

# COMPLIANCE @ WORK

advancing workplace rights, safety & health, and accessibility in the legislative branch

## ADA progress on the Hill: Q & A with Architect of the Capitol's Ben Scavone



Ben Scavone works with an OOC inspector from Evan Terry & Associates to inspect Capitol Hill buildings and grounds for ADA compliance.

*credit: Anne Knife Photography*

The ["113th Congress Biennial Report on Americans with Disabilities Act Inspections Relating to Public Services and Accommodations"](#) notes improvements made over



the past six years. Many of the exterior barriers have been removed by the AOC, working cooperatively with the OOC and other legislative branch offices, including the Library of Congress and Senate and House administration.

**"Preventing Disability Discrimination in the Congressional Workplace" training is available online: [www.compliance.gov](http://www.compliance.gov)**

July 26th marks the 27th anniversary of the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The civil rights law prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities was applied to the legislative branch by the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995. To ensure accessibility on Capitol Hill, the Office of Compliance (OOC) works closely with the Architect of the Capitol — in particular, with architect Ben Scavone from the Technical Support Branch in the Architect of the Capitol's Planning and Project Management Division. We sat down with Ben to talk about ADA progress on the Hill.

### What is your role?

My role is Universal Accessibility Coordinator. The main purpose of the role is to provide the greatest accessibility feasible throughout the Capitol complex to all persons regardless of their disability.

### What is your biggest challenge?

Our biggest challenge is determining how to integrate accessibility into historic buildings without losing the historic fabric and nature of the building.

Accessibility should be seamless. It's there, but you don't know it's there, and everyone gets to enjoy the privileges of access and mobility. There are a lot of aspects of accessibility built into building codes already. For example, the reach range of someone using a wheelchair is between 15 to 48 inches above the floor. Industry standard is to install light switches at 42 inches above the floor. This automatically makes the light switch accessible.

We're getting involved in projects in the very early stages and making the determination that accessibility can be improved. For instance, if a room configuration is going to change or if a door is going to move, we want to take a look at the project. Even though most of our focus is on current public access, we want to make sure we have future accessibility options built into all of our projects.

Other challenges are the interior French doors in the U.S. Capitol. The doors are an integral part of the historic fabric of the building. They might be 36 or 40 inches wide as a pair, but if you only open one door, you don't have a clear width complying with the accessibility standards.

## What's the solution?

Our solution has been to provide a simultaneous automatic door opener that opens both doors at the same time. This provides a clear width in compliance with the ADA standards and maintains the historic fabric of the building.

It's that balance of preserving historic fabric of our existing buildings, adhering to codes and regulations, and incorporating new technology to provide accessibility for everyone to the greatest extent possible.

## How do you work with other AOC offices and the OOC?

It has been my experience working with the OOC that we are partners working toward the common goal of providing accessibility to the Capitol complex. Our open interactions and dialogue provide us a forum to discuss and apply the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, through the Congressional Accountability Act. Through the biennial ADA inspections conducted by the OOC, I have been in contact with many offices across the Capitol complex, either directly or with one of my AOC colleagues.

Internally, I work with the AOC's Architecture and Preservation Branch to find the balance with accessibility and historic preservation.

In addition, I hold a quarterly meeting of an accessibility team comprised of AOC professionals from across the Capitol complex. The purpose of our meeting is to review and identify any accessibility concerns. This group helps to provide a unified approach to addressing accessibility throughout all of our facilities. A few examples of the items we have discussed include: mounting heights and locations of signage, where to install automatic door operators, typical accessories in restrooms and, of course, OOC findings.

## What do you wish others realized about the ADA?

One is that the ADA and accessibility are not just for wheelchair users. For example, it is assumed by the majority of people that if a project is being done solely to comply with the ADA, the project is for a wheelchair user. That couldn't be further from the truth. Under the current version of the ADA, the majority of identified disabilities are not visible. Someone could have a disability that isn't apparent, because it can be bacterial, muscular, or intellectual.

Another thing that I'm a big proponent of is trying to change our vocabulary and our vernacular. The 'H' word for example, "handicapped," should be avoided. We should be using the word "accessibility" in its place. It still exists on some signs throughout our society, however, the word carries a negative connotation in the disability culture and everyone should be respectful of that.

We all need to be a little more understanding to everyone's needs, especially here at the Capitol complex. After all, the U.S. Capitol represents the American people. That's also why I believe that what we do should be seamless, and everyone should be able to access the buildings and facilities.

"We live and work in a museum. It's that balance of preserving historic buildings... while still making them accessible for everyone."

— Ben Scavone, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP



credit: Anne Knife Photography

## EXAMPLES OF ADA PROJECTS

- Capitol Visitor Center  
Began adjusting the website to improve accessibility, including enlarging font sizes and adding descriptive text.
- Rayburn House Office Building  
Completed upgrades to six committee rooms, providing automatic door operators, accessible means of egress, and accessible daises for Members of Congress.
- Cannon House Office Building  
Created temporary accessible entrance on C Street, SE to support the building's renewal project.
- Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Added ADA compliant restrooms to the first floor.
- Library of Congress Madison Building  
Installed Braille signage in elevator cabs, lobbies, and corridors.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

[Tips for Improving Office Accessibility and Accommodating Constituents with Disabilities](#)

