

**State Bar of Arizona Task Force on Persons With Disabilities  
Accessibility Committee Site Visit  
La Paz County Superior Court  
Parker, Arizona**

**SURVEY BACKGROUND**

**Facility:** La Paz County Superior Court, 1316 Kofa Avenue, Parker, Arizona 85344

**Date:** June 4, 2004

**Team:** Colleen McManus, State Bar of Arizona (team leader); Jim Reed, Jaburg & Wilk P.C., Phoenix, Arizona

**Court and County Personnel:** Sheri Newman, Clerk of the Court; the Honorable Michael J. Burke.



## **Overview**

The overall impression is that this is a facility in a newer complex that was designed to have the look and feel of a more historic adobe structure. As Ms. Newman noted, it was constructed more for aesthetics than for functionality or accessibility. The Superior Court and Justice Court occupy two separate suites in this complex. Due to the late hour of the team's arrival, our tour concentrated on the Superior Court facility. The team did, however, note a very nice ramp to the entry of the Justice Court.



There is a real conservation of space in this facility, and the staff has very wisely designated multiple uses for a number of areas, thus maximizing space utilization. The team noted some positive points, such as an amplification system in the courtroom and easily moveable file systems in the staff area. The team also noted suggestions that would enhance accessibility. All observations are discussed below.

## **Parking**

The parking lot is somewhat inconveniently located from this facility. There are some accessible spaces on the street immediately outside the facility; however, one has to negotiate a steep and short ramp up from the street. Ms. Newman noted that an employee who had temporarily used a wheelchair had to back the wheelchair up, using one foot to propel herself, in order to maneuver this ramp. This would not be a viable option for many persons using a wheelchair. The team noted that this should be changed, if possible.



### **Entrance and Exits**

Visitors can enter the courtroom directly from the patio area, which is how the team first entered the facility. Signage directing people to the main entrance could not be seen by the team. Ms. Newman noted that courtroom doors are kept locked when there is a proceeding. The main entrance to this court facility is through a single door. While the tension on the door is very light, since there is no device for automatically opening it, some persons with a mobility disability would have difficulty. Ms. Newman explained that employees working behind the counter just a few feet from the doorway could go out to assist them in accessing the facility.

### **Exits**

Visitors exit through the main entry or the courtroom.

Suggestion: If possible, change access from accessible parking on street level to avoid use of steep, short ramp.

### **Hallways and Lobbies**

The lobby is flanked by an open counter area. Given the relatively young age of the facility, it was surprising to find that none of the counters had been lowered to provide access by individuals using a wheelchair. The team also noted that fire alarm pulls are too high to be accessed by an individual using a wheelchair.

The team noted Braille on many of the posted signs inside and outside the facility. There was no apparent signage directing those needing assistance or accommodation to a contact person; however, as individuals approach a staffed open counter area immediately upon entry, they can ask the staff person assisting them for this information.



The lobby is still undergoing some changes from more recent remodeling, and Ms. Newman noted that some further enhancements are forthcoming. Lowering the counter is something which could be included in these changes.

### **Security**

Individuals do not pass through any security check at this facility. Ms. Newman noted that metal detectors are used when security is an issue, such as when a serious court proceeding takes place.

Suggestion: Install signage outside the complex and within the courtyard area that would more clearly direct visitors. If possible, avoid use of red and blue lettering, which can be difficult for a person who is color blind.

### **Information Service**

Ms. Newman noted that all court summons and documents advise of the willingness to make accommodations for individuals with disabilities and provide instructions on how to request such accommodations.

Suggestion: Consider lowering a portion of the counter and the fire alarm pulls in the lobby so as to provide accessibility to a person in a wheelchair.

### **Court Administration Areas/Clerk's Office**

The team noted that court administration areas were generally accessible. Ms. Newman informed the team that they would do their best to accommodate anyone with a disability who required access to those areas. She noted they had made some minor accommodations for an employee who had to temporarily use a wheelchair for a couple of months.





### **Public Restrooms**

There are public restrooms for the entire complex that are located in a separate suite within walking distance from the court. These restrooms are very spacious and maneuverable. The handicapped stall in the women's restroom includes bars and its own sink, making use very convenient. All sinks had small flipper handles, which would allow for easier use by a person with a mobility disability. Boxes that hid pipes under the counters were appropriately sloped to allow for greater access by a person using a wheelchair. Soap and paper towel dispensers were at a good height to be readily accessed by all.



Suggestion: Exchange handles on internal restroom faucets to the flipper type.

## **Law Library**

With an obvious emphasis on using space for different purposes, the law library, which is accessed through the Superior Court courtroom, is also used for attorney/client meetings, for administrative hearings, and as a waiting area for witnesses waiting to testify. In addition to containing some very interesting old texts, this room has computer stations at tables that can easily be accessed by a person using a wheelchair.

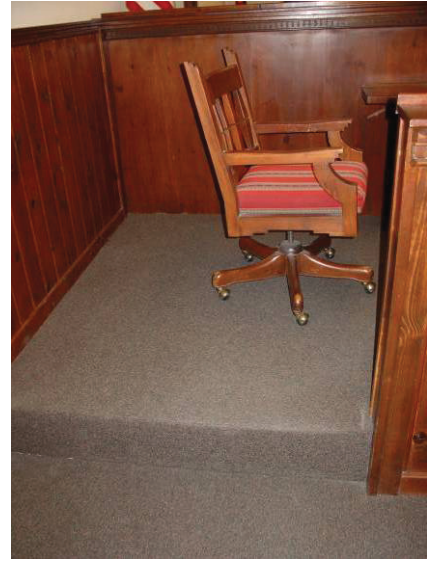


## **Courtrooms**

### **Superior Court**

The Superior Court courtroom is a large and stately looking room. A real plus immediately noted by the team was the installation of a voice amplification system to assist an individual with a hearing disability.

The court bench, jury box and witness boxes are raised, so they would not be readily accessed by a person using a wheelchair. Ms. Newman explained that a witness with a mobility disability could be accommodated by placing the individual in front of the witness box. Ms. Newman also noted several other accommodations that would be made if needed, including the provision of a sign language interpreter for a defendant with a hearing disability. Such accommodations are made upon request to her office. Counsel tables easily accommodate individuals with disabilities.



Judge Burke talked with the team about his courtroom. He noted some of the design flaws and demonstrated a real commitment to making individuals with disabilities as comfortable as possible.

### **Justice Court Courtroom**

Due to the late hour of the team's arrival, the team was not able to view the Justice Court courtroom; however, Ms. Newman advised that the set-up is very similar to the Superior Court, although she noted that staff areas are much more congested.

### **Courtroom B**

This is a small courtroom that is used for hearings, training, conferences, and motions. There is a platform bench that can be used as a bench or raised and stored so that all of the room is at one level. This is a great feature for room flexibility and full accessibility. Overhead storage maximizes use of space, but would be difficult for a person using a wheelchair to access.





### **Jury Areas**

The court wisely conserves more space by allowing their break room to double as a jury room. Given the number of trials they have, this has not posed a serious inconvenience to employees. When jurors are in deliberation, employees stay out of the area. The break room appeared generally accessible, although a person using a wheelchair might have some difficulty using the counter sink or getting coffee.

There are restrooms for the use of staff and jurors that are handicapped accessible. The team noted bars in the accessible stall and soap and paper towel dispensers that were at an appropriately accessible height. The team recommended replacing the faucet handles with flipper handles which are a great accommodation and easy to use.

### **Judge's Chambers**

Ms. Newman graciously escorted us into judge's chambers, which were very accessible. Adjoining the office area was a fully accessible bath and shower area.



## CONCLUSION

Given that this complex was constructed in 1996 or 1997, there could be more features to provide accessibility for, and accommodation to, individuals with disabilities. Despite this design flaw, Ms. Newman demonstrated a real awareness of, and sensitivity to, the needs of persons with disabilities. She favorably received the recommendations of the team members, and made the tour a very welcoming and informative experience. It should be noted that Ms. Newman very graciously extended her day to about 6:30 p.m. in order to provide the team such a thorough tour. The team is grateful for her flexibility, as well as the opportunity to have visited this facility.

