

# ACCESS BASICS: THE LAWS, THE REGULATIONS, THE STANDARDS (and where they come from)

The Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504  
Revised March 2013

## FRAMEWORK FOR LAWS AND REGULATIONS (Civics 101 PLUS what they didn't teach you)

**Law:** A statute passed by Congress. Examples:

- The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (**section 504**, covering recipients of federal financial assistance, is part of it)
- The **ADA** (Americans with Disabilities Act), including **title II** (state and local governments) and **title III** (public accommodations)
- The **ABA** (Architectural Barriers Act), applying to Federal (and some federally assisted) construction, leasing, and alterations

**Regulation or rule:** Binding requirements issued by agencies or departments, according to what the law (statute) says.

- Regulations/rules give more details about what the law means.
- Examples: section 504 regulations of the Department of Education (D.Ed.), ADA (title II and title III) regulations of the Department of Justice (DOJ).
- Regulations are binding/mandatory. They have the force of law, which means they can be enforced through administrative or court proceedings.

**Standards:** Enforceable accessibility requirements for new construction and alterations.

- These are part of a regulation.
- These usually have both scoping and technical portions. **Scoping** provisions say what is covered and how many of each space or element (e.g., parking spaces, elevators, entrances, restrooms) must be accessible. **Technical** provisions describe what makes a space or element "accessible" (e.g., dimensions, material, slope).

**Guidelines:** Usually, a "floor" (minimum, baseline) for regulations and/or standards. A statute may say that one agency develops guidelines, and that another agency's regulations or standards have to meet or exceed those guidelines.

- The guidelines are not enforceable unless another agency adopts them as regulations.
- Other agencies' standards have to be at least as strict as the guidelines (if the law says so). For example:
  - The Access Board develops guidelines for the ADA and ABA standards.
  - DOJ develops guidelines for other agencies' section 504 regulations (not just accessibility requirements).

BUT sometimes the word "guideline" or "guidance" refers to advisory information.

**Appendix:** An "attachment" to a regulation or guideline. It can be binding or just informative. If you're not confused yet, try this:

*NOTE: This guide is intended to provide basic information. It should not be relied upon as a precise or complete explanation of legal requirements.*

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- DOJ's 1991 title III regulation has an Appendix A, the binding "1991 ADA Standards" (see below). The regulation also has an Appendix B, which is an analysis of the regulation and of the comments made by the public. But Appendix A has an appendix too! It provides advisory information (section-by-section analysis) that correlates with the sections of the ADA Standards.
- DOJ's 2010 title II regulation has an Appendix A, "Guidance to Revisions" to the regulation, which reprints the preamble (introduction and explanation of comments, regulation changes, etc.) to the 2010 rule. Appendix B reprints the section-by-section analysis to the 1991 title II rule.
- Appendix B of the final title III rule (Analysis and Commentary on the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design) is often overlooked but is a helpful description of the major changes in the 2010 Standards (as compared to the 1991 ADAAG – see below) and a discussion of the public comments on specific sections of the 2004 ADAAG.

## FEDERAL AGENCIES (Who writes these things, anyway?)

**Access Board:** It does research, enforces the Architectural Barriers Act, and develops accessibility guidelines for other agencies' ADA and ABA standards.

**DOJ:** U.S. Department of Justice.

- DOJ issues government-wide guidelines for section 504.
- DOJ issues ADA regulations for title II and title III (BUT see DOT).
- DOJ enforces title II, title III, and section 504.

**DOT:** U.S. Department of Transportation. It issues regulations for transportation aspects of the ADA and section 504.

**OCR:** Office for Civil Rights. Almost all Federal departments have an OCR, which oversees implementation of several civil rights laws, including section 504 (and sometimes the ADA). For example, OCR at the Department of Education issues section 504 rules applying to recipients of its funds. It investigates complaints about education under section 504 and title II.

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## CODES, GUIDELINES, AND STANDARDS (What do you mean, the ADA isn't a building code?)

**Generally, a building code** sets minimum safety and performance requirements for new construction and major alterations. Codes are adopted and enforced by a local or state jurisdiction. For example, cities usually have codes addressing electrical, plumbing, fire safety, accessibility, and other construction issues. A city will review plans for new buildings for code compliance, issue a permit for the work, and inspect final construction for compliance with plans and codes.

BUT the ADA is a **Federal civil rights law**. It requires new construction and alterations to be accessible, according to Federal standards. There are no Federal ADA plan reviewers or building inspectors. Only the Federal government (and individuals) can enforce the ADA. In addition -- unlike a building code -- other parts of the ADA (e.g., barrier removal, program access, most integrated setting) address access to facilities, programs, and services in the context of the civil right to receive services and to participate in programs and activities.

**ADA Standards (sometimes "the Standards"):** The ADA Standards issued by DOJ and DOT.

- DOJ's standards: These are the accessibility standards that must be followed for new construction and alterations.
  - o The original standards are the 1991 Standards for Accessible Design and they were binding for new construction and alterations by title III entities until September 15, 2010. Until that date, title II entities could choose between the 1991 Standards and UFAS (see below).
  - o In 2010 DOJ revised its regulations and issued substantially revised standards, the 2010 ADA Standards. Between September 15, 2010, and March 15, 2012, title III entities could choose to follow either the 1991 or 2010 Standards; and title II entities could follow the 1991 or 2010 Standards or UFAS. The 2010 regulations have been binding on both title II and title III entities since March 15, 2012.
- DOT's standards: These are the standards that must be followed for purposes of transportation facilities such as bus stops, rail stations, and airports. The current ones are based on 2004 ADAAG with some additions.

**ADAAG:** Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (developed by the Access Board). The ADA says that federal ADA accessibility standards, which are issued by DOJ and DOT, must be at least as stringent as these.

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**“Original” ADAAG or 1991/1994 ADAAG:** DOJ and DOT adopted these, word for word, as 1991 standards for the ADA.

**“New” ADAAG or 2004 ADAAG:** Guidelines developed by the Access Board and based largely on 2003 ANSI A-117.1 and 2000/2003 IBC. DOJ adopted these in their entirety as part of the 2010 Standards. DOT adopted them as ADA Standards with some changes.

*Note: The Access Board continually works to expand and refine the ADAAG. It is currently developing guidelines for medical diagnostic equipment, pedestrian facilities in the public right-of-way, outdoor developed areas, and shared use paths.*

**ANSI:** American National Standards Institute. ANSI is a private group that has developed many “industry standards” or “consensus standards,” including ANSI A-117.1 (accessible buildings and facilities). These are usually technical standards. Although ANSI’s publications are called “standards,” they really are a type of model for standards. They aren’t enforceable unless a government entity adopts them.

The 1961 ANSI Standard was the original standard under the Architectural Barriers Act and section 504. “New ADAAG” is based largely on recent (e.g., 2003) ANSI Standards.

**IBC:** International Building Code. This is a private “model code,” also developed by a private group (the International Code Council). “New ADAAG” is also based largely on this code. A number of state and local governments have adopted the accessibility portion of the IBC, in whole or in part. The IBC contains scoping requirements. It references ANSI Standards for the technical provisions. (See page 1 for an explanation of “scoping” and “technical” provisions.)

**UFAS:** The 1984 Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards, issued for purposes of new construction and alterations under the Architectural Barriers Act. Generally, if a recipient of federal funds follows UFAS, it is in compliance with section 504. A state or local government can no longer choose to follow UFAS under title II of the ADA, as of March 15, 2012, but must comply with the 2010 ADA Standards for new construction and alterations. On March 14, 2012, the Department of Education issued a notice saying that it will consider compliance with the 2010 Standards to be compliance with Education’s section 504 requirements for new construction and alterations.