



photo by Stan Barouh

Arena Stage, Washington, DC: "The Miracle Worker" with Shira Grabelsky and Kelly C. McAndrew

Accessibility is a Work in Progress

Accessibility is and should be a work in progress. Routinely review and evaluate services, accommodations and physical access. With rapid changes in technology as well as the changes within the disability community, what was acceptable and worked fine yesterday may not be the best an organization can do today.

If something isn't working, for example, no one is using the braille self-guided tour scripts to the art gallery, then evaluate and determine why. Does the content have broad appeal to the audience that the organization is trying to reach? In this example, there may not be a large audience of people who read braille and who are interested in abstract two-dimensional visual art. The organization may want to shift resources to touch tours of outdoor sculptures or provide the self-guided script in large print. Work with advocacy groups or an accessibility advisory committee to establish and re-establish priorities.

How large or small is the community in the organization's region? For example, the area may have a very small population of individuals who are deaf and use sign language, but a large population of people who are hard-of-hearing. Is the organization offering an accommodation that doesn't suit or meet the needs of people with disabilities in its area? Don't be afraid to customize services or provide various options to suit the audience, community and region. What works in Cleveland doesn't always work in St. Louis.

There may be some simple explanation for why an accommodation isn't successful. For example, an organization decides to offer a discount ticket program on Thursday evenings to draw in older adults. The organization tried this for a while, but it didn't seem to have the desired results. If they had gotten input from an advisory committee the organization would have learned that transportation wasn't available on Thursday evenings in their area and many older people as well as other individuals with vision loss may not drive at night.

Keep an eye on changing technologies. Twenty years ago only a few companies provided FM assistive listening systems; now there are numerous

resources for this equipment. The equipment has also improved. Some examples of ways in which technology has changed include:

- Infrared assistive listening systems originally had only one channel for transmission and now there are multi-channel systems.
- For years the only way to open a door was to grab it and pull. Now there are electronic door openers that are activated by pushing a button or walking in front of an electronic sensor.
- Not too many years ago the idea that a computer could talk, read aloud, or respond to its user's voice was completely alien—not so today. Many new technologies can be used to improve or enhance accessibility.

Most important, remember to check with people in the community to find out about changing attitudes. When the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, Section 504, was first implemented, people who used wheelchairs rarely objected to entering through a side or back entrance. Simply getting inside was the goal. Now, more than a decade after the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed, just “getting in” is no longer acceptable. People want to enter by the same door as everyone else; second-class citizenship is no longer acceptable. These changes in attitude mean that cultural organizations must be ready to make changes in accessibility, policies and procedures to meet the current expectations of the community.

The Core Principles of Accessibility

- Access to cultural programs is a federal law and a legal requirement of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Access is an organizational asset and must be integrated into all facets and activities, from day-to-day operations to long-range goals and objectives.
- Access accommodations and services must be given a high priority and earmarked in the budget process.
- Access has economic benefits because people with disabilities and older adults are a significant part of the population and they constitute a large potential market for the arts and the humanities.
- Access is a social issue. People with disabilities are included in the definition of “diversity.” Promoting diversity and inclusion ensures broader access to the arts for all people.
- Access is a civil right. Assuring equal opportunity for everyone is a fundamental starting point for all accessibility efforts.

“An experience that’s rich and meaningful for participants who have disabilities will almost certainly be rich and meaningful for others, but the reverse isn’t necessarily true.”

John Slatin, Institute for Technology and Learning, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX