

**State Bar of Arizona Committee on Persons With Disabilities
Accessibility Committee Site Visit
Apache County Superior Court
St. Johns Justice Court
St. Johns, Arizona**

SURVEY BACKGROUND

Facility: Apache County Superior Court and St. Johns Justice Court, 70 West 3rd South, St. Johns, Arizona 85936

Date: Tuesday, April 27, 2004

Team: Carrie Sherman (team leader), State Bar of Arizona; Emily Johnston, Public Member, State Bar of Arizona Board of Governors; Jim Reed, Jaburg & Wilk P.C.

Court Personnel: Betty Smith, Court Administrator; Presiding Judge: Hon. Donna Grimsley; Judge Pro Tempore: Hon. John Taylor.



Overview

This historic courthouse, built in 1917, is an impressive two-story structure. The justice court, located on the first floor, and the superior court, located on the second floor, serve a community of 69,000. Approximately two jury trials are held in the courthouse each month.

Parking

The public parking lot is located at the front of the building. Several accessible spaces are clearly marked.



Entrances and Exits

There is a long walkway connecting the parking area with the main entrance to the building. This could be a challenging distance for an individual using a non-motorized wheelchair, someone on crutches, the elderly or pregnant women.

There is a ramp extending from the main walkway to the front door of the courthouse. It is interesting to note that the ramp was an addition installed around 1980, 10 years prior to the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act. Such forethought is recognized and celebrated.

The tension on the door to the main entrance was heavy and, therefore, fast closing. It would be unlikely that an individual using a manual wheelchair would be able to enter the building unaided. There is no one who can assist visitors entering the courthouse as there is no security guard stationed inside the front entrance and the staff's workstations and offices are located down the hallway, out of sight of the front door.

There is an exit, via a ramp, at the back of the building which leads to the employee parking lot. A security card is required to access this entrance from the lot. Accessible parking is available and spaces are wide.



If the elevator were to be turned off in the event of an emergency, the only exit from the second floor is by way of the stairs.

Suggestion: An adjustment to the tension of the front door is the easiest and least costly modification that can be made to enhance access. In addition, a doorbell and signage could be installed at the front entrance which, when rung, could alert courthouse personnel that an individual required assistance.

Security

There is no permanent security guard at this courthouse (located in a small community in a rural setting). As noted above, the employee entrance to the building is secured.

Information Center

There is an ample and varied supply of pamphlets available to the public regarding social services and agencies, court processes, etc. These materials are displayed close to the filing counter.

Justice Court – First Floor

Court Administration

Filing Counters

The filing counter in the hallway (inside the main entrance) was built to accommodate/serve one individual at a time. It appeared to be approximately 40 inches high.



Restrooms

The restrooms were accessible.



Suggestion: Reposition the soap dispensers at the sides of the sinks for easier access. One has to reach across the counter to access them; difficult for someone using a wheelchair. Wrapping the pipes beneath the sink would protect persons using a wheelchair from possible burns.

Hallways

The hallways were accessible even with benches and seating placed along the wall for visitors to the courthouse. Latch-type door handles, which are easy to open, are utilized throughout the facility.



Water Fountains

The drinking fountain, located by the restrooms, is functional but could be placed at an even lower level.

Elevators



The elevator was installed in 1993. Due to its specific placement and construction issues relating to this historic building, a ramp to the elevator was constructed in order for it to be totally accessible. The elevator is large enough to hold several individuals including a person using a wheelchair. For individuals with vision limitations, there are audible “dings” that indicate on which floor one has arrived. Braille signage is posted.

Library

There is a small library of legal publications located in one of the jury/conference rooms. Although the room is accessible, maneuverability for someone using a wheelchair may be difficult due to the size of the room and the furnishings and the number of individuals present at any given time. (See Juror Facilities)

Courtroom

The Justice Court courtroom is simply outstanding. One bench had been removed from the gallery to accommodate persons utilizing mobility assistive devices. There is a ramp to the jury box and to the witness stand. This is a perfect example of the effective construction and use of ramps in the courtroom – a model that could easily and relatively inexpensively be replicated in courtrooms across the country.



One chair at the end of the jury box by the ramp is removable to accommodate a person using a wheelchair or scooter. If a defendant or juror does not sign, the court staff arranges for a real-time court reporter to travel in from Flagstaff (149 miles away).



Juror Facilities

As noted previously, a multi-use room is situated just down the hallway from the courtroom.

Superior Court – Second Floor

Court Administration

Filing Counters

Comparable to the one on the first floor, the counter was built to accommodate/serve one individual at a time. It appeared to be approximately 40 inches high.



Restrooms

The restrooms are accessible although smaller than those on the first floor.



Hallways

The hallways were unrestricted and provided ample space for movement. Latch-type door handles, which are easy to open, are utilized throughout the facility.

Water Fountains

The drinking fountain, located by the restrooms, is functional but could be placed at an even lower level.

Library

There is no public law library on this floor; however, the presiding judge maintains law books in his/her chambers.

Courtroom

The tension on the door to the courtroom is appropriate. Upon entering, one is transported back in time to 1917. Many of the fixtures and furnishings are original pieces. Due to its historical registry designation, there is reluctance to remodel or make modifications to the courtroom. That does present some challenges for individuals with disabilities.

There is a step up to both the jury box and the witness stand. This is a very large room with a high ceiling and wooden floors and, therefore, the acoustics are less than desirable. The court does not have assistive listening devices.





Suggestion: It would be possible to lower the witness stand to floor level. The Justice Court on the first floor has a ramp to the jury box and to the witness stand, and this could be replicated here. Due to space limitations, a piece of the jury box railing could be cut and hinges installed so that a section of the railing swung out to accommodate a juror using a wheelchair in order to navigate the proposed ramp. Interpreters would be made available if requested.

Judge's Chambers

The Hon. Donna Grimsley welcomed the survey team into her chambers which are accessible, as is the route to her chambers through her staff's work stations. Judge Grimsley has

been at the court since 1982. She graciously shared her time with the team and provided first-hand accounts regarding the planning and implementation of the modifications that have been made over the years to improve accessibility at the courthouse.

Signage

Suggestion: Signage, including Braille signage, throughout the facility would be helpful in directing individuals to accessible restrooms and emergency exits.

General Observations

It was quite apparent that the court personnel are proud of this historic courthouse and the modifications that have been made over the years to improve its accessibility. They have every right to be. Such improvements have not diminished the rich history clearly visible throughout the structure. If and when the decision is made to modify the second floor courtroom and monies are available, one can be assured that the changes will be as inclusive as those already made in other parts of the courthouse while preserving its historical designation.

