Americans with Disabilities Act: Access and Fairness

Court Consulting Services Division

Assisting the Blind and Visually Impaired

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When considering the impact of the ADA, it is important to note that approximately 2 percent of our population is considered legally blind or visually impaired. Of this 2 percent, approximately 95 percent have residual vision. Beyond the traditional use of magnifiers and large-number telephones, there are many ways to assist blind and visually impaired individuals.

Visually impaired individuals may be assisted by increasing the size of an object, by changing viewing distance, by improving illumination, and by improving contrast. Changing size and distance go hand in hand. Size can be changed in several different ways: an object can be made larger (such as a big-button telephone), materials can be reproduced larger (such as large print), a nearby object can be enlarged (using a magnifier), or a far-away object can be enlarged (using a telescope). Devices can be set into glass frames, some of which are bioptic.

The most critical consideration for a low-vision individual is lighting. The midday offers the best light. Halogen bulbs and lamps that place direct light on a subject are highly recommended. When considering which bulbs to use, incandescent bulbs with a high wattage are preferred over florescent. Florescent bulbs throw off a glaring blue light. If the visually impaired individual is referring to notes, additional light (such as a gooseneck lamp) may be necessary.

Contrast plays a major part in everything we see. When viewing a forest you will hardly notice the details of a single tree. However, if you imagine one oak tree standing in a field, you can immediately identify its size, shape, and detail. This scenario also applies to the color, line, and intensity of written pages and forms. The more words crowded onto a page and the more similar the ink and paper colors, the less one can discriminate. Using 14-point or larger black type on yellow paper will greatly increase the readability of materials.

All literature that is available to the general public must be made accessible to visually impaired individuals. Anything that is produced on computer disk can be reproduced in excellent braille at a center for the blind. One of the most useful devices for the braille user is a small electronic brailler about the size of a paperback book, which has enough memory to retain a day's worth of notes. The notes may be uploaded to a computer and printed onto braille paper.

Computer equipment is also available that produces and accepts material in speech-synthesized form. Closed-circuit television has been adapted for use by people with low vision, providing electronic adjustment in size, contrast, and illumination all in one unit. And don't forget the trusty tape recorder, a stand-by for people with vision problems.

For more information on assistive technologies for individuals with visual impairments, readers are invited to contact Greta T. Tyler, Executive Director, The Alliance for the Blind and Visually Impaired (901) 577-7800.

For more information on the Americans with Disabilities Act,
contact Knowledge Information Services,
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