

## A Front Row Seat: Improvement Needed for Wheelchair Accessibility

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**H**ave you ever wondered if you would be able to work, shop, eat out and travel, if you used a wheelchair? Unless you know someone in this situation, the idea may have never crossed your mind. Using a wheelchair for the last ten years has made me realize how difficult, and sometimes impossible, it is to accomplish basic tasks.

Most people are unaware that a building designated as “Wheelchair Accessible,” only means that a person who uses a wheelchair has the capability of entering a building and using the inside facilities. It does not mean that you can function without the aid of others or

that you can even use the public restroom. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires existing buildings, such as retail stores and restaurants, to remove architectural barriers, only when it is readily achievable, i.e., it can be done without much difficulty or expense. The construction of new buildings has mandatory requirements, but they seldom provide easy access to all places inside.

Frequently, shopping centers do not have enough accessible parking. Ramps from the lot to the stores are limited in number, causing dangerous manipulating in the street or parking area.

Maneuvering in, out and through doors, represents another major barrier. Very few public buildings have automatic door openers. Opening and holding a heavy door is difficult while navigating a wheelchair through at the same time. If the door sill has a “lip,” you may have to enter backwards, as your manual wheelchair’s smaller wheels in front can easily cause the entire chair to tip over.

Many public restrooms, even those with the accessible sign on the door, have done little more than widen the door opening and put a grab bar in one of the stalls, which has not been

widened to accommodate the entire wheelchair. Consequently, unless you can stand up and walk to the toilet, you will not be able to use it. Imagine having to leave a restaurant in the middle of dinner to find another bathroom.

Hotel stays can be very challenging for the wheelchair user. Often, there are no accessible rooms on the ground floor. I am always a little nervous staying in an upper floor room for fear that there will be a fire or other emergency that will force me to exit the building.

Accessible hotel rooms should have automatic door openers and closets with poles and shelves at wheelchair height. Bathrooms should have roll-in showers or accessible bathtubs as well as grab bars, higher toilets and enough room to navigate.

Accessibility laws should be revised to provide the opportunity for independence for all wheelchair individuals. This can be accomplished by hiring people with disabilities to advise, instruct and educate legislators, contractors and owners of buildings on improvements needed to update existing buildings and new construction. We deserve nothing less! ▲

**Joseph Koval** had polio at the age of two and was paralyzed from the neck down for six months.

Ten years ago, he broke his leg and was unable to recover the strength needed to walk again on his own. Today, he works fulltime and uses a manual wheelchair.

“Although many people who use a wheelchair have the desire and potential to be self-sufficient, the stereotype is that wheelchair users require the assistance of others to perform business and daily activities.”

The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) recently released the “Emergency Evacuation Planning Guide” for People with Disabilities, which is available for download at no cost from NFPA’s website, [www.nfpa.org/evacuationguide](http://www.nfpa.org/evacuationguide).