

**State Bar of Arizona Task Force on Persons with Disabilities
Accessibility Committee Site Visit
Cochise County Courthouse
Arizona Superior Court in Cochise Court
Bisbee, Arizona**

SURVEY BACKGROUND

Facility: Cochise County Courthouse, P.O. Drawer CK, Bisbee, AZ 85603

Date: March 17, 2004

Team: Emily Johnston; David Freeman, Bisbee resident; Sally Simmons

Court Personnel: Tim Hilb, the Director of Security, and Marty Jones, chief deputy of security



Overview

The Cochise County Court House was built in the 1931. It is a stone building and has a staircase leading to the front entrance. Three of the courtrooms are in this building. Another courtroom, which is used part time, is in an adjacent building. We observed a ramp to the first floor of that adjacent building from the outside. We were told that there is an elevator to the second floor where the court room is. The security personnel noted that the judges will trade courtrooms to accommodate persons with disabilities.



There is a division of the Cochise County Court in Sierra Vista; it primarily handles juvenile cases. It is a newer building and apparently is more accessible, but we did not tour it.

At one time, the jail was on the third floor of the courthouse for men and on the fourth floor for women. Court personnel graciously allowed us access to that area so we could see it from a historical perspective. The building does have a historical designation, which adds an additional obstacle to changes.

One team member, Dave Freeman, a resident of Bisbee, has a mobility disability and uses a walker.

Parking

Two accessible parking spaces are in the back of the courthouse. There also is parking on a hill at the back.

Suggestions: Since there are only two accessible spaces at the back of the courthouse, more are needed. The court personnel are working to create two more such spaces. Street signs directing people to the accessible entrance are in the master plan to improve parking.

Entrances and Exits

The only accessible entrance is the back of the courthouse. The parking spaces are located directly adjacent to the entrance, which is helpful.

Security/ Emergency Evacuation

There is security at this entrance, and it would be difficult for a person using a wheelchair to move through the area. Court personnel simply move the security screening device if someone cannot get through it. They then use a wand to screen the person.

The elevator is close to the entrance to the building, and security is also close. This allows those in security to provide help to those who need it.

There is an emergency door on the first floor at the back entrance. The security personnel are responsible for any emergency evacuation. There are a minimum of four security personnel on duty at all times. The emergency evacuation plan is posted, but the Loss Control Committee is preparing a new plan. One suggestion has been to build a light weight ramp of one piece which would fit over the stairs out the emergency entrance. It would be stored by the door and molded to the steps so it could be quickly installed during emergencies. The personnel did note that there is no auxiliary power source for the building which could create difficulties in the case of a power outage.

Court Administration

There is an open counter in the clerk's office, but it appeared to be a little high. We were told that if someone with a disability needs help, security will be called by radio to help. The doors to the clerk's office are always open, providing access to that area.



Restrooms

There is only one door to each of the bathrooms, and the door handles were "pull" handles. The bathrooms did have a wide stall, which would be accessible.



Hallways

The floors of the building were smooth, and there was easy access persons using a wheelchair. The water fountains and telephones were at appropriate heights. There were several chairs in the lobbies for people to use.

Elevators

Elevators were signed. The elevator does not go to the basement where the court administration (other than the clerk's office) and the collections files are housed.

Library

There are several computer cubicles in the library. One cubicle was quite accessible with an easy entrance and a "straight-in" entrance. The aisles in the library appeared to be wide enough for a person using a wheelchair, but there might be some difficulty turning corners. In addition, some shelves were beyond the reach of persons using a wheelchair or those who are of low height. The court personnel advised us that interpreters double as librarians and are available to help attorneys or others who need assistance reaching books.

Courtrooms

The courtrooms have sufficient room for a person using a wheelchair. Counsel tables have access, and there are moveable chairs with access for the overflow in the audience. The front row of the jury box has space for a person using a wheelchair and the floor is flat, allowing access. There is a step up to the witness chair, but a witness could be moved in front of the witness chair. The witness would have access to a microphone. The judge can come into the courtroom directly from chambers, but he/she would have a step up.



Cochise County does not have its own ASL interpreters or hearing enhancement equipment. If the court is made aware that a party, witness or juror needs sign language aid, the Court instructs the regular interpreters to obtain an ASL interpreter from Tucson. Hearings are then scheduled around the court interpreter's schedule.¹

Juror Facilities

There is a separate deliberation room for Courtroom 2; all others are attached to the courtroom. The chairs in the jury deliberation rooms could be moved to allow space for a person using a wheelchair, and there appeared to be room to maneuver. The bathrooms in the jury rooms had faucets with good handles and are of appropriate height. However, space is limited and it might be difficult to move around. Our hosts noted that the bailiff can escort people who need a more accessible bathroom to such a facility.

Chambers

While we could not view the judge's chambers since all were in use, we noted that there were no steps into the chambers and the entrance was wide.

General Observations

There is no cafeteria. If a jury is deliberating, the court personnel will either bring in food or take them out.

There is a lot of cooperation among court personnel and the public. Mr. Hilb and Mr. Jones noted that if there are special needs for an attorney, a witness or a juror, the jury commissioner or the attorneys involved will alert security so that special help can be arranged.

¹ This information was provided after the visit by Judge Steve Desens, Cochise County Superior Court.

Plans are underway to make some changes to the facility, to the extent possible given its historic designation. The assessor's and recorder's office are housed in a building in back of the courthouse. These offices are set to move out of this building. One plan calls for the court clerk's office to move to this building and turn the clerk's office on the main floor of the courthouse into Division 5 of the Court.