

**State Bar of Arizona Task Force on Persons With Disabilities
Accessibility Committee Site Visit
Graham County Superior Court
City of Safford Justice Court
Safford, Arizona**

SURVEY BACKGROUND

Facility: Graham County Superior, Safford, Arizona, and the City of Safford Justice Court

Date: May 25, 2004

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Court Personnel: Darlee Maylen, Court Clerk's Office/Administration/Services



Overview

Originally built in 1916, this facility was in the process of renovation, with a basement courtroom in current use, with limited accessibility provisions there. The court is the subject of a federal grant to add onto the building. The courthouse has one jury trial per year, on average, but with many senior citizens in the jury pools. Within the main courthouse building, the team did not observe significant access-related issues for persons with disabilities. Court administrators and personnel are aware of issues pertaining to access for persons with disabilities. The survey team had one member with total deafness and one member with a mobility disability. Specific observations follow.

Parking

Parking is sufficient. Sufficient accessible parking spaces exist in front of the court, with proper signage and cut curbs to the entry sidewalk.

Entrances and Exits

The main accessible entrance was challenging, but functional. The accessible entrance is behind and underneath the main court entryway, and opens into the basement of the building. The accessible entrance is not an automatic door, and also functions as the delivery entrance, which is not uncommon for many of the courthouses visited, or even a criticism; if the entryway can be commercially useful for purposes other than accessibility considerations, then it confirms the wisdom of universal design. While no signage indicated the availability of an accessible entrance, the railings leading down the ramps to an opening underneath the main stairway entry to the court, were clearly visible. On the day we visited, some maintenance and construction materials were in the entry area, but did not appear to present an obstruction to the entryway.





The accessible entrance could be a lighter tension, but was slow-closing, which is helpful for persons with mobility challenges. Light tension doors can be used at entrances, without the door being subject to wind or air pressure pulling it open.

Inside the building, the accessible entrance is clearly identified with a blue wheelchair sign at the entry from an interior hallway.

Security

There were no evacuation maps or procedures posted, but a sign indicated an emergency exit which is accessible. Administrative staff would assist members of the public, including persons with disabilities, during any evacuations. The fire alarm handles seemed somewhat high for a smaller individual or someone using a wheelchair or walker. There is no Braille associated with the fire alarms or with any emergency exits. Persons with disabilities would be very dependent on courthouse staff in the event of emergency, who appear helpful and available.



Pamphlet and Informational Services

While the informational bulletin shelf at the entrance to the Courthouse was outstanding, there is no pamphlet currently available describing services for persons with disabilities. However, this was consistent with most of the courthouses surveyed in Arizona.



Court Administration

The Safford Justice Court Clerk's window presented access challenges to any person of low height or using a wheelchair.



Restrooms

The restrooms were accessible on all floors. All restrooms seemed accessible with no significant issues or concerns noted. The sidewall placement of soap dispensers was optional, mirroring the survey's recommendation for sidewall placement to permit persons in wheelchairs or with low height to reach the dispensers without excess soap materials falling on the floor and creating a slippery surface. The lower level bathroom did not have a heat-protection pipe wrap.



The third floor has a unisex bathroom, but with Braille description. Braille identified all of the bathrooms in the building. That bathroom was fully accessible, including wheelchair entry and exit space, heat wraps on the sink pipes, and a soap dispenser to the sidewall, making it easier to reach.



Hallways

All hallways were wide.

Each floor that the team observed had a water fountain at wheelchair height, and all were functional.

The public telephone was placed at an accessible height, with TTY capacity.



Elevators

The public elevator is large, with a railing inside. There was sufficient room in the elevator for entry and mobility, and the elevators had a non-slip, rubber tile surface that was extremely safe and functional. The buttons were placed at appropriate heights. The elevator floor indicators outside the elevator were in Braille.



Law Library

The law library is located on the bottom floor and was quite functional for a person using a wheelchair or generally having mobility challenges. The library is open to both staff and members of the public. The library was moved to the bottom floor because of the heavy weight of the books, reflecting the degree to which the courthouse staff was working with an older structure. It has a fully accessible water fountain at wheelchair height and electronic research facilities. A large banner was prominently displayed in the library for a Court Appointed Special Advocate, with a telephone number, with a scope of assistance that presumably would benefit persons with disabilities.



Courtrooms

Superior Court Courtroom

Courtrooms are located on the main and basement floors. The upper level courtroom is partly accessible to members of the judiciary and public, and partly not. There are two steps, without a ramp, leading to the witness stand. There is one step, without a ramp, leading to the first observation tier of the jury box and a second step leading to the second observation tier. There is no gate separating the public gallery from the courtroom well, with two easily-passable entrances. The jury box only has chairs on casters, which may be easily moved to accommodate a juror using a walker or other mobility assistance. There is sufficient room in the gallery for numerous users of wheelchairs to easily move and observe proceedings immediately behind the railings.



For any juror or witness requiring hearing assistance, the court has a real-time court reporter and recording devices to produce a transcript.

The doors in and out of the courtroom, with two entrances for the public, all had crash bars. The main entryway doors were medium tension, but had a post between the two, for both security and noise control purposes. While representing a common courtroom design throughout Arizona, the barrier would present somewhat of an obstruction both for persons using wheelchairs and attorneys moving exhibits in and out of the courtroom. The door tension is initially medium, and increases towards 90 degrees extension. A common experience in reviewing courthouses in Arizona is that any door with a maximum extension of 90 degrees commonly is difficult for even a normal user to pull open past approximately 75 degrees.

The courtroom “well” was large. Castered chairs at the counsel table are easily removed to accommodate a wheelchair. The area behind the counsel table is large and open, permitting wheelchair use if necessary.

The basement courtroom has a ramp that leads to it. Its entrance is fully accessible.

Justice Court Courtroom

The Justice Court Courtroom was essentially accessible, once again demonstrating that the more basic the courtroom elements, the more accessible the facility generally is. There was no jury box, with four rows of ordinary chairs supplying that instead, any of which could be removed or moved to accommodate a person with a mobility disability or using a wheelchair. The same is true for the table and chairs constituting counsel’s table. The witness stand had one step.



Juror Facilities

The jury deliberation room on the upper level Courtroom floor was somewhat small, but did appear accessible in all material respects. The jury deliberation room doors have ornate, but accessible “wing” or latch handles.



Chambers

The passageway from the courtroom “well” into the judge’s chambers was entirely at floor level, passing between the entrances to the jury box and the witness stand. There was ample room for any member of staff or visiting lawyer or member of the public to maneuver in a wheelchair or move with a walking device.

General Observations

All public signs in the building that the team observed were imprinted with Braille code.

Currently, no benches are wheelchair accessible.

Similarly, and consistent with any budget demands, some consideration could be given to publishing a pamphlet for members of the public or those in the legal profession with disabilities.

Finally, Court Facility staff might benefit from more discussion concerning potential requests for access to a fully electronic courtroom by a party to a criminal or civil suit, where the party's disability may make use of a fully electronic courtroom more beneficial to the presentation of his or her case, but the assigned judge does not ordinarily use one.

CONCLUSION

The Graham County Courthouse is a generally accessible building, both in its main areas of public use and in its courtrooms. Personnel responsible for administering the facility seemed aware of the needs of persons with disabilities. The historic courtroom presents a challenge for accessible use, with the simplest suggestion being a removable ramp to the witness and jury boxes.

