



## Facilitator — October/November 2011



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### An Open-door Policy

Allan B. Fraser

Accessibility isn't just the law; it's very good business

For more than 100 years, the National Fire Protection Association has promoted fire and life safety for everyone, regardless of their condition, through codes and standards. The mission of the international non-profit NFPA, established in 1896, is to reduce the worldwide burden of fire and other hazards on the quality of life by providing and advocating consensus codes and standards, research, training and education.

NFPA is the world's leading advocate of fire prevention and an authoritative source on public safety with more than 70,000 members from 80 different countries. The group develops, publishes and disseminates more than 300 consensus codes and standards intended to minimize the possibility and effects of fire and other risks. Many of the key provisions in its codes, standards and public education programs offer specific information for people with disabilities.

#### Safety First

In 2004, NFPA President James Shannon established the Disability Access Review and Advisory Committee (DARAC) as a standing advisory group, reporting directly to the NFPA President.

"For many years, NFPA has worked to involve all interested parties in efforts to strengthen important safety codes. The DARAC is an important step in our continuing efforts," he wrote when establishing the committee.

Seven years after the committee was formed, Shannon knows that DARAC is playing a key role in helping to ensure that NFPA codes, standards and other safety initiatives recognize and fully consider the needs of people with disabilities. This is evidenced in new code requirements, new educational programs and new documents that have addressed the needs of the disability community.

DARAC's responsibilities include:

- Identifying existing needs and emerging issues within the disability community.
- Providing recommendations to the NFPA President as to how NFPA can offer leadership on such issues.
- Working to ensure that NFPA's code and standard development process includes comments and proposals reflecting the latest thinking on disability access provisions and other matters that impact the disability community.

#### Design for All

One of the major NFPA codes that governs building design, including accessibility issues, is NFPA 5000 - Building Construction and Safety Code. In 2005, one of the goals for this code was to aggressively consolidate all the accessibility requirements into one place. The basic strategy was to utilize the range of both federal government and private sector regulations that address access issues, including usability, barrier-free use and rules on accessible means of egress.

The plan called for a review and incorporation of the following provisions into the code:

1. All of the scoping requirements from the U.S. Access Board's Americans with Disabilities Act/Architectural Barriers Act –Accessibility Guidelines, 7-23-2004;
2. The technical requirements of private sector standard, ICC/ANSI A117.1 -2003 Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities;
3. The technical requirements contained in the U.S. Access Board's ADA/ABA – Accessibility Guidelines 7-23-2004 not contained in A117.1 -2003;

#### 4. The scoping requirements of the Federal Fair Housing Act (FHA) as promulgated by HUD.

The committee's intent was to essentially "extract" all the text from the federal documents and editorially re-work it so they were cohesive. This would make it easier for designers, contractors and building owners/managers to use, creating a more accessibly built environment.

The proposed changes were so sweeping that a request was made to have the revised language for this section to be further reviewed by the DARAC for technical accuracy and compliance with the intent of Fair Housing Guidelines.

The DARAC conducted this review at its meeting on June 5, 2005, and forwarded its findings and comments along with their recommendation in order to correctly mirror the Fair Housing Guidelines. As the two federal documents (FHA and ADA/ABA) were written by two separate agencies, significant editorial changes were needed to meld them into regulatory text compatible with NFPA 5000. Since the actual requirements were not written by the NFPA technical committee, the work was really editorial to ensure clarity and consistency between the federal provisions and provide a complete and technically correct set of melded text.

#### Getting Proactive

Why has NFPA been so proactive in incorporating accessibility requirements? This approach is important for many reasons. People with disabilities are a measurable segment of the population that is dramatically underserved and, in some ways, almost invisible.

The number of people with disabilities that rise to the ADA level in this country is in the neighborhood of 50 million and growing daily. People with disabilities want to work for you, go to your facilities and buy your products. They can't do that if they can't get into your restaurant and enjoy the same level of access, service and freedoms of other patrons.

More importantly, what safety options and plans do you have in place for your disabled clientele in the event of a fire or similar emergency? How has your emergency plan accounted for an evacuation of all of the customers? With skilled and loyal employees and customers at a premium and traditional market growth slowing, can you afford to ignore or stereotype people with disabilities?

#### Thinking Ahead

Fortune Magazine estimated in 1998 that the aggregate income of people with disabilities was \$796 billion and would exceed \$1 trillion by the year 2001. Even though their unemployment remains high, in 1998, their discretionary income stood at \$176 billion. That's a lot of appetizers and entrées.

By building your restaurants to the accessibility standards in NFPA 5000 Building Construction and Safety Code, owners can ensure that everyone can get into, move around freely in and enjoy the ambiance of your establishment. Planning for emergencies using NFPA resources, many of which are freely available from the NFPA website, such as the Emergency Evacuation Planning Guide for People with Disabilities, can complete your customer checklist. And should there ever be an emergency, everyone will be able to evacuate safely.

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