility, Disability, Assistive Technology, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), American Library Association (ALA)

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This presentation focuses on accessibility at major conferences held by the American Library Association as well as many of its divisions, i.e. Public Library Association, Association of College and Research Libraries, American Association of School Libraries, and Library and Information Technology Association. ALA holds an annual summer conference that attracts roughly 20,000 library workers and librarians and vendors, and a Midwinter meeting with roughly 10,000 attendees. There are numerous other large, medium and smaller U.S. library conferences and symposia, for example Special Libraries Association, American Association of Law Libraries, Joint Congress of Librarians of Color, The Internet Librarian Conference, National Conference of African American Librarians, Music Library Association, REFORMA National Conference, Code4Lib Conference, National Diversity in Libraries Conference, and many more that occur in the United States. However, We can only report on accessibility and universal design as it relates to ALA events, and therefore cannot generalize about accessibility at all U.S. library conferences and forums.

First, why is accessibility, and more widely the universal design/design-for-all/inclusive design movement so important? A preliminary survey of ALA members geared toward challenges and barriers faced at conferences and meetings resulted in 17-20 percent of respondents identifying as a person with a disability. If this figure held for IFLA that could mean 800 of the 4,000 attendees here in Wroclaw require some form of accommodation in order to experience a successful WLIC. In addition, the normal aging process is a large contributor to what has been labeled “functional limitation,” and WHO figures as high as 40-50 percent of the world’s population have been cited in some studies, with hearing loss and arthritis as large contributors. WE prefer the philosophy espoused by the Boston based Institute for Human Centered Design, an NGO founded in 1978: “Variation in human ability is ordinary, not special, and affects most of us for some part of our lives, and as recently as 2014 the U.S. Census Bureau reported 56.7 million Americans with disabilities or roughly 19% of the population.” To quote the Institute’s Executive Director Valerie Fletcher: “We are fortunate to live longer and survive more illness and injury than ever before in human history. Diversity of ability and age are the new normal of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time, expectations of independence, personal choice and quality of life transform old thinking that caretaking is an answer. Inclusive design offers a tool for making diversity of ability not only workable but also an asset to a continuous process of creating a world that recognizes diversity as an asset to potent innovation.” Therefore, accessibility can be seen as a way to improve the experiences of all conference attendees and not just those traditionally demarcated as deaf, blind or visually impaired, dyslexic, mobility challenged, etc.

Over the past three to four decades, accessibility concerns—strategies for serving patrons and members with disabilities—and policies and procedures governing the burgeoning field of disability librarianship found their American Library Association home in decentralized interest groups and/or round tables, and in the 1960s and 70s in the ALA Health and Rehabilitative Library Services Division (HRLSD). In the late 1970s, the Association’s commitment to disability librarianship coalesced when the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA) was formed with its Libraries Serving Special Needs section. An Accessibility Assembly was created as an ALA committee in 2002, among other tasks maintaining checklists of suggested service, technology, and equipment accommodations for conference events, and sharing them with ALA’s Information Technology and Governance Offices. Conference improvements such as accessible public computers, scooter rentals, and availability of reliable American Sign Language interpreters were established while ALA simultaneously built accessibility requirements into its contracts with software vendors.

In recent years, however, following multiple incidents in which ALA event attendees with disabilities faced inconvenience, substandard facilities, embarrassment, and (in some cases) exclusion at Association events, members began discussing how remedies could be sought and implemented: the consensus was that a more systemic approach was required. In January 2016, at the Midwinter Conference in Boston, ALA governing Council took action by passing a resolution calling for the establishment of a Conference Accessibility Task Force charged with researching accessibility at ALA conferences and meetings, and producing a final set of recommendations for facilitating improvements at future meetings. Along with Christopher Corrigan, the Library of Congress representative to IFLA’s Libraries Serving Persons with Special Needs Section Standing Committee, I undertook the mantle of co-chairing the task force. The task force members researched, interviewed Association staff and membership, and ultimately unearthed vital information leading to a 78 page report including supplemental appendices in addition to recommendations for improving conference accessibility. The task force final report is available through the ALA web site at: [http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council\\_documents/2017\\_mw\\_council\\_documents/cd\\_37\\_CATFReport%20%28MW17%29.pdf](http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2017_mw_council_documents/cd_37_CATFReport%20%28MW17%29.pdf)

The Conference Accessibility task Force membership spanned a wide representation of library types and association interests, and as the work proceeded subcommittees were formed to identify and collaborate on four subsequent tracks: Survey/Data Gathering, current Process Review, defining Accessibility Guidelines, and accessibility Training for conference presenters and programmers. These subcommittees researched, deliberated over, and prepared materials culminating in 81

recommendations, a glossary of terms, tip sheets for exhibitors and hotels, preliminary survey assessment, and a set of accessibility guidelines for ALA.

While there is not sufficient time to cover all recommendations, and it is important to note that implementation is the next phase in the process, it is worthwhile to describe the approach in general terms. Recommendations for rendering physical and virtual library conferences and meetings more accessible were divided into three overarching categories that are subdivided by theme:

1. Before Conferences: virtual and in-person meeting planning for conference
2. During Conferences: coordinating accommodations and addressing concerns on-site
3. After Conferences: ongoing assessment and evaluation

This sequential approach breaks down into more specific detail in the following subcategories:

**Before:**

1. Site Visits
2. Accommodations and Housing (i.e. requiring hotels have a disability training plan for their staffs)
3. Conference Center Spaces (i.e. designated quiet room, centrally located meetings, adjustable lighting, etc.)
4. Communication with Site Personnel (i.e. sending tip sheets to exhibitors and hotels, and \* making sure conference scheduler is available as accessible document)
5. Web Accessibility
6. Program Planning Process and Preparation (i.e. accessible preconferences, links to presenter guidelines, notify of availability of alternate format docs)
7. Exhibits (i.e. rest areas)
8. Social Events and Off-Site Locations (i.e. accommodations such as interpreters)

**During:**

1. On-Site Accessibility Services Management (designated accessibility contact person)
2. Transportation (i.e. accessible buses/paratransit, scooter rentals)
3. Awareness and Publicity of Reporting Issues (advertise accessibility contact for reporting)
4. Virtual Participation (i.e. robust Wi-Fi in all meeting rooms)

**After:**

1. Assessment and Improvements to Future Conferences (i.e. tracking database)
2. Surveying Methods (incorporate accessibility questions into post conference and post-program surveys)
3. Site and Systems Review (create post conference accessibility report)
4. Virtual Meetings Between Conferences (i.e. cost for CARTing=live captioning, accessible web conferencing software)
5. Follow-Up Communication (i.e. provide accessibility training for session planners and presenters)

The task force report has been well-received and ALA administration is assessing the list of recommendations and how to prioritize and implement them going forward. What are the main takeaways from the process? We were particularly struck by two systemic issues blocking progress toward a more accessible conference; namely the lack of timely reporting by attendees experiencing barriers, and an absence of issue-tracking by the ALA Conference Services unit.

In the first instance, we learned that the majority of complaints or grievances about inaccessible spaces, technology, or equipment were made after the conference in question, and therefore could not be ameliorated right away (this is also difficult because each conference site has unique challenges). In the second instance, because ALA has not been quantitatively tracking accessibility complaints or grievances, most of the information on inaccessibility at conferences has been qualitative or anecdotal at best. It was the proffering of several anecdotes, in fact, that aided the decision to propose an accessibility task force, and though these episodes entailed legitimate grievances, they were not documented at the exact time of infraction or occurrence. Therefore, documentation of future grievances, along with proposed or actual remedies and degree of successful remediation, must be put into place to gauge progress going forward.

With regard to tardiness of or reluctance in reporting of barriers at conferences, general consensus is for all members and conference attendees to instill a climate of acceptance and remind each other, those with and without disabilities, to report accessibility issues. Conference coordinators need to know when problems arise or they will not be able to resolve them. There is a need for increased, targeted outreach to conference attendees with disabilities to publicize the existence of on-site point-persons (Conference Accessibility Contact), as well as stressing the importance of reporting issues immediately. Many of our Task Force's recommendations addressed this strategy as well as other methods for increasing awareness of accessibility to content presenters, event planners, hotel and conference center staff, vendors, and general attendees. Similarly, Conference administrators need to track accessibility grievances and resolutions to problems in an organized manner, to track data over the short and long term and especially to identify wider trends so that universally designed solutions may be employed. Survey data needs to be consistently gathered from association membership and other conference attendees such as vendors, exhibitors, and other stakeholders.

The growing acceptance and integration of accessibility and universal design within ALA and societies at large is encouraging. At its meeting at the 2016 Annual Conference, the Library Information and Technology Association (LITA) Board voted to adopt an accessibility pledge for its national LITA Forums held each autumn. LITA followed the core principles of the WorldCon Science Fiction convention pledge:

1. The convention has an accessibility statement posted on the website and in the written programs offering specifics about the convention's disability access;
2. The convention has at least one trained accessibility staff member with easy to find contact information; and
3. The convention is willing and able to make accommodations for its members as it tries to be as accessible as possible.

The adoption by the American Library Association in January 2017 of "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion" as a fourth strategic direction strengthens the resolve and commitment of the Association and signifies the importance of accessibility. Members and people of all abilities must be welcomed, celebrated, and given the same opportunities to participate successfully in ALA and by extension library conferences and meetings worldwide. As our members—and society at large—age and as people with disabilities come to play a role in society reflecting their proportion of the population, ALA and ideally IFLA will be well-positioned to meet their needs. As we concluded our report for ALA, it cannot be stated enough: It is time for we librarians and library workers to take our place at the leading edge of this civil rights struggle.

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## References

- [Access Guidelines for MLA Convention Session Organizers and Presenters](#): Modern Language Association
- [ADA Title III: Rules on Public Accommodation](#): ADA.gov
- [CSUN Assistive Technology Conference](#): California State University – Northridge
- [Final Report of the ALA Task Force on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#): ALA EDI, June 2016
- [HCI Annual Conference 2017](#): Human-Computer Interaction International Conference
- [IAAP Access Conference](#): International Association of Accessibility Professionals
- [Making Presentations Accessible](#): American Historical Association Annual Meeting
- [SIG-Access Accessible Conference Guide](#): Association of Computing Machinery, Special Interest Group on Accessible Computing
- [Understanding Disability Models – Social Model of Disability](#): Identity-First Autistic
- [Visions Conference 2016](#): Foundation Fighting Blindness, blindness.org
- [What is Accessibility?](#): CNIB – Seeing Beyond Vision Loss
- [Worldcon Sci-Fi/Fantasy Conference Accessibility Pledge](#): Mary Robinette Kowal

### 1.1.1 Resources on Universal Design for Events, Meetings, and Conferences:

- [A Planning Guide for Accessible Conferences](#): Council of Ontario Universities – Accessible Campus
- [Accessible Information Exchange—Meeting on a Level Playing Field](#): U.S. Department of Justice, Disability Rights Section, ADA.gov
- [Accessible Meetings, Events, and Conferences Guide](#): ADAhospitality.org
- [CCCC Conference Accessibility Guide 2017](#) and [2016](#) (tailored by location): National Council of Teachers of English, Conference on College Composition and Communication, NCTE.org/CCCC
- [Designing Accessible Events for People with Disabilities and Deaf Individuals](#): Vera Institute of Justice
- [Disability Access at WisCon](#): WisCon Science Fiction Convention
- [People First—How to Plan Events Everyone Can Attend](#): New York State Department of Health
- [Planning Guide for Making Temporary Events Accessible](#): ADA National Network
- [Universal Design of Conference Exhibits and Presentations](#): University of Washington DO-IT Equal Access

### 1.1.2 Accessible Events Checklists:

- [Accessible Public Event Checklist](#): California Mayor’s Office on Disability
- [Creating Accessible and Inclusive Meetings or Events](#) (infographic): University of Minnesota
- [Facilitating Accessible Meetings](#): Council of Ontario Universities – Accessible Campus

- [Planning Accessible Meetings and Events Toolkit](#): American Bar Association Commission on Disability Rights

### 1.1.3 Conference Diversity and Inclusion—General Resources:

- [6 Steps to Planning a Diverse Conference](#): NetImpact.org
- [Coordinating Inclusive Events on Campus](#): Washington State University – Vancouver
- [Creating an Inclusive and Supportive Work Environment](#): Community Foundations of Canada HR Council
- [Creating More Inclusive Events](#): Skidmore College
- [Guidance to Create More Diverse Participation for Panel Discussions](#): World Resources Institute (WRI.org)
- [Top 10 Best Practices for Inclusive Multilingual Events](#): JustCommunities.org