



Town of Ashland, Massachusetts

PART B – Evaluation of Non-discriminatory Policies & Practices in Programs, Services & Activities

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Introduction

In an effort to provide and maintain compliance with the American with Disabilities Act, the Town of Ashland contracted with the Institute for Human Centered Design (IHCD) to undertake a comprehensive assessment of its policies, practices and procedures as well as its facilities to determine compliance with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The review and recommendations provided in this assessment also go beyond strict compliance assessment to recommend enhancements to current conditions that would result in a more usable, inclusive and welcoming environment for members of the Ashland community.

Information about corrective action will include recommendations based on Title II of the ADA as well as recommended '*best practices*' for each aspect that requires action.

The assessment included non-discrimination in policies, practices and procedures for all of the Town's programs, services and activities including those related to effective communication and policies, practices and procedures relative to employment.

This report summarizes IHCD's findings of ADA Title II compliance. The information pertinent to this assessment was obtained by an on-line ADA questionnaire developed by the Institute for Human Centered Design and submitted by twelve (12) Departments from the Town of Ashland. The survey responses, and other information made available to IHCD by Town employees, constitute the basis for this compliance assessment report. It is clear that the Town understands its obligations under Title II of the ADA, but additional steps are necessary to ensure that people with disabilities enjoy the same opportunities to participate in its programs, services and activities as Ashland residents without disabilities.

Corrective action is needed in policies and procedures to create written policies that would ensure the Town of Ashland's compliance with applicable laws. In addition, the Town may wish to consider making a commitment to a more accessible website. Choosing to make the website completely accessible would make it available to site visitors who use assistive technology such as screen readers as well as to website visitors with a mix of other functional limitations. The website is also a valuable asset in communicating the Town's commitment to equal opportunity for people with disabilities through a clear statement and contact information for the ADA Coordinator. It can also provide a helpful opportunity to share information about accessible routes to reaching the Town's programs and activities including meetings as well as requesting effective communication or modification of policies.

Analysis

Title II of the ADA prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. Specifically, Title II requires that:

No qualified individual with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any public entity (28 CFR Part 35.130 (a)).

This report is divided into sections where these requirements apply. Each section includes the applicable citation from Title II of the ADA; IHCD's summary of findings after reviewing answers from the ADA questionnaire and information from the website. It also includes IHCD's recommendations for the Town of Ashland to implement.

I - Designation of Responsible Employee

Title II of the ADA makes clear that a public entity must designate a responsible employee and adopt grievance processes.

A public entity that employs 50 or more persons shall designate at least one employee to coordinate its efforts to comply with and carry out its responsibilities under this part, including any investigation of any complaint communicated to it alleging its noncompliance with this part or alleging any actions that would be prohibited by this part. The public entity shall make available to all interested individuals the name, office address, and telephone number of the employee or employees designated pursuant to this paragraph. (28 CFR Part 35.107 (a)).

Title II provides little specific guidance for implementing this requirement but the primary role of the designated employee, also called the ADA Coordinator, is making sure that the Town is in compliance with the requirements.

Finding

The Town of Ashland had met its obligation to designate a responsible employee by appointing Mike Crisafulli, the Town Building Commissioner, as the Town's ADA Coordinator. Mr. Crisafulli no longer works for the Town. Ashland will appoint a new ADA Coordinator as soon as possible, and will announce the appointment once it is complete.

Recommendations

The Town should consider clarifying for its entire community and Town employees the name and scope of responsibilities of the ADA Coordinator. Highlighting this information will improve compliance and make for more efficient operations with respect to the needs of members of the public with disabilities.

Furthermore, clarification on the ADA Coordinator will:

- Make it easier for the Town to be proactive in meeting the needs of members of the public with disabilities;
- Help the Town to develop and articulate a clear vision and mission with regard to members of the public with disabilities;
- Reduce confusion and improve the Town’s day-to-day operations with respect to members of the public with disabilities;
- Permit employees to respond more quickly to needs as they arise because they have a primary contact for addressing these needs;
- Build in-house expertise and capacity;
- Prevent confusion and help ensure that candidates for employment, employees and the public have a clear understanding of their responsibilities and rights under the ADA.

II – Grievance Procedures

Title II of the ADA requires a public entity to adopt an adequate grievance process.

A public entity that employs 50 or more persons shall adopt and publish grievance procedures providing for prompt and equitable resolution of complaints alleging any action that would be prohibited by this part. (28 CFR Part 35.107 (b))

Findings

The Town of Ashland Employee Handbook includes a Grievance Procedure for employees of the Town, and the Complaint Resolution Process section 6.1 references disability discrimination as a reason that a complaint can be filed under the Grievance Procedure. However, the Employee Handbook and the Grievance Procedure it contains do not appear to be available on the Town’s website.

A Grievance Procedure that may be used by members of the public is available online on page 77 at the following link: <https://www.ashlandmass.com/DocumentCenter/View/481/Operational-Policies-and-Procedures-PDF>. However, IHCD has been told that it is not the most up-to-date version of the Grievance Procedure, and it does not appear that most members of the public know how or where to access the most recent version.

It is also not clear if staff in all departments are aware of the process for meeting the requirement for grievance procedures. A few departments responded ‘Don’t know of any’, ‘I am not aware of any procedure implemented’, ‘None that we know of’, ‘We haven’t made up procedures’, and ‘We do not have any grievance procedure’.

Recommendations

The Town should take steps to clarify its grievance process regarding employees and members of the public.

IHCD recommends:

- The most recent version of the Town’s Grievance Procedure for members of the public should be posted online, and a link on the Town’s website homepage, or some other clear and easy-to-locate method should be provided so website users know how to find it.
- Ensure the Town employee and public Grievance Procedures are distributed to all department heads. Post copies in noticeable locations in each of the Town’s public buildings.
- Ensure Town employees and the public are aware of the Grievance Procedure process and that Town employees can provide information to members of the public about the process when appropriate.
- Provide the Grievance Procedure form on the Town’s website and state the commitment to provide copies in alternate formats upon request.
- Add the email of the designated employee to whom the complaint should be addressed.
- Once the ADA Coordinator has been appointed, include his/her complete contact information.

III – Notice

Title II of the ADA requires that public entities notify participants of its non-discrimination policies:

A public entity shall make available to applicants, participants, beneficiaries, and other interested persons information regarding the provisions of this part and its applicability to the services, programs, or activities of the public entity, and make such information available to them in such manner as the head of the entity finds necessary to apprise such persons of the protections against discrimination assured them by the Act and this part. (28 CFR Part 35.106)

Findings

Survey responses submitted by staff at the Police Department, Human Resources Department, the Town Clerk and the Building Commissioner state that each has an ADA Notice posted at their respective location. Other Town departments responded ‘No’, ‘None that I am aware of for public’, ‘There are no ADA notices posted in the department’, ‘Not sure’ and ‘I don’t know’.

Recommendations

The Town should take steps to clarify the posting of the ADA Notice of Non-Discrimination policy to comply with the ADA Title II that states that public entities shall take initial steps to notify program/service participants, beneficiaries and employees of its obligations. More specifically:

- Publish the ADA Notice in all the materials distributed by the Town; post the ADA Notice on the Town’s website home page and post copies in public locations in the Town’s buildings at locations where the notice has yet to be posted.
- Include the ADA Notice on social media such as Twitter and Facebook.
- Distribute the ADA Notice to all department heads. Copies should also be provided to any person upon request.
- Include the ADA Coordinator’s name, address, telephone number and email address on materials and publications that contain general information disseminated to staff and members of the public.

(See the Sample ADA Notice (short version and long version) towards the end of this document.)

IV - Reasonable Modification of Policies, Practices and Procedures

Title II of the ADA requires state and local governments to modify its policies when necessary to avoid discrimination:

A public entity shall make reasonable modifications in policies, practices, or procedures when the modifications are necessary to avoid discrimination on the basis of disability, unless the public entity can demonstrate that making the modifications would fundamentally alter the nature of the service, program, or activity. (28 CFR Part 32.130 (b)(7))

Findings

From the responses submitted by staff it appears that the Town of Ashland has not developed written policies and/or procedures to ensure compliance with the ADA, and the absence of such a policy appears to be an issue for some departments. Department responses included, ‘We didn't have enough notice to find an interpreter before the event’, ‘Sometimes the disability is temporary and we cannot make a reasonable accommodation’ and that there was difficulty in responding to a request because of, ‘Language, limited interpreters onsite’.

Recommendations

The Town should develop written policies and procedures to ensure compliance with the ADA.

IHCD recommends:

- Ensure that Town employees can provide information to members of the public about the process of requesting reasonable modification of policies when appropriate.
- Ensure that the form for requesting reasonable modifications of policies is on the Town’s website, and state the commitment to provide copies in accessible formats upon request.
- Include the ADA Coordinator’s name, address, telephone number and email address on materials and publications that contain general information disseminated to staff and members of the public.

V – Eligibility Criteria

A Title II entity may not impose eligibility criteria that may prevent a person with a disability from participating in its programs, services or activities:

A public entity shall not impose or apply eligibility criteria that screen out or tend to screen out an individual with a disability or any class of individuals with disabilities from fully and equally enjoying any service, program, or activity, unless such criteria can be shown to be necessary for the provision of the service, program, or activity being offered. (28 CFR Part 35.130 (8)).

This requires that ADA Title II entities may not impose eligibility criteria that either screen out or tend to screen out persons with disabilities, unless it can show that such requirements are necessary for the provision of the service, program or activity.

Findings

Some departments responded to the online questionnaire indicating that they have eligibility criteria such as age (Senior Center), income and ownership (Assessing), and that, ‘A valid library card is required to borrow for use at home’, (Library). These requirements might be necessary for the provision of the service, program or activity, and are permitted under the ADA.

VI - Employment and Reasonable Accommodation

Title II of the ADA prohibits discrimination on employment on the basis of disability:

No qualified individual with a disability shall, on the basis of disability, be subjected to discrimination in employment under any service, program, or activity conducted by a public entity. (28 CFR Part 35.140 (a)).

This requires that ADA Title II entities make reasonable accommodation to qualified employees with disabilities. Reasonable accommodation may include modifying work schedules, job restructuring, and making facilities used by employees readily accessible to employees with a disability.

Note that the requirements of Title I of the ADA, as established by the regulations of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 29 CFR Part 1630, apply to employment in any service, program, or activity conducted by a public entity if that public entity is also subject to the jurisdiction of ADA Title I. (28 CFR Part 35.140 (b)(1)).

Findings

From the responses received from the ADA questionnaire, there is no evidence that the Town has failed to provide reasonable accommodations to its employees, and section 1.1 of the Employee Handbook states the Town’s commitment to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified

employees with a disability. However, three departments responded that they do not have policies regarding reasonable accommodations in place.

Recommendations

- IHCD recommends that the Town distribute its policy regarding reasonable accommodations for employees to all department heads, and make the policy available online by posting the Town of Ashland Employee Handbook on the Town’s website.
- IHCD recommends that the Town of Ashland employees familiarize themselves with the excellent free national resources from the Job Accommodation Network (<https://askjan.org>).

VII – Effective Communication through Auxiliary Aids and Services

Title II entities are required to provide appropriate auxiliary aids and services to ensure “effective communication” with people with disabilities. This obligation applies to all members of the public with disabilities including job applicants, program participants and people who are seeking information about the Town’s programs, services or activities. Specifically, Title II requires that:

A public entity shall take appropriate steps to ensure that communications with applicants, participants, members of the public, and companions with disabilities are as effective as communications with others. (28 CFR Part 35.160 (a)).

Auxiliary aids and services are devices or services that enable effective communication for people who have vision, hearing, or speech disabilities (communication disabilities), use different ways to communicate. The type of auxiliary aid or service necessary to ensure effective communication will vary in accordance with the length and complexity of the communication involved (e.g., a query at a service counter in the Town Offices, a meeting, a job description).

The obligation to communicate effectively with people who have disabilities applies to the presentation and exchange of information in all forms including sound, print, graphics and voice.

Furthermore, this requirement may include but is not limited to providing sign language interpreters, telephone handset amplifiers, Telecommunication Devices for Deaf persons (TDD’s), note takers, written materials for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing or transcripts, braille, digital or audio information for persons who are blind or have difficulty seeing.

The decision about what auxiliary aid is appropriate should evolve from a consultation between the ADA Title II entity (Town of Ashland) and individuals with disabilities wherever possible to ensure effective communication. In many cases, more than one type of auxiliary aid or service may make effective communication possible. While consultation is always strongly encouraged to achieve effective communication, the Town of Ashland and all public entities are required to give primary

consideration to the requests of individuals with disabilities. The Effective Communication obligation does not require the Town to take any action that would result in a fundamental alteration in the nature of its services, programs or activities or that would impose an undue financial and administrative burden.

Findings

From the questionnaire responses, it appears that the Town does not have a policy regarding Effective Communication. While the Community Center indicated that they have, ‘hearing devices and adaptable equipment’ and the Health Department indicated that they have translation services, other departments responded, ‘I have not come across this’, ‘I am not aware of any such communication’, ‘Nothing for written. Not sure what is available on computers’, ‘I don’t know of anything provided’ and ‘I don’t know’. However, there is no evidence that the Town has failed to provide effective communication when requested.

It is not clear if face-to-face communication with individuals with disabilities is equally effective as communication with people without disabilities, or if information available in print format is currently available in accessible electronic or hard-copy formats such as large-font, or on the website.

Recommendations

The Town should consider developing and publicizing clear processes for members of the public and employees to request auxiliary aids and services:

- The Town of Ashland would benefit from a written policy on Effective Communication so staff across all departments have an understanding of their responsibility and clarity about what to do.
- Distribute the Effective Communication Notice to all department heads; publish it in a local newspaper of general circulation serving the Town; in all materials regarding the Town’s programs, services or activities and on the Town’s website home page. Copies should also be posted in prominent locations in the Town’s public buildings.
- Staff should clearly understand the responsibility to provide auxiliary aids and services where necessary to afford qualified individuals with disabilities, including applicants, participants, companions, and members of the public, an equal opportunity to participate in, and enjoy the benefits of, a service, program, or activity of a public entity. (28 CFR Part 35.153 (b)). Staff should also clearly understand the process for requesting auxiliary aids when needed.
- Staff needs to understand the scheduling time necessary in requesting a sign language interpreter or a Computer-Assisted Real Time Interpreter (CART) through the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Interpreters must be qualified.
- Members of the public also need to have a clear understanding of the process for requesting auxiliary aids and services and the time period in which a request must be made if it involves ASL interpreters, CART, or special equipment such as assistive listening devices that may need to be

rented. This information should be included in the general information for the public as well as on the Town's website.

- Ideally, the Town should develop a system for training staff to meet these responsibilities especially knowing the processes for securing braille, making large print or other types of accessible formats, understanding how to request interpreters or CART and the length of time needed prior to an event. It is also important that staff know how to use and maintain the assistive listening systems and other special devices to assist people with disabilities to enjoy effective communication.

IHCD, through its New England ADA Center, can provide a training for the Town of Ashland on Effective Communication that would be appropriate for department heads and public-facing Town staff in order to build confidence about rights and responsibilities and building capacity within the Town to comply with this important element of the ADA.

Sample of Effective Communication request:

“The Town of Ashland is committed to the full participation of people with disabilities. Any person with a disability who requires an auxiliary aid or service for effective communication, or a modification of policies or procedures to participate in the Town's programs, services, activities and committee meetings, should contact the office of the ADA Coordinator (Name, Address, Phone number and Email) as soon as possible but no later than 48 hours before the scheduled event.” (*if the Town needs 2 or 3 weeks or longer to ensure an interpreter, then it must be clearly stated).*

- Ensure that information and resources at each department interacting with the public are available in accessible formats. This could be done by having a large print sign at each department and on each department's portion of the website stating:

“All of our materials are available, upon request, in accessible formats such as audio, large print or braille.”

- Ensure that staff interacting with the public is fully trained on how to respond to TTY and relay calls for telephone communications with people who are deaf, have difficulty hearing or have speech disabilities.

Even though there is a fundamentally changed pattern among people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing in relation to communication technology, TTY remains a compliance requirement.

Because of these advances in communication technology, some people who are deaf and people with speech disabilities no longer have TTYs in their homes and rely instead on instant messaging, text messaging, email, or the video communication features of computers.

- Ensure that the Town's website and other web-based services are accessible to people with disabilities. It is the Department of Justice position that when services are provided on a website,

those services must be made accessible (see www.ada.gov/mclennan_pca/mclennan_sa.html Section K on Web Based Services and Programs).

- To address these Information and Communication Technology (ICT) issues, the Town should commit to fixes and maintenance of the website's accessibility. All staff should undergo training on accessibility best practices for posting web content and creating accessible documents. All third-party software should be properly vetted for compliance with WCAG 2.0 AA and section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.
- Ensure that all PDF's are on accessible formats.
- Additionally, under Title II of the ADA, emergency programs, services and activities must be accessible to people with disabilities. Ensure that the Town takes the necessary steps to effectively communicate with people with disabilities and make the emergency plan available on the Town's website and update the emergency procedure as often as is necessary.

Also, it is the Department of Justice position that police stations provide sign language interpreters in a timely manner when requested.

- **Non-scheduled Interpreter Requests:** A "non-scheduled interpreter request" means a request for an interpreter made by an inmate, visitor, companion, or other member of the public, who is deaf or hard of hearing with less than two (2) hours advanced notice. For non-scheduled interpreter requests, the interpreter shall be provided no more than two (2) hours from the time of the request for an interpreter if the service is provided through a contract interpreting service or a staff interpreter who is located off-site or 30 minutes from the request for an interpreter if the service is provided through a Video Remote Interpreting service.
- **Scheduled Interpreter Requests:** A "scheduled interpreter request" is a request for an interpreter made two (2) or more hours before the services of the interpreter are required. For scheduled interpreter requests, the Police Department will make a qualified interpreter available at the time of the scheduled appointment. If an interpreter fails to arrive for the scheduled appointment, upon notice that the interpreter failed to arrive, the Police Department will immediately use reasonable efforts to call an interpreter service for another qualified interpreter or provide a Video Remote Interpreting service.

VIII – Emergency Preparedness, Evacuation Plans, and Emergency Shelters

While a review of the Town of Ashland's emergency preparedness, evacuation plans and emergency shelters was not part of this RFP, as evidenced by recent U.S. Department of Justice's (DOJ) Project Civic Access settlement agreements, DOJ's views on emergency preparedness, shelters and evacuation plans are critical components of a Town's responsibilities related to accessibility

Recommendations

- Visibly post up-to-date floor plans for all buildings;
- Post information about evacuating people unable to use stairs;
- Develop evacuation plans for each facility;
- As plans are developed or revised, adopt policies to ensure that community evacuation plans enable people with disabilities, including those who have mobility, vision, hearing, or cognitive disabilities, mental illness, or other functional limitations, to safely self-evacuate or to be evacuated by others. Until all emergency shelters are accessible with parking, exterior routes, entrances, interior routes to the shelter area, and accessible toilet rooms serving the shelter area, the Town should identify and widely publicize to the public, including persons with disabilities and the organizations that serve them, the locations of the most accessible emergency shelters.

For more information see:

Making Community Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs Accessible to People with Disabilities - <http://www.ada.gov/emergencyprepguide.htm>

ADA Tool kit: Emergency Management -

<http://www.ada.gov/pcatoolkit/chap7emergencymgmt.pdf>

FEMA Guidance on Planning for Integration of Functional Needs Support Services in General Population Shelters - http://www.fema.gov/pdf/about/odc/fnss_guidance.pdf

Additionally, we recommend considering engaging the National Fire Protect Association (NFPA) for evacuation training and guidance, providing and load verifying backup power source for elevator to address Functional Needs Support Services (F.N.S.S.) emergency shelter needs, installing one or more accessible showers to meet emergency shelter needs and providing backup power for charging batteries for wheelchairs or breathing equipment and refrigeration for medication to meet emergency shelter needs.

Sample ADA Notice (long version)

(Name of public entity) does not discriminate on the basis of disability in its services, programs, or activities.

Employment: *(Name of public entity)* does not discriminate on the basis of disability in its hiring or employment practices and complies with the ADA title I employment regulations.

Effective Communication: *(Name of public entity)* will, upon request, provide auxiliary aids and services leading to effective communication for people with disabilities, including qualified sign language interpreters, assistive listening devices, documents in Braille, and other ways of making communications accessible to people who have speech, hearing, or vision impairments.

Modifications to Policies and Procedures: *(Name of public entity)* will make reasonable modifications to policies and procedures to ensure that people with disabilities have an equal opportunity to enjoy programs, services, and activities. For example, people with service animals are welcomed in *(name of public entity)* offices, even where pets and other animals are prohibited.

Requests: To request an auxiliary aid or service for effective communication, or a modification of policies or procedures contact *[ADA Coordinator name and contact information]* as soon as possible, preferably XX days before the activity or event.

Complaints: Send complaints to *[ADA Coordinator name and contact information]*.

Sample ADA Notice (short version)

The *[Name of public entity]* does not discriminate on the basis of disability in its programs, services, activities and employment practices.

If you need auxiliary aids and services for effective communication (such as a sign language interpreter, an assistive listening device or print material in digital format) or a reasonable modification in programs, services or activities contact the ADA Coordinator as soon as possible, preferably XX days before the activity or event.

A grievance procedure is available to resolve complaints.

Upon request, this notice is available in alternative formats such as large print or Braille.

[ADA Coordinator name and contact information]

Reference List

ADA Action Guide for State and Local Governments:

- www.adaactionguide.org

Department of Justice:

- Americans with Disabilities Act Title II Regulations:
http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/titleII_2010/titleII_2010_regulations.htm
- Making Community Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs Accessible to People with Disabilities - <http://www.ada.gov/emergencyprepguide.htm>

Federal Emergency Management Agency:

- FEMA Guidance on Planning for Integration of Functional Needs Support Services in General Population Shelters - http://www.fema.gov/pdf/about/odc/fnss_guidance.pdf
- Job Accommodation Network:
<http://www.askjan.org>

New England ADA Center:

- <https://www.newenglandada.org>