



# SEGD ADA White Paper Update 2006

## Guidelines, Best Practices, and Innovation for Signs for the Blind and Visually Impaired

*Sponsored by ASI-Modulex with Dixie Graphics and Nova Polymers*

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## PART 1 | Executive Summary

It has been over ten years since the development of the SEGD ADA White Paper, the first of few documents that gave an insight into how the then-new ADA guidelines apply to environmental graphic design. Since that time, the ADA has evolved into a complex set of guidelines vetted by many disability experts and special interest groups. The sign industry has also evolved around the ADA, with a variety of companies and products developed to meet the guidelines.

### Goals of the White Paper Update 2006

- **Ensure real world compliance**  
The ADA is not a static document; it also exists as part of 50 individual state accessibility and building codes, which have spawned thousands of local interpretations. This update will focus on understanding what this means on a practical level.
- **Look at the guidelines as a living document**  
The ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) have changed and will change again in the coming years. We will focus on where those changes may occur and how to be proactive when designing within the guidelines.
- **The best of design**  
Many designers and fabricators use the ADA to justify meeting only minimal standards. This update strives to go beyond minimal compliance to focus on the best of environmental graphic design and good design in general.

### Changes From the Original White Paper

During the last few years, SEGD has developed extensive educational programming regarding the ADA. These programs focus on research, design, and innovation over the last decade. This update will incorporate SEGD educational development in three areas.

- **History**  
Much has been learned about how to navigate the ADA. Those insights will be included in this update, along with state and local code recommendations.
- **Best Practices**  
Many well-designed sign projects have met the ADA guidelines in a creative manner. These can serve as models for future development.
- **Innovation**  
Innovation in signage for the blind and visually impaired has included new materials, design processes, and technological products.

### Three Groups and Their Wayfinding Needs

There are three primary groups of disabled individuals. Each group utilizes distinct ways of navigating the environment and, therefore, has special needs distinct from the other two groups.

- **The Blind**  
Obviously, the blind cannot “see” signs, interior changes, color, or type. What the blind can “see” through hearing and touch are people and spaces. They have a strong understanding of three-dimensional space through the position of their bodies within it. When walking, they expect information to be where their hands fall and where their feet and cane follow. The blind can also hear directions by following the flow of people and asking directions. The functionally blind make up 2-3% of the population, but only a very small percentage of this group are able to read Braille or raised letters.
- **The Visually Impaired**  
The visually impaired can distinguish type and color, but with great difficulty. They have a difficult time finding signs, unless they are nearby. Individuals with visual disabilities are easily confused, especially by small type and low color contrast. People with visual disabilities make up at least 25% of the population. Among people older than 65, this figure can be as high as 75%. Ironically, although this population is so large, they are often the most neglected, both in design practice and in code enforcement.



- **The Physically Impaired**

The physically impaired are able to navigate their environment based on what services have been provided to meet their needs. Curb-cuts in sidewalks, elevators, wide doors, adapted bathrooms, and ramps are all physical additions that service the needs of this group. While this update will not focus on the wayfinding requirements of this group, it is certainly built around the architectural design of the environment and whether improvements for the physically disabled are central to design.

### **How to Use This White Paper**

The White Paper will be available in print format in the SEGD Newsletter and in PDF format on the SEGD website. We intend that designers use this White Paper as an overview and interpretation of the written guidelines available on the ADAAG web site ([www.access-board.gov](http://www.access-board.gov)). Make sure not to accept everything in this document at literal fact. State and local codes change constantly. Make sure always to confirm the particular code and its enforcement in the locality of the project. We also intend that designers use this White Paper as a beginning point to develop creative solutions for people with disabilities as well as develop thoughtful design solutions for everyone.

All the documents and the links in this update will be available to SEGD members at [www.segd.org](http://www.segd.org), ASI-Modulex clients at [www.asimodules.com](http://www.asimodules.com), and on CD through SEGD.

### **Credits**

This White Paper is made available through the assistance of sponsors ASI-Modulex, Dixie Graphics, and Nova Polymers.

The ADA Code Committee is made up of Roger Whitehouse, RIBA (Whitehouse & Company), Ken Ethridge, AIA, RIBA (iZone), Matt Williams (Dixie Graphics), and Kris Key, CSI (ASI-Modulex).

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## **PART 2 | What is the ADA?**

The Americans with Disabilities Act is civil rights legislation first signed into law in July 1990. The guidelines supporting the law were issued in July 1991 by the Architectural Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (ATBCB). The intent of the law is to broadly protect the civil rights of disabled individuals and prohibit discrimination in employment and access to goods and services. The ADA legislation and its supporting guidelines (ADAAG) have been published in the Department of Justice Federal Register since 1991 and were last updated in 1998. Title III (Public Accommodation) requires adoption by the Department of Justice (DOJ), as the enforcing authority. The updated ADAAG guidelines were released by the Transport Board in July 2004 and are expected to be adopted by the DOJ, as "the law of the land" in July 2006.

**Link:** 1994 ADAAG - [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org)

### **Title III**

Title III covers all public accommodations, including any facility open to public access, It includes, but is not limited to, restaurants, schools, museums, public offices, transportation facilities, zoos, retail establishments, and social service establishments. For more specific information, refer to ADAAG Section 36.104.

### **The ANSI Committee and the ADA**

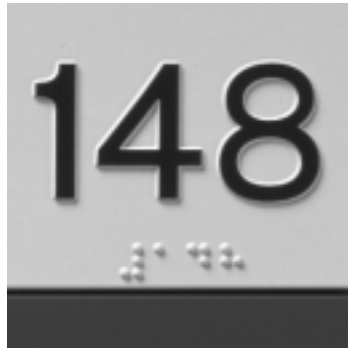
The American National Standards Institutes A117 Code Committee provides the basis of the accessibility sections of the International Building Code (IBC). That ANSI standard is also the basis for the new federal ADAAG. The Committee is made up of a number of design associations, disability advocacy organizations, and other experts. SEGD is represented on this committee. This committee produced ANSI editions in 1998 and 2003 that, in terms of accessible signage, were virtually the same as the "new" ADAAG. The "new" 2006 ADAAG is virtually contained in the accessibility section of the 2003 IBC, including signage.

**Link:** Comparison between the 1994 ADAAG, 2006 ADAAG and the 2003 IBC – [www.access-board.gov](http://www.access-board.gov).

## The States and the ADA

All projects are subject to the Federal ADAAG. However, building code officials currently only enforce the letter of their state or local building code. Several states have adopted the provisions of ANSI 117.1A of 2003, bringing them substantially in line with the updated ADAAG. Therefore, when speaking of signage and accessibility, "things that are permitted in some states are not permitted in others." Once the DOJ approves the 2006 ADAAG, all states codes must conform but this may take time. It is advisable to follow the current ADAAG and also reference local and state codes, consulting a code official on any discrepancies. Most states adhere closely to ADAAG standards but some states, most notably California, have their own regulations and enforcement mechanisms. These state codes may not be changing anytime soon.

Link: State ADA Codes – [www.segd.org](http://www.segd.org)



◀California's Title 24 requires that a special Braille ("California Braille") be used with wider spacing between Braille dots.

### The ADA In Your Local Town or City

Enforcement of state codes is by local code officials, with interpretation in their hands. Because interpretation of codes and guidelines can be tricky, it is important to consult local officials when any conflict in interpretation occurs. Designers should be proactive in interpreting ADAAG standards, though many local officials are not very familiar with these codes and need guidance.



◀Many designers report that code enforcement officials interpreting their state codes require that all symbols be raised along with text, even though this requirement does not actually exist in the ADAAG.

### Liability

What can happen if a project does not adhere to the state or local interpretation of the ADAAG? First and most likely, the project will not be approved by the code enforcement official without changes made to meet the guidelines. Second, and more serious although less likely, can be a civil lawsuit to force removal or change of aspects of a project. There are a number of possible situations where a client refuses to adhere to the ADAAG. If this is the case, there are three actions that have been recommended by SEGD members:

- Verbally inform the client about failure to comply with the ADAAG.
- Write a letter outlining this failure to comply.
- Avoid project areas where compliance is necessary.

Link: Liability Letter – [www.segd.org](http://www.segd.org)

### Recommendations

- Act to get your Certificate of Occupancy and any other official permissions.
- Comply with state and local building codes first.
- Let the architectural accessibility code compliance strategy for the entire project (ramps, stairs, etc.) be your guide.
- Remember that "things that are permitted in some states are not permitted in others."
- Keep thorough records in case of a conflict with the ADAAG.

