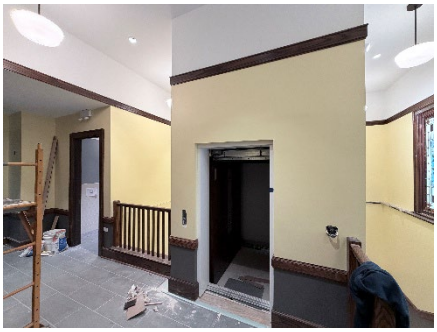
NATIONAL FUND FOR SACRED PLACES

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE | ACCESSIBILITY





Left: New elevator and ramp in First Covenant Church, Minneapolis, MN. Photo by Dan Collison.
Center: New ADA-compliant concrete ramp on the north elevation of Lovely Lane United Methodist Church, Baltimore, MD. Photo by Rev. Deb Scott and Shanna Webb.
Right: New elevator, ADA-compliant stairwell, and accessible restroom under construction at Wicker Park Lutheran Church, Chicago, IL. Photo by Jason Glombicki.

ACCESSIBILITY

Most historic buildings were not designed with accessibility in mind. The first nationally recognized accessible design standards were not released until 1961. In 1968, the Architectural Barriers Act was passed, which required buildings or facilities designed, altered, or leased with federal funds to be accessible. It was not until the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 that most new public buildings were required to be accessible. To provide further guidance on the requirements in the ADA, the United States Access Board published the ADA Accessibility Guidelines on July 26, 1991 (today known as the ADA Accessibility Standards). During additional updates to resolve issues between the ADA Accessibility Guidelines and other national standards, the United States Access Board worked with the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) to develop updated guidelines. Adherence to the ADA Accessibility Standards and ANSI A117.1 are required in most jurisdictions.

Religious entities and places of worship (such as mosques, synagogues, and churches) are exempt from Title III of the ADA and ANSI A117.1, meaning they are not legally required to make their places of worship accessible and provide access for all people. While this is a federal exception, local building codes or state-level accessibility laws may still apply. Many religious entities choose to adopt accessibility requirements to be more inclusive, regardless of whether these changes are legally required.

The ADA provides special considerations for existing buildings listed on, or eligible for listing on, the National Register of Historic Places, or for buildings that contribute to a National Register Historic District. When making a historic building accessible, the goal is to achieve the highest level of accessibility while minimizing changes to the historic building and its materials and character-defining features, as determined by the State Historic Preservation Office. These changes can be achieved with careful planning and sensitive design.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

All projects funded by the National Fund for Sacred Places must respect the property's historic character and materials, and must adhere to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Below are general recommendations for updating historic buildings to be accessible, but they do not cover all the specific recommendations. Reference the resources in the section below for more detailed recommendations.

- **KEY IDEA:** Accessibility modifications should be in scale with the historic property, visually compatible, differentiated from the historic materials and features, and, whenever possible, reversible.
- **CONSULT:** Consult with experts in historic preservation and accessibility before making any permanent changes to the historic property.
- **MINIMIZE IMPACT:** Install accessibility updates in a manner that preserves and minimizes the impact on a historic building's character-defining exterior features, interior spaces, historic materials, finishes, and site features.
- **ACCESSIBLE ENTRANCE:** To the greatest extent possible, the accessible entrance should be the primary public entrance. If this cannot be achieved without permanent damage to the character-defining features, at least one entrance used by the public should be made accessible. A rear or service entrance should be avoided as the only accessible entrance into the building.
- **RAMPS:** Minimize the visual impact of an accessible ramp. This can be done by installing the ramp on secondary elevations, if it does not compromise accessibility, or by screening the ramp with plants or other visual elements.
- **SIDEWALK:** Add a gradual slope to the sidewalk, if appropriate, to access the entrance of the building instead of installing a ramp.
- **ELEVATOR OR LIFT**: Install an elevator or lift in a location that is as inconspicuous as possible (such as at the back of a building), or in a secondary or less significant space on the interior.

RESOURCES

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring and Reconstructing Historic Buildings | Accessibility Recommendations are found on Pages 147-149

Preservation Brief #32: Making Historic Properties Accessible

American with Disabilities Act Accessibility Standards

ANSI A117.1 Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities