



# Inclusive Spaces Playbook

**A Practical Guide Through  
the Journey of Inclusive Design**

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Compiled by The Access Coalition  
February 2026

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# Acknowledgement and Recommended Strategic Partners

The Access Coalition would like to acknowledge and thank the following individuals and organizations for their support and efforts in drafting this Playbook.

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Joshua Klipp of Made Welcome

Alexander Jones of the Woodland Park Zoo

Marcie Roth and Dawn Skaggs  
of the World Institute on Disability

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The following details include information about their organizations and contact information as potential external partners.

## **Made Welcome**

“Accessibility where you work and gather.” Made Welcome was instrumental in developing and continues to update the Inclusive Spaces Framework.

Check out the website here:

<https://www.made-welcome.com>

## **Woodland Park Zoo**

“A zoo for all.” The Woodland Park Zoo has a robust accessibility guide and is a leading cultural institution on accessibility, providing great insight to the Coalition.

Learn more here:

<https://www.zoo.org/access>

## **World Institute on Disability**

“Trusted worldwide, WID partners with communities, governments, and businesses to shape disability policy, accessible and inclusive design, workforce access, and disaster risk reduction.”

Learn more here: <https://wid.org>

The Access Coalition works with incredible strategic advisors. In addition to those listed above, the following are potential partners and resources you may want to engage with throughout this work.

### **Amazeum**

“The Amazeum exists to spark and nurture the curious and creative spirit in all of us.”

Visit <https://www.amazeum.org/> to learn more about this incredible cultural institution and our great advisor.

### **Center for Inclusive Design & Environmental Access**

“We’re a dynamic group of researchers united by our shared values. We’re committed to creating a more inclusive world—for our clients, our team, and our community.”

Visit <https://idea.ap.buffalo.edu/> to learn more.

### **Disability:IN**

Disability:IN is the leading nonprofit resource for business disability inclusion worldwide. Disability:IN partners with leading companies and drives progress through initiatives, tools, and expertise that deliver long-term business impact.

Are You IN?

Check out: <https://disabilityin.org/>

### **Gensler**

“We are creating a better world through the power of design.”

Check out their website at <https://www.gensler.com/> to learn more about this global architecture, design, and planning firm.

### **McKinsey & Company**

“Partnering on America’s toughest challenges.” McKinsey is a global management consulting firm that was with Starbucks since the conception of the Inclusive Spaces Framework.

Learn more here:

<https://www.mckinsey.com/>

### **Snowsound**

“We have helped make spaces sound as good as they look.” Snowsound’s innovative sound solutions are in some of our retailer’s stores and help to make the retail experience more welcoming to all.

Learn more here:

<https://snowsoundusa.com/>

### **United States International Council on Disabilities**

“Building a global community of persons with disabilities.” USICD has a strong global perspective on disability rights.

Check out their website here:

<https://usicd.org/>

# Preface

This playbook is for anyone who wants to create inclusive spaces that are welcoming and hospitable by offering independence, choice, and ease in the experience for everyone.

Originally launched in October 2024, member companies **Starbucks, Walmart, Sam's Club, CVS Health, Step 'n Wash, LockNet, and Inclusive Web** have joined forces to advance this goal within retail environments. We launched The Access Coalition, convened by the American Association of People with Disabilities, to take these actions:

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Co-author and openly share inclusive design tools and resources,  
Expand the business case for accessibility investments, and  
Facilitate putting the ideas into practice across our respective spaces.

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We recognize there are a lot of resources out there. We have also found that a Playbook that synthesizes learnings across multiple businesses on inclusive design and that focuses primarily on exceeding compliance-based design in physical-built environments, is hard to come by. Further, inclusive design is a journey, and few resources help navigate the different entry points.

## Who Should Read the Playbook?

While written by and for retailers, we also believe that small businesses, nonprofits, government, schools, and other organizations with physical spaces may find this useful. The playbook is likely most applicable to designers, architects, UX researchers, strategists, and executives within your organizations who want to integrate inclusive design solutions into your strategic priorities, processes, tools, and design standards.

## How Do I Use the Playbook?

This playbook may be read front to back but can also be useful by chapter. If inclusive design is new to you, chapters 1-2 set up a foundation with key concepts, why inclusive design is beneficial, and stakeholders to engage. If you are well versed in inclusive design but need tools and examples to expand the work, chapters 3-6 will be most useful.

## What's Next?

The biggest takeaway from the playbook: get started! Small changes have big impacts. Inclusive design is not a readiness model; there are not specific activities or steps to follow to begin. We hope all readers find this Playbook useful, and that more spaces in our communities show what's possible to welcome everyone in with great design.

## Chapter 1:

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# Get Rooted in Your Why

Businesses and organizations starting out on this journey or building on their work will want to get rooted in their “why.” Many businesses and organizations begin working in disability inclusion and accessibility because of legal compliance needs, public pressure, or because they feel it is the right thing to do. The work may be started by one employee who is passionate about the work and starts an initiative.

All of those reasons are the right reasons to get started. We also strongly encourage finding the business imperative as inclusive design is good for all people and your business. Developing your “why” for this work is critical as competing interests, financing, politics, and needs will pull support from the work. Establishing a strong foundation at the start is the beginning of the journey.

### **The Methodology**

At The Access Coalition, we use inclusive design—a design approach and methodology that creates spaces that work better for everyone. However, inclusive design is not the only method for ensuring that people with disabilities are prioritized in design decisions. The following describes inclusive design and universal design, plus what makes the two different.



At CVS Health, we know the importance of ensuring every individual feels welcome on their health care journey. We believe that everyone deserves access to care and resources they need, and we're proud to ensure our spaces that reflect that commitment. Meeting the many health and wellness needs of the communities we serve is a priority and we know that building partnerships to drive accessibility is essential.”

**Charley Golden**  
Senior Vice President,  
Real Estate, Construction  
and Property Administration,  
CVS Health

## What is Inclusive Design?

Inclusive design is focused on choice and how each individual may navigate a space rather than a one-size-fits all approach. When reflecting on a tiered approach, inclusive design moves beyond universal design and focuses first on how the experience works—or not—for people with disabilities. This is because people with disabilities very often face the biggest barriers and friction when navigating spaces due to design that has failed to consider their perspective, even when technically compliant with legal requirements. When we address the common barriers and points of friction, the result is spaces that are much better matched to all people, across disability, age, and a range of other scenarios. These spaces are easier to physically navigate. Easier to communicate in. They are less stressful. They are spaces people want to linger in and return to and tell their family and friends about.

<sup>1</sup> <https://universaldesign.org/definition>

<sup>2</sup> <https://medium.com/hippo-digital/designing-for-inclusion-kat-holmes-mismatch-39bb2dc2aa53>

## Universal Design and Inclusive Design

Universal design is another commonly used methodology, developed in 1997 and based on seven core principles: 1) equitable use, 2) flexibility in use, 3) simple and intuitive use, 4) perceptible information, 5) tolerance for error, 6) low physical effort, and 7) size and space for approach and use. The general idea of universal design is that it is “design usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”<sup>1</sup> Some solutions are well suited for universal design, such as a curb cut or a push button automatic door opener. Other solutions benefit from designing multiple ways to equitably participate in the experience. For those solutions, inclusive design is a stronger design methodology to use as it does not stick to a single design but aims to accommodate many individuals and is tailored to individual preferences. “Inclusive design doesn’t mean you’re designing one thing for all people. You’re designing a diversity of ways to participate so that everyone has a sense of belonging,” said Susan Goltsman, a leader in inclusive design.<sup>2</sup>

# Inclusive Design Benefits Everyone

	If we design for...	We help...
 <b>Mobility</b>	People who use wheelchairs by adding a ramp.	People with strollers and shopping carts.
 <b>Reach</b>	People who use wheelchairs by placing things at accessible heights.	People who are shorter, have less strength or have their arms full.
 <b>Dexterity</b>	People with arthritis by having larger buttons.	People who are visually impaired or have temporary hand/arm injuries.
 <b>Visual</b>	People who are blind or visually impaired by having standard locations for standard items, and audio, tactile, or haptic cues.	People who are first time customers, busy, multitasking, or have a learning disability.
 <b>Hearing</b>	People who are deaf or hard of hearing by having visual cues.	People who are not native speakers of the local language.
 <b>Cognitive</b>	People who have Down syndrome by having product images or icons along with text.	First time customers, and people who are not native speakers of the local language.
 <b>Neurodiversity</b>	People with autism by having a limited but clear soundscape.	People who have a headache or are trying to focus.

## Good for People and Communities

Inclusive design is a methodology that supports more equitable participation in communities, for everyone. People with disabilities have a right to access their communities, but access does not equal a good experience and full participation. For example, by employing inclusive design, retail allows people with disabilities, older adults, young children, caregivers, families, and all people to engage with their communities in ways that better meet their needs and equate to a better, more holistic experience. It is the local grocer, coffee shop, pharmacy, clothing store, hardware store, and all the spaces in between that make up a community where everyone benefits and builds the economy that supports all. Inclusive design is ultimately good for people and the whole community.

“

Retail is individual people having control over their lives, what kinds of products they use, and what kinds of experiences they want to create for themselves. For so many people with disabilities, a lack of accessibility in retail actually means a lack of agency over our own lives. That’s what I’m excited about beyond the changes to physical infrastructure or design; the ways in which more people can have choice and agency in their everyday interactions with these stores is exciting to me.”

### Maria Town

President & CEO of the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), and Convener of The Access Coalition

## Case Study:

# The Starbucks Coffee Company Signing Store

### Overview

In October 2018, *Starbucks opened the doors* to its Signing Store in Washington, D.C. with a team of baristas all fluent in American Sign Language (ASL). The store model drew learnings from the company's first Signing Store to open worldwide in 2016 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, an initiative that paved the way to a current network of 26 Signing Stores across the globe—many of which have become destination locations customers go out of their way to visit.

### Bringing the Concept to Life

A foundational principle for the D.C. store was to “flip the script” to reimagine a retail experience oriented around the linguistic pride of Deaf individuals expressed through a shared culture of signing. Development of the store concept was led by a team of Deaf Starbucks employees and allies.

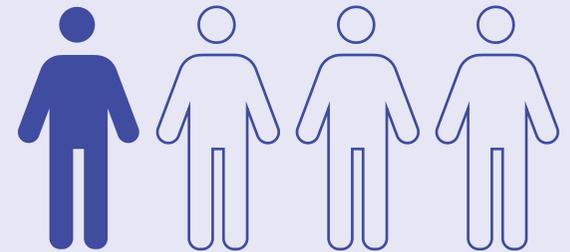
*Adam Novsam*, now retired from Starbucks, knew firsthand how frustrating it can be to accomplish even the most basic transactions in the hearing world. “Before I go into any store, I’m anticipating and figuring out how I’m going to order and communicate. Typically, it is not an easy or smooth experience,” Novsam says. “Sometimes I’ll try to lipread, and that often results in misunderstanding my order, especially if they have a question. Sometimes I will gesture for paper and pen and the person will appear annoyed with me or seem exasperated that it is taking extra time.”

## Focus on Employment

Another bedrock principle for this initiative has been the focus on expanding career development and business opportunities for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, including for leadership positions in the store such as Coffeehouse Leader and Shift Supervisor roles. Deaf baristas at the Signing Store (and across the country) are given the option of wearing the iconic green aprons with ASL fingerspelling, many of which have been embroidered by Angie Foster, a Deaf business owner and certified women-owned supplier. Just inside the doors of the store is a large mural created by Yiqiao Wang, a Deaf artist and adjunct professor at Gallaudet University. Her mural includes a mix of letters, signs and symbols representing English, ASL, Deaf culture, and coffee. At the store's opening, the store featured (and quickly sold out of) a unique mug designed by Deaf artist Jena Floyd that features the ASL sign for "Starbucks" and text on the interior that reads "Coffee brings us together."

## Integrating Inclusive Design Solutions

Several physical design and tech modifications were integrated when the store opened to expand and optimize visual communication in the space. This has included low-tech tools like store-supplied writing pads; to enhanced lighting and window blinds to support well-lit spaces while reducing glare and shadow patterns; to tech innovation including a customer-facing visual display at the point of sale to confirm order accuracy and ticket totals and the installation of a customer order status digital board near the handoff area to indicate when orders are ready. This order status board has proved so useful to so many people—Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing alike—that Starbucks has now deployed this design broadly across its store portfolio as it seeks to design coffeehouses that are welcoming to all.



More than 1 in 4 (29.7%) of adults in the U.S. have some type of disability.

Source

## Good for Business

Businesses often believe work with people with disabilities and about people with disabilities is solely social impact work or “feel good” work. People engage in such work because it is the right thing to do, and small investments may be made, disconnected from larger business strategies. Inclusive design flips this narrative intentionally. Inclusive design is good for people, and it is a good business strategy plus best-in-class innovation. Inclusive design can solve many mismatches by incorporating context, constraints, environments, user needs, and preferences. By widening our perspective and expanding the users we consider, we create better products, experiences, systems, and services for everyone. It also fuels innovation by forcing new ways of thinking and enhancing long-term brand loyalty.

Embedding inclusive design into overall business strategy improves the end result and brings in customers. This includes customers with disabilities who are a sizeable but still often disregarded customer base. In fact, it is estimated the disposable income of disabled people just in the U.S. is \$1.3 trillion,<sup>3</sup> equating to a considerable consumer force. Customers want to see accessible products and are willing to spend money on those products. A 2018 study found that for every one dollar spent on accessibility features and inclusive design, companies saw a nine dollar or more average return.<sup>4</sup> From focus groups conducted by The Access Coalition, we know that customers leave carts of products when businesses are inaccessible and take their business elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rod-group.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/The-Global-Economics-of-Disability-2024-The-Return-on-Disability-Group-September-24-2024.pdf?https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rod-group.com%2Fresearch-insights%2Fannual-report-2024%2F>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.forrester.com/report/The-BillionCustomer-Opportunity-Digital-Accessibility/RES143294>.

[https://www.thevaluable500.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Inclusive-Representation-White-Paper\\_Jan24.pdf](https://www.thevaluable500.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Inclusive-Representation-White-Paper_Jan24.pdf)

# Case Study:

# Inclusive Design is Core to the Business

## Renewed Strategic Focus for the Business

In an *open letter* to all employees, customers, and stakeholders dated September 10, 2024, the then new-in-role Starbucks ceo Brian Niccol announced a strategic vision for the 53-year-old retailer rooted in the experience in the company's thousands of brick-and-mortar locations: "Today, I'm making a commitment: We're getting back to Starbucks. We're refocusing on what has always set Starbucks apart—a welcoming coffeehouse where people gather, and where we serve the finest coffee, handcrafted by our skilled baristas. This is our enduring identity. We will innovate from here."

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2025/09/05/starbucks-cafe-renovations-accessible.html>

One of the signature pieces of this "Back to Starbucks" strategy, the company later announced, would be a makeover of roughly 1,000 locations by the end of 2026, with more to follow in subsequent years. These upgraded locations are meant to encourage customers to stay longer. With tweaks like improved insulation and dimmer lighting, these locations will become more accessible and inclusive.<sup>5</sup>

"We're uplifting more than 1,000 coffeehouses over the next year, blending our global heritage with local relevance to create spaces that are immersive, inclusive, and deeply human," Dawn Clark, Starbucks senior vice president of coffeehouse design and concepts, said *in a statement to CNBC*. "Whether it's the laid-back warmth of the Palisades or the urban energy of Manhattan, intentional design encourages customers to stay longer, connect more, and return often—and translates into meaningful business impact," Clark said.

1.6x  
2.6x  
2.0x  
“

Companies that have led on key disability inclusion criteria [...] have realized 1.6x more revenue, 2.6x more net income, and 2x more economic project than other participants.”

Source

“

Three industries formed the core of our research. Within these, we found that ***implementing inclusive design can lead to financial, economic and social benefits.*** This includes: within the ‘retail industry’, increases of \$4 billion in ‘household goods’ and ‘clothing, footwear and personal accessory sales’ due to non-inclusively designed products.”

Source

## **Inclusive Design in Practice and at Scale**

While exact design modifications vary by location, many of the “uplifts” focus on warming up the space to entice customers to stay and linger—and to return as their cozy coffeehouse of choice. Touches include more seating and an intentional assortment of furniture options that can meet a range of preferences—such as soft seating and chairs with and without arm rests. Many tables and chairs are easily movable and at an accessible height for wheelchair users. The sensory experience has been improved with more sound absorbing materials like acoustical panels and area rugs that reduce echo and ambient noise. New lighting fixtures soften the store’s lighting and reduce glare, while optimizing key visual features in the store like artwork and signage. Starbucks also brought back the electrical outlets that disappeared in prior makeovers so that customers who want to study or work from the location can charge their laptops or phones.

Trying to appeal to a wider swath of customers isn’t new for the company. A number of these design approaches are informed by Starbucks [\*previous commitment\*](#) to expand accessibility in the store experience using an Inclusive Design Framework, starting with the opening of its Union Market store in Washington, DC.

## Chapter 2:

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# Convene Your Stakeholders

Now that you are rooted in your why and have a foundational understanding of inclusive design, it is time to convene partners. Often the work of inclusive design and improving accessibility starts out as a team of one at many companies and organizations. Yet, inclusive design cannot be done in isolation—it thrives through collaboration, shared learning, and co-creation. Whether you are just beginning the journey, part of a growing accessibility unit, or a large organization with distributed teams, convening the right stakeholders, internally and externally, is what transforms intentions into sustained change.

At The Access Coalition, members have found that one of the most important elements to this work is co-creating with communities and disabled people with lived experience. This does not mean bringing in a group of people at the conclusion of the work, but rather engaging people with disabilities at every phase of design to bring in their valuable perspective and improve the work in real-time. When bringing in perspectives, accessibility of platforms should be considered and compensating people for their time as a best practice.

## Engage Internal Partners

Inclusive design work touches nearly every part of an organization. To be effective, it must be cross-functional—linking accessibility goals to business objectives, operations, and customer experience.

At The Access Coalition, the foundation of the work is the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and accompanying guidelines*, as well as *similar digital guidelines*. When building a team, having a team member with an understanding of compliance and code is important to set the baseline. The following are suggested steps to begin to engage internal partners. You can follow in this order or move through these steps as you find momentum.

## Build a Core Team

If you are a team of one or a small team, build your core group to include the necessary individuals that will help to create success. Start with a foundational team that includes:

- 
- Accessibility and compliance experts (ADA, building codes, WCAG 2.2),
  - Designers and architects who can translate inclusive principles into tangible design specifications,
  - Operations or facilities leads,
  - Communications and marketing professionals to help tell the story, and
  - Human resources or leaders for the employee experience.
- 

Bringing these perspectives together creates a holistic view of accessibility across your organization's ecosystem. It may take time to find all these individuals, and the core team may change as you work through various projects. Knowing people in your company across these various teams will help support the work as it grows and changes.

## Secure Executive Sponsorship

Executive sponsors or senior champions are pivotal. These are the decision makers and can bring in the funding you may need. You also need their buy-in to make bigger changes and pilot new innovations. These individuals:

- 
- Signal and reinforce across levels in the organization that accessibility is fundamental, not an afterthought;
  - Bring inclusive design into rooms where decisions are made about budgets, priorities, and planning;
  - Connect accessibility work across business lines and functions; and
  - Serve as internal and external spokespersons.
- 

Sponsorship is not symbolic; it is strategic and indispensable for the long-term success of the work. Leaders who champion accessibility help ensure resources, accountability, and alignment with broader business priorities. Chapter six delves into proving the return on investment (ROI) for accessibility. This will be necessary when securing executive sponsorship and proving the business case.

## Engage Employee Resource Groups (ERGs/BRGs)

Your disability employee resource group (ERG) or business resource group (BRG) is a critical internal partner. It is likely the ERG/BRG is already active on conversations around accessibility internal to the company. By engaging them, they can:

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Identify accessibility gaps and propose actionable solutions;

Participate in user testing;

Amplify internal storytelling and education; and

Provide lived-experience perspectives.

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A best practice is to compensate participants for their time through stipends, professional development opportunities, or leadership visibility. Supplement ERG input with subject-matter experts in UX, human-centered design, and accessibility research.

## Find the Intersections

Inclusive design becomes sustainable when tied to company and brand strategy. As The Access Coalition has found, accessibility is good for business. By connecting inclusive design and accessibility with ongoing efforts and current brand strategies, you can leverage momentum. You are likely to find intersections with innovation and product development, customer and employee experience metrics, real estate and facility upgrades that are already occurring, workforce goals, and brand reputation. Connecting inclusive design to existing business priorities can unlock funding and attention.

“

Connecting inclusive design to existing business priorities can unlock funding and attention.”

## Engage External Partners

No organization can do this work alone. Especially when teams are at the beginning of the work, finding partnership is critical to success. Thought partnership, problem solving, and feedback are essential to ongoing success. The following are a few external partner suggestions that can support inclusive design efforts. In addition, find The Access Coalition's list of strategic advisors at the beginning of this Playbook as great resources and potential partners.

### Engage and Co-Create with Disabled People

The individuals most impacted by the work you are doing should also provide the most immediate feedback. Creating focus groups and working closely with nationally recognized experts can help to keep the work grounded and aligned with the need.

## Collaborate with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

Engage external SMEs across inclusive design, UX research, policy, legal compliance, and architecture. These experts can provide feedback on your ideas, progress, pilots, and strategy. Further, seek diversity of perspective when engaging SMEs to ensure you have a variety of perspectives you are bringing into your work.

### Partner with Suppliers and Manufacturers

Work with suppliers to introduce more accessible products and materials into the marketplace. As a company, if a product in your space is not working and not accessible, leverage your purchasing power and sourcing requirements to motivate suppliers to create something different that does work for more users. Be innovative. Encourage manufacturers to test and improve their designs with disabled users.

## Build Relationships with Architecture and Design Firms

Architectural partners are key in embedding accessibility and inclusive design into early planning. The firms can help to better understand detailed federal, state, and local minimum code requirements and collaborate with you on going above and beyond the legal baseline in new construction. Encourage co-creation, iterative feedback, and compliance reviews at multiple stages.

### Collaborate with Landlords and Real Estate Partners

Your landlord is a crucial stakeholder. Inclusive space design can be a selling point. Negotiate accessibility features into lease agreements and use inclusive design as part of your brand strategy.

## Case Study:

# The Access Coalition Bentonville Design Sprint

### Background

The Access Coalition embarked on a mission to co-design more inclusive restroom experiences for all customers. The effort was framed within the coalition's Year 1 goal: to "co-design and develop more inclusive restroom spaces to integrate standards into the Inclusive Spaces Framework and put new designs into practice." This initiative sought to ensure dignity, comfort, and independence for all guests, especially those with disabilities.

### Methodology: Co-Creation and Research

Multiple partners of The Access Coalition convened at the Inclusive Restroom Co-Creation Workshop at the Sam's Club Clubhouse a Design Thinking Studio. The workshop brought together shoppers with disabilities (including wheelchair users and blind or low-vision participants), and caregivers to share lived experiences and co-develop design ideas.

### Research & Empathy Building

Participants first visited multiple retailers leading up to the workshop and at the beginning to observe various ways accessibility has been implemented or where it missed the target. Shoppers were invited to move through a full restroom journey using a cardboard prototyping space, simulating real-world constraints and interactions following "think aloud protocol" to share their thoughts. Facilitators led low-fidelity journey mapping, identifying friction points around wayfinding, stall entry, usage, and cleanup.

### Design Thinking Approach

1. Teams used "Learn, Imagine, Try, and Test" phases inspired by design thinking.
2. Multiple low-fidelity prototypes were built using simple materials like cardboard, chimes, tape, Legos, scissors and tactile markers to test accessibility concepts before investing in full-scale remodels.
3. Inclusive personas were integrated into all exercises to ensure intersectional design perspectives across mobility, sensory, and cognitive experiences.



Making change in the retail space begins with collaboration. The Access Coalition is bringing together large retailers, nonprofits, and business partners such as us at LockNet to change design standards and implement real changes for customers with disabilities. We are ready to demonstrate the business case for accessibility, together.”

**Elise Miller**  
Director of Business  
Development, LockNet

## Key Insights

The workshops generated critical insights across multiple experience phases:

Stage	Challenge Identified	Inclusive Design Opportunity
<b>Wayfinding &amp; Identification</b>	Difficulty locating restrooms due to inconsistent visually based signage or poor contrast.	Introduce digital or tactile wayfinding cues, improved signage with visual and auditory indicators.
<b>Entry &amp; Stall Access</b>	Heavy or non-automatic doors, unclear occupancy cues.	Implement automatic doors, clear tactile signage, and visual indicators of occupancy.
<b>Stall Usage &amp; Cleanup</b>	Limited maneuverability and inconsistent fixture layouts.	Standardize fixture placement, add transfer supports and adult changing stations for dignity.
<b>Maintenance &amp; Feedback</b>	Lack of awareness on upkeep and accessibility upkeep.	Incorporate feedback mechanisms and accessible maintenance checklists for associates.

## Impact

The Inclusive Restrooms co-creation exercise demonstrated:

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Cross-functional collaboration between store design, accessibility, and associate experience teams.

Direct user involvement in shaping the physical environment.

Scalable design learnings that informed broader accessibility guidelines within the Inclusive Design Framework, helping to embed inclusion as a standard practice in store planning and remodeling.

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## Bringing It All Together

At The Access Coalition, our member companies have shown that meaningful change happens when design teams, executives, employees, community members, and industry partners collaborate around a shared vision: a retail experience that welcomes everyone.

The next step is to understand where you are starting from. In Chapter 3, we will explore how to assess your current state of accessibility and inclusivity—establishing a baseline that will guide your strategy and enable you to measure your progress over time.



# \$25 billion

## “

The GDP could get a boost up to \$25 billion if just one percent more of persons with disabilities joined the U.S. labor force.”

Source

## Chapter 3:

# Assess Your Starting Point

To create spaces, products, and services that truly work for everyone, you first need to understand where you are starting. Assessing your current level of accessibility may begin with compliance but moves beyond a simple checklist. Assessing your starting point with your core team is an opportunity to uncover insights, discover more about the customer and employee experience, and design for impact.

Accessibility compliance is the baseline, not the ceiling. A space can meet all the legal and technical standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and still not be welcoming, usable, or inclusive. True accessibility and inclusivity ensures that every customer and employee can navigate, participate, and contribute with ease and confidence.

For example:

1. A building may advertise an “accessible entrance” and have a ramp that technically meets the requirements of the ADA, but the entrance with the ramp is tucked away behind a service entrance, resulting in a difficult and extended distance to navigate and an othering experience.
2. A digital kiosk might meet screen-reader standards but still be hard to use for users with intellectual disabilities or a person who needs the content read to them.
3. A staff breakroom may have a physically accessible entrance with tables that have clearance but have lighting that triggers sensory sensitivity.

These experiences remind us that “compliance” may allow only some access, but inclusive design promotes belonging to all.

## Think Across Disabilities

When assessing your starting point, consider the diversity of disability experiences. As described above with the three examples, access for someone with one disability may not be access for someone else. Reflecting back on the definition of inclusive design from Chapter 1, the goal is to provide choice throughout spaces, rather than a one size fits all design. When assessing your starting point, be ready to view your spaces from a variety of perspectives. Begin with a framework across functional areas (noting: this does not capture all disabilities and is a simple framework to begin):

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**Vision:** Contrast, lighting, signage, and tactile wayfinding.

**Auditory:** Acoustics, noise control, captioning, and assistive listening systems.

**Mobility:** Paths of travel, furniture spacing, counter heights, and door operations.

**Dexterity/Reach:** Controls, handles, touchscreens, and shelf placement.

**Cognitive:** Wayfinding simplicity, labeling, information hierarchy, and sensory load.

**Speech:** Alternative communication options and visual interfaces.

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As you begin to assess your starting point, engage your external partners, in particular, national disability experts, ERGs/BRGs, and potential focus groups for feedback. This will allow you to more holistically reflect perspectives across your spaces. Inclusive design is most effective when it anticipates a wide range of disabilities, and when it recognizes that everyone benefits from a more accessible environment.

“

Inclusive design is most effective when it anticipates a wide range of disabilities, and when it recognizes that everyone benefits from a more accessible environment.”

## Map the Journey

One of the most powerful tools for assessing accessibility is journey mapping: tracing the real-world experience of moving through your space or using your services from start to finish. Select a specific retail store or environment and map the journey a customer or employee may take, including any pre-planning that individuals may require, digital tools that complement the physical in-store experience, and the infrastructure that connects people to your location. As you do this, consider the following questions:

1. Where do friction points or barriers emerge?
2. Where does the environment seem mismatched with users?
3. What assumptions are being made?
4. How could small environmental or process changes make the experience smoother, including reducing the amount of advance planning required to confirm the experience will be accessible to all users?

Map the journey again as you consider the disability framework provided above. Best practice is to bring in other partners with lived-experience to help you map the journey and get real-world perspectives.

## Assess by Functional Area

Because retail and workplace environments can be complex, it is helpful to assess accessibility by functional area or zone. This makes it easier to identify issues without feeling overwhelmed. The Access Coalition has built the Inclusive Spaces Framework (described in later chapters) around functional areas that may be a helpful starting point, but there are likely many other areas specific to your retail environment. Some of these areas include:

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Entrance	Ambiance and Lighting
Paths of Travel	Pharmacy
Goods and Services	Aisles
Point of Sale	Signage
Bathroom	Digital
Preparation and Back of House (Employee Areas)	

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Many of these functional areas overlap and interact with others. For example, lighting that supports visibility in customer spaces can also improve employee well-being and safety. Digital is a broad category that crosses many of the others, plus may enhance the overall physical accessibility of a space. In addition, some of the areas have well defined standards while others have minimal or no standards but still have barriers to accessibility. Identify the functional area or areas that are most relevant to your space and begin with a few. Start small with your first assessment as you can always scale later.

## Reimagine the Experience

Assessment is not just about identifying barriers. Assessment is about reimagining what is possible and innovation. Once you understand your baseline in your identified functional areas, turn those insights into opportunities for innovation. Gather your internal team you identified in Chapter 2 and begin to identify areas for change, keeping in mind that small changes can have big impacts.

## Aim for Systems Thinking

Accessibility should not live in one department or be an afterthought added late in design. Instead, approach accessibility and inclusive design as a system: an interconnected experience that supports both customers and employees.

Ask yourself: What does the end-to-end experience look and feel like for someone with a disability? What does it look like for an older adult? What does the experience look like for a caregiver? Who else is my customer and how are they experiencing my space? From pre-planning a visit, to entering a building, to moving through and exiting the space, each step is part of the ecosystem of accessibility. Each of these steps also involves new design elements and new individuals on your team.

Proactive, built-in solutions ultimately reduce pre-planning or anxiety about accessibility and prevent awkward or “othering” situations. Building accessibility into the system itself enhances the customer and employee experience, plus it improves independence and choice.

“

The Access Coalition is a powerful example of the positive impact that can occur when industry comes together with community to co-create spaces that reflect and adapt to the range of consumer experiences. It is coalitions like this that make the goals of the Americans with Disabilities Act, of Equal Opportunity, Full Participation, Independent Living, and Economic Self-Sufficiency achievable, and it is the work of coalitions like this that make it easier for us to embrace our disability pride.”

### Maria Town

President & CEO of the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), and Convener of The Access Coalition

# Case Study:

# Building the Inclusive Spaces Framework

Later in this Playbook, you will find the Inclusive Spaces Framework. Before delving into this tool, it is helpful to understand how and why it was developed. This is a brief preview into why a framework of design standards was created to expand inclusion in retail. For a more comprehensive read, [find a blog written by the authors of the Framework on The Access Coalition LinkedIn here.](#)

## **Starbucks Inclusive Design Journey:**

Starbucks recognized that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) sets a critical baseline, and uncovered a lot of existing technical and high-level principles-based guidance for improving accessibility in built spaces. But they weren't certain what new inclusive design standards to start to integrate into stores.

## **Developing the Inclusive Spaces Framework:**

In 2020 Starbucks set out to create a framework. Grounded in that data, they convened internal teams spanning coffehouse design and construction, technology, operations, and others, as well as their employee resource group for accessibility, and from the [Signing Store](#)

in Washington, DC. They also partnered with accessibility subject matter experts representing architecture, policy, and legal fields. Through multiple design sprints, they ideated on how to address common barriers in the store experience across five broad categories of disability to better design environments for doing things like placing and picking up orders or brewing and serving coffee.

## **From Framework to Reality:**

The Starbucks [Union Market Store](#) in Washington, DC, which opened in February 2024, served as the first store to use the Framework from the earliest concepting and design. This store opening coincided with a commitment to continue to expand accessibility in their store experience going forward.

## Get Started

Assessing your starting point is both a mirror and a map. This is an important part of the process that shows you where you are beginning and illuminates your vision of innovation and design. The goal is not perfection, but progress: building systems that anticipate needs, reduce friction, and create more inclusive environments for all.

At The Access Coalition, our members have found that accessibility assessment is not just a technical process. It sparks dialogue, drives innovation, and creates the foundation for inclusive design that benefits everyone.

In Chapter 4, we will turn insight into action and begin to explore how to put tools into practice, build inclusive design into your operations, and turn accessibility from a project into a sustained practice.

“

The goal is not perfection, but progress: building systems that anticipate needs, reduce friction, and create more inclusive environments for all.”

## Chapter 4:

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# Put Tools into Practice

Putting inclusive design into practice doesn't have to mean starting from scratch. Across the retail sector and industries, proven frameworks and field-tested tools already exist to guide teams through this work. The opportunity (and challenge) is to find those that best fit your company's inclusive design goals and make the tools your own. Building from established resources saves time, reduces duplication, and allows your team to learn from leaders who have already tested what works.

The goal of this chapter is to provide tools that members of The Access Coalition use and have developed, as well as other resources that can accelerate your progress. Adapt, refine, and evolve these tools to align with your brand and operational practices. The tools provided in this chapter focus on built environments with crossover to digital and operational components common in retail settings but are applicable across many settings.

“

There's often a gap between wanting an accessible restroom and knowing how to make it happen. I'm proud to support this playbook because it gives operators a clear, practical guide. It removes the guesswork and makes inclusive design easier to act on.

**Jacob Fedosky**  
President, Step 'n Wash

## Prioritize Where to Start

What matters most is getting started. As noted in the last chapter, begin where there is momentum, a clear opportunity, or an immediate customer or employee need. These can all be identified through conversations with different teams, surveys with customers, observations in stores, performance metrics, or assessment of legal compliance. Avoid the trap of trying to address every barrier at once as this will slow progress and overwhelm teams. As the saying often goes, you do not need to “boil the ocean” when you are getting started. Instead, start with one functional area or space, one store, or one experience. Once proven effective, standardize the improvements to ensure consistency and replicability across locations and teams.

Utilize the tools provided here, in particular the Inclusive Spaces Framework, to help identify a functional area or space and how best to go about improvements. The Access Coalition begins with the assumption that functional areas and spaces are already meeting the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance—this is the floor or baseline for the work. If you do not know if a space is compliant with the ADA, conduct an accessibility audit. Utilize internal experts, work with the experts provided at the beginning of this playbook, or reach out to your regional ADA Technical Assistance Center for suggestions to carry out an accessibility audit of your space. Then, make changes to meet compliance. Once your identified space is meeting compliance, determine how to go above this and how far above you will go to meet customer and employee needs.

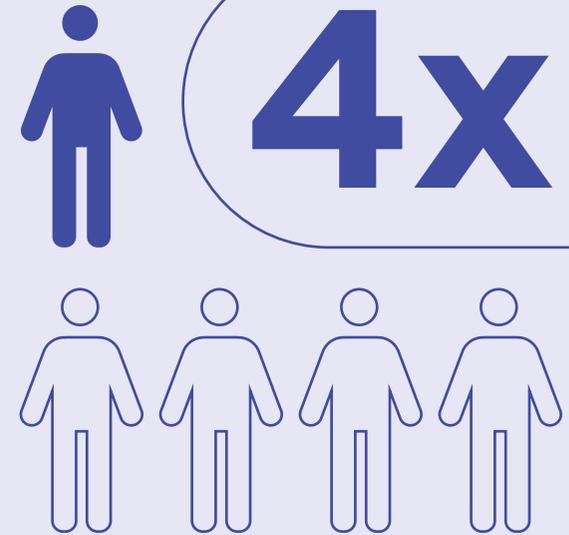
## Embrace That Small Changes = Big Impact

Chapter 6 will delve into return on investment, but it is worth noting that you do not always need major capital investments to improve accessibility. Many impactful changes can be achieved through operational adjustments or simple design decisions.

Small changes can:

1. Improve the experience, comfort, and independence for disabled customers and employees.
2. Increase dwell time and repeat visits.
3. Demonstrate clear, ongoing commitment to accessibility.

Setting clear goals, timelines, ownership, and metrics will allow progress to be tracked so that larger changes can be built into budgets in the future. Teams will want to adopt a mindset of continuous improvement and celebrate early wins to build momentum. Some teams may decide to design a completely new store or location that fully exceeds all standards in every space. This will require more significant investment. Others may determine a single design element like signage or acoustics or lighting is a barrier to accessibility and focus on scaling improvements to this element across many locations.



Inclusively designed products and services can reach and benefit up to four times the size of the intended audience.

Source

## Case Study:

# Walmart Sensory Friendly Hours (SFH)

### Small Changes, Big Impact: Sensory-Friendly Hours

Walmart recognized an opportunity to create a more inclusive shopping experience for neurodiverse customers without requiring significant capital investment. The solution was simple yet powerful: identify and reduce sensory input by adjusting lighting and acoustics.

### Discovery

The journey began with research into Walmart's international markets to identify customer-facing initiatives for neurodiverse communities. This exploration revealed that Walmart Chile had successfully implemented quiet hours in its stores, providing a model for consideration.

### Testing

Building on this insight, Walmart coordinated a U.S. pilot of Sensory-Friendly Hours (SFH). The approach was straightforward: lower the lights, turn off the in-store radio, and make TV walls static and silent. These changes required minimal investment and were tested across all Walmart stores and Neighborhood Markets every Saturday for several months.

### Brand Perception

The response was overwhelmingly positive with customers expressing appreciation. Media coverage amplified the impact, highlighting how SFH supported the neurodiverse community. The initiative was later featured in Case Studies in Disability-Driven Innovation by Robert Ludke.

### Scaling

Encouraged by the success of the pilot, Walmart expanded SFH to every day from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. in all U.S. and Puerto Rico stores, with no planned end date. Walmart Canada & Mexico also adopted the initiative, reinforcing its commitment to inclusivity.

### Associate Feedback

The benefits extended beyond customers. Many associates have given feedback that sensory friendly hours help them feel like they belong, and they're proud to work for a company that prioritizes accessibility and inclusion.

## Lean Into Intersections Between Physical and Digital Solutions

Today, it is rare for a customer or employee to engage with a physical retail environment without using a digital tool or having a digital experience in some way. Retail is increasingly hybrid in every form. This may involve pre-planning—an individual planning how they get to and navigate a physical retail environment through the use of digital tools. A customer may use their phone to order at a food and beverage retailer even though they are physically inside the location. Not every accessibility challenge can be solved through built environment changes alone. Inclusive design increasingly needs to connect the physical and digital worlds. Digital tools can expand independence, provide choice, and support communication and navigation. Thus, when using the tools provided, selecting your space, and getting started, consider where digital accessibility can:

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Support communication and point of sale.

Improve wayfinding and real-time information access.

Reduce anxiety and uncertainty before and during a visit.

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## Strategize on Feedback Loops and Iteration

Inclusive design is an active, ongoing practice. As spaces evolve through new fixtures, technology, or operations, accessibility performance must be evaluated and refined. Improving one functional area or space, one store, or one experience is not a static experience for individuals or teams. Inclusive design involves establishing feedback loops and iteration. Not only can design change with fixtures failing, furniture moving, or other built environmental changes, but when it comes to digital accessibility, the standards are quickly evolving, and digital accessibility shifts easily with coding changes.

Teams should establish feedback loops through:

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Obtaining feedback from people with disabilities and customers important to their design efforts.

Onsite observation and accessibility walk-throughs at regular intervals.

Quantitative indicators such as customer satisfaction, return visits, and incident reports.

Existing data reviews already present in feedback channels (customer surveys, contact center calls, chats) for comments from disabled customers, parents, caregivers to identify where inaccessible experiences may lie. Create automated reports based on keywords that hint at inaccessibility without using the specific language.

---

Teams should be prepared for course correction as occasionally one improvement may conflict with another need.

“

[T]he Inclusive Spaces Framework provides practical standards on accessibility that can be implemented by teams. Other resources support usability and experience while leaving room for creativity and brand expression.”

## Let's Talk Costs

Inclusive design is most cost-effective when integrated early. Retrofitting spaces after construction can be expensive or disruptive and may not result in the most accessible and inclusive spaces. Teams can be conscious of costs by making intentional decisions across their functional areas, spaces, and stores. For example, if a team is buying furniture for a store, they can select furniture that meets a range of preferences, accessibility needs, and gathering spaces (small group, large table, high top, low top, etc.). These intentional decisions can save money and time with inclusive design at the forefront of decision making.

Additional strategies to manage cost include:

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Align upgrades with planned renovations or replacement cycles.

Leverage economies of scale by standardizing inclusive solutions across the company.

Set expectations with landlords and vendors in contracts and lease agreements.

---

Accessibility investments are strategic. Measuring ROI will support long-term prioritization and investment in this work across the organization. More discussion on ROI is provided in chapter 6.

## Existing Resources

When this work began for members of The Access Coalition, it was not about copying checklists, as many found the right tool didn't exist. The resources that follow were developed by The Access Coalition and chosen for their ability to bridge aspiration with practice, helping teams move confidently from intention to implementation. Specifically, the Inclusive Spaces Framework provides practical standards on accessibility that can be implemented by teams. Other resources support usability and experience while leaving room for creativity and brand expression. Use these tools as a launchpad: test them, adapt them, and utilize them to enable your teams to build on the foundation and accelerate implementation.



The Access  
Coalition

Creating More Inclusive  
Retail Spaces

# The Access Coalition's

Inclusive Spaces Framework Checklist

Creating truly inclusive retail spaces begins with the recognition that accessibility is both a civil rights obligation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and a design opportunity. The Inclusive Spaces Framework Checklist (“checklist”) is a practical tool to help retailers, small businesses, and other community spaces move from idea to implementation with actionable steps that teams can evaluate, test, and adopt across functional areas and store formats. Leveraging inclusive design methodology, the checklist helps to create spaces in which every customer and employee, including those with disabilities, can navigate and participate in the full experience.

This tool is grounded in a core truth: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is the floor—not the ceiling. ADA compliance is a federal civil rights requirement and represents the minimum standard for accessibility in the built environment. Compliance is not optional, and spaces must meet compliance standards prior to using this checklist. The checklist cannot be reasonably used until the entirety of the spaces being assessed meet ADA requirements. Only once compliance is confirmed can teams move confidently into identifying opportunities to exceed the minimum, remove remaining barriers, and improve both customer and employee experiences.

Building from this baseline, the checklist introduces a tiered approach that supports continuous improvement. The Inclusive Spaces Framework defines three tiers: A, AA, and AAA. The following is a brief overview of the tiers. A detailed description of the tiers is included in this document.

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**A** Good, spaces that meet all ADA requirements and exceed them in some areas.

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**AA** Better, spaces exceed ADA in most areas and ensure that essential functions are accessible as built or have a clear alternate mode.

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**AAA** Best, spaces exceed ADA throughout, ensuring that all essential functions are accessible without prior planning and that customers and employees have full choice and independence across the environment.

These tiers recognize progress rather than perfection. They allow teams to start where they are, improve over time, and align investment decisions with organizational priorities. They also acknowledge what the Access Coalition emphasizes: inclusive design is an ongoing practice, not a one-time retrofit. As fixtures change, technology evolves, and customer

expectations shift, accessibility must be revisited, evaluated, and refined. Regular feedback loops, store walk-throughs and roll-throughs, and customer and employee insights ensure the checklist remains a living tool that responds to real-world use and emerging needs.

Because of this commitment to continuous improvement, the checklist is being updated annually by The Access Coalition. This annual iteration cycle ensures the checklist keeps pace with emerging best practices, evolving digital-physical integration, and the lived experiences of disabled customers and employees. It also reinforces that inclusive design is a journey, not a destination, and one we move forward together through shared standards; cross-sector collaboration; and a willingness to test, adapt, and innovate.

We invite you to begin using this year’s edition of the Inclusive Spaces Framework Checklist. Begin with ADA compliance, identify where you can elevate beyond the minimum, and use the tiered framework to guide your path toward more accessible and inclusive spaces. The Access Coalition is committed to continually strengthening this tool and the environments it helps to shape.

# The Access Coalition | *Creating More Inclusive Retail Spaces*

**Framework Definition** | The Inclusive Spaces Framework establishes retail environments as welcoming, inclusive, and accessible to people with disabilities and all people, and strives for better customer and employee experiences.

Tier	A	AA	AAA
	<b>Good</b>	<b>Better</b>	<b>Best</b>
<b>Tier Description</b>	<p>ADA requirements are exceeded in some areas of the space.</p> <p>Additional upgrades, training, or add-ons may be needed in the future or to meet the needs of all.</p>	<p>ADA guidelines are exceeded in most areas of the space.</p> <p>Essential functions are either accessible as built, or have at least one clear, alternate mode to address key disability categories.</p>	<p>ADA guidelines are exceeded throughout the entire space.</p> <p>Essential functions are accessible as built.</p> <p>Full customer and employee experience is available without prior planning for people with a range of disabilities.</p>

**Better Customer & Employee Experience  
More Choice & Independence**

The Framework is built on Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Compliance. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal civil-rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. In the built environment (such as retail), it requires that new construction, alterations, and additions comply with specific accessibility (scoping and technical) standards, and that owners of existing public accommodation or commercial facilities remove architectural barriers when doing so is “readily achievable” (i.e. feasible without undue difficulty or expense).

# Checklist Instructions

Review the guidelines on the following pages and mark which ones pertain to your current or future built space. Once you've completed the checklist, verify which tier has the most check-marks to better understand the current status.

# Entrance Guidelines

An accessible entrance is often the first stop in an inclusive retail experience and signals that all are welcome.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Exterior Paths</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>1A.</b> For store-maintained exterior path(s) of travel, at least one path leverages ADA guidelines for accessible routes.	<input type="radio"/> <b>1AA.</b> For store-maintained exterior path(s) of travel, multiple paths leverage ADA guidance.	<input type="radio"/> <b>1AAA.</b> For store-maintained exterior path(s) of travel, multiple paths leverage ADA guidance with at least one that exceeds ADA.
<b>Exterior Door Signage</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>2A.</b> Any doors that are specifically intended for entry and, separately, for exit, are labeled using the ADA signage guidelines.	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Exterior Wayfinding</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>3AAA.</b> A combination of (visual, tactile, and/or audible) cues signal when individuals are approaching the other side of any interior or exterior door.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Exterior Doors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>4A.</b> All customer-facing manual doors in the store leverage ADA guidelines for closing speed, operating force, sight lines, handles, clearance, and thresholds. Exterior doors include a doorbell to request assistance if needed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>4AA.</b> All exterior doors are either automatic (e.g. via press button) or have a power assist feature, and are labeled according to ADA guidelines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>4AAA.</b> All exterior doors are fully automatic (e.g. sensor activated), and are labeled according to ADA guidelines.</li> </ul>
<b>Interior Doors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>5A.</b> All BOH interior doors in the store leverage ADA guidelines for closing speed, operating force, and handles. Maneuvering clearance requirements are met where feasible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>5AA.</b> All BOH interior doors in the store leverage ADA guidelines for closing speed, operating force, handles, and clearance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>5AAA.</b> All BOH interior doors are either automatic (e.g. via press button) or have a power assist feature, and are labeled according to ADA guidelines.</li> </ul>
<b>Accessibility Features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>6A.</b> Signage legibly provides information about amenities inside and outside of the store including accessibility options on-site.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>6AA.</b> Each store's accessibility features are listed online.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>6AAA.</b> Availability status of accessibility features and services is provided in real time online and in app.</li> </ul>

# Paths of Travel

A continuous, unobstructed pedestrian path around and through a retail space allows people to approach, enter, explore, and exit with ease.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Line of Sight</b>	○ <b>7A.</b> An unobstructed line of sight is available from anywhere in the store to all functional areas (e.g. Entry, menu, register, pickup, seating, bathroom).	○ —	○ —
<b>Interior Paths: Customer</b>	○ <b>8A.</b> The primary, and most direct, interior path of travel—extending from the entry to each functional area in the store (e.g. register, seating, restrooms)—is accessible, leveraging ADA.	○ <b>8AA.</b> Multiple interior paths of travel extend from the entry to each zone in the store (e.g. POS, handoff area, furniture, restrooms, etc.) that leverages the ADA clearance guidelines.	○ <b>8AAA.</b> At least one interior path of travel—extending from the entry to each zone in the store (e.g. register, seating, restrooms)—is barrier-free, exceeding ADA guidelines.
<b>Interior Paths: Employee</b>	○ <b>9A.</b> The primary interior path of travel—connecting the employee entrance to each functional bar and back-of-house space—is optimized for accessibility as feasible.	○ <b>9AA.</b> At least one interior path of travel—that connects from the employee entrance to each functional area in the back of house—is accessible, leveraging ADA and CBC guidelines.	○ <b>9AAA.</b> At least one interior path of travel that connects the employee entrance to each functional area in the bar area and back-of-house is barrier-free, exceeding ADA and CBC guidelines where feasible.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Interior Wayfinding</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>10AA.</b> Interior wayfinding signage and cues (e.g. overhead or on-floor signage, etc) meets ADA requirements, and exceeds wherever possible.	<input type="radio"/> <b>10AAA.</b> Interior wayfinding signage and cues are perceptible at varying distances and in two or more formats (visual, audible, tactile).
<b>Exterior Wayfinding: Employee</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>11A.</b> Company-maintained exterior path(s) of travel to employee-only entrances have signage indicating the accessibility of the entrance, leveraging ADA and CBC guidelines.	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>11AAA.</b> Exterior wayfinding signage and cues are perceptible at varying distances and in two or more formats (visual, audible, tactile).
<b>Point of Sale: Wayfinding</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>12AA.</b> Wayfinding signage is used at the Bar and BOH where line of sight cannot be established. Signage meets or exceeds ADA & CBC standards wherever possible.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Waiting Area Paths of Travel</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>13AAA.</b> Waiting areas are distinguished from other store areas through multiple modes (visual, audible, tactile) to provide maximum clear space for people with disabilities and to minimize crowding.

# Goods and Services

User-friendly environments provide a variety of options for interacting with products and customer touch points.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Visual Information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>14A.</b> Key visual information in a store (menus, marketing, and other signage not already regulated by the ADA) is easy to both perceive (non-glare, high contrast, font size, lighting, mounting heights, angles) and comprehend (simple language, icons wherever possible).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>14AA.</b> Key visual information in a store (menus, marketing, etc. —whether analog or digital) is available in multiple locations, and can be read at varied heights and distances.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>14AAA.</b> Key information in a store is available in two or more formats (visual, audible, tactile).</li> </ul>
<b>Customer Interaction Points</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>15A.</b> All customer touchpoints that are not explicitly regulated by the ADA follow guidance for heights, reach ranges, and approach.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>15AA.</b> Key customer touchpoints are built leveraging California Building Code guidelines (which are more stringent than ADA), and include multiple height options where possible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>15AAA.</b> All customer touchpoints exceed ADA guidelines in variability of heights to match user needs (e.g., drive-thru window, POS, counters, hand dryers).</li> </ul>
<b>Product Placement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>16A.</b> At least one of each product available for sale on the retail floor is located within ADA-specified reach ranges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>16AAA.</b> A reasonable percentage of each product available for sale on the retail floor is located within ADA-specified reach ranges.</li> </ul>

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Point of Sale: Stations</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>17A.</b> All POS stations leverage ADA guidelines for accessibility.	<input type="radio"/> <b>17AA.</b> All POS stations meet California Building Code requirements (for heights, approach, location, tactile markers, etc.).	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Point of Sale: Order/Total Confirmation</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>18A.</b> Order and total are confirmed verbally before purchase, and visually upon request.	<input type="radio"/> <b>18AA.</b> A visual confirmation of the order and total is available to all customers before purchase.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Customer Notifications: Delivery</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>19A.</b> Customer-facing announcements and notifications are delivered either through clear audible signals (e.g., verbal announcement) or legibly posted via digital screens, leveraging ADA guidelines.	<input type="radio"/> <b>19AA.</b> Customer-facing announcements and notifications are delivered in two or more formats (visual, audible, tactile).	<input type="radio"/> <b>19AAA.</b> All customers can receive order status notifications on their personal devices.
<b>Customer Notifications: Format</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>20AA.</b> Customer-facing announcements and notifications delivered via digital screens can be seen from multiple locations.	<input type="radio"/> —

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Store &amp; Product Visual Information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>21A.</b> Any store-provided visual information on customer-facing products is legible from 1' away, leveraging ADA guidelines.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>21AAA.</b> Product information is available in two or more formats (visual, audible, tactile).</li> </ul>
<b>Employee-Customer Communication</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>22AAA.</b> Employees have tools to communicate with customers via two or more methods.</li> </ul>
<b>Order Labeling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>23A.</b> Add labels to all customer orders for pickup to clearly distinguish items from those of another customer.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>23AA.</b> Multiple methods for labeling are used to distinguish customer orders for pickup from a handoff area.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>
<b>Ordering Options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>24A.</b> Stores provide tools to place orders without speaking, available upon request (writing, typing, app, etc.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>24AA.</b> Stores automatically provide tools to place orders without speaking (writing, typing, app, etc.).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>24AAA.</b> Customers have at least one option to place orders in stores independently without need to interact with an employee.</li> </ul>

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Employee Assistance to Customers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>25A.</b> Stores are equipped with steps, footrests, or other assistive devices that customers may request to improve access to seating.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>25AA.</b> Employees have preparation and tools to effectively provide assistance to customers with disabilities upon request. Training is provided on clear expectations for restroom use and use of inclusive language when working with customers. This includes etiquette when interacting with customers with disabilities who require restroom access and needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>25AAA.</b> Employees proactively offer assistance to all customers and have preparation and tools to effectively provide assistance to customers with disabilities.</li> </ul>
<b>Point of Sale: Alternatives for Transactions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>26AA.</b> Stores are equipped with at least one POS that accepts non-insertion methods for card payments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>26AAA.</b> Alternatives to cash and credit card payment are available (e.g., biometric authentication, prepaid account, settling a tab, etc.).</li> </ul>
<b>Order Delivery Options</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>27A.</b> Customers have multiple options (speaking, writing, typing, in-app, etc.) to specify their order delivery preferences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>27AA.</b> Customers can specify their order delivery preferences in the app, and have these preferences saved as the default setting for future orders.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Carrying Products</b>	○ —	○ —	○ <b>28AAA.</b> Stores provide multiple means for customers to carry items (e.g., bag, basket, tray).
<b>Accessible Seating</b>	○ —	○ <b>29AA.</b> Stores provide a variety of accessible seating options that suit a range of customer preferences and social gatherings.	○ <b>29AAA.</b> Customers can reserve accessible furniture in stores, online, or in app.

# Bathroom: Single Use

Functional and easy to use bathrooms for all individuals, families and employees to use is important for an inclusive experience.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Space for Personal Belongings (Single Use)</b>	<p><input type="radio"/> <b>30A.</b> Customers have a secure, accessible place to store belongings in the restroom, fitting room, or other single-person occupancy space.</p> <p>If a restroom features a shelf, shelf is a flip-down shelf with an automatic return; and/or, if restroom features a permanent shelf, it is achieved in combination with another, compliant accessory, e.g. a shelf on top of a toilet paper dispenser.</p> <p>All shelves have rounded edges with a raised lip to prevent contact injury and items slipping off.</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> —</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> —</p>

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Fixtures (Single Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>31AA.</b> Restroom functions (flushing, water/soap/towel dispensing) leverage no-touch technology to activate. Develop and implement maintenance schedules to ensure that touchless controls are properly calibrated and kept in working order.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Reach (Single Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>32A.</b> All restrooms implement CBC accessory reach ranges (e.g. 40" AFF to accessory outlets and operable parts).	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Changing Tables (Single Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>33AAA.</b> Changing tables in restrooms are powered, height adjustable, and can accommodate an individual up to 300lbs.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Restroom Occupancy (Single Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>34A.</b> Restroom occupancy is clearly indicated in both visual and tactile methods.	<input type="radio"/> <b>34AA.</b> Restrooms feature an additional method—e.g., an audible or illuminated indicator—to communicate whether the restroom is vacant or occupied.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Mirrors (Single Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>35A.</b> A mirror is provided that meets ADA requirements for height and clear floor space.	<input type="radio"/> <b>35AA.</b> At least one or more mirror is provided that exceeds ADA requirements, e.g. a tilted wall or floor length mirror.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Doors (Single Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>36A.</b> Bathroom door handle can be operated with a closed fist.	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>36AAA.</b> Door lock mechanisms can be operated in multiple ways, e.g. using a keypad, using a swipe card or fob, or using an (accessible) app.

# Bathroom: Multi-Use

Functional and easy to use bathrooms for all individuals, families and employees to use is important for an inclusive experience.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Space for Personal Belongings (Multi-Use)</b>	<p><input type="radio"/> <b>30A.</b> Customers have a secure, accessible place to store belongings in the stall.</p> <p>If a restroom features a shelf, shelf is a flip-down shelf with an automatic return; and/or, if restroom features a permanent shelf, it is achieved in combination with another, compliant accessory, e.g. a shelf on top of a toilet paper dispenser).</p> <p>All shelves have rounded edges with a raised lip to prevent contact injury and items slipping off.</p> <p>Shelf (flip-down or permanent) is installed on a permanent wall, or on a well-secured partition.</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> —</p>	<p><input type="radio"/> <b>30AAA.</b> Secure locker compartments for personal items (that meet requirements for operable parts and reach ranges, and do not reduce widths for accessible path of travel) are available outside of multi-occupancy restroom facilities.</p>

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Fixtures (Multi-Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>31AA.</b> Restroom functions (flushing, water/soap/towel dispensing) leverage no-touch technology to activate. Develop and implement maintenance schedules to ensure that touchless controls are properly calibrated and kept in working order.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Reach (Multi-Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>32A.</b> All restrooms implement CBC accessory reach ranges (e.g. 40" AFF to accessory outlets and operable parts).	<input type="radio"/> <b>32AA.</b> Incorporate built-in features to create a more comfortable reach range experience for bathroom amenities, e.g. a Step 'n Wash.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Changing Tables (Multi-Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>33AA.</b> Include changing tables in all restrooms: adult changing table if possible, baby changing if not.	<input type="radio"/> —

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Restroom Occupancy (Multi-Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>34A.</b> Restroom occupancy is clearly indicated in both visual and tactile methods.	<input type="radio"/> <b>34AA.</b> Multi-occupancy restrooms feature a lighting cue to communicate whether a stall is vacant or occupied.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Mirrors (Multi-Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>35A.</b> A mirror is provided that meets ADA requirements for height and clear floor space.	<input type="radio"/> <b>35AA.</b> At least one mirror is provided that exceeds ADA requirements, e.g. a tilted wall or floor length mirror.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Doors (Multi-Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>36A.</b> Bathroom door handle can be operated with a closed fist. Door lock keypad mechanisms meet the requirements for keypads inside elevators.	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>36AAA.</b> Where space permits, restrooms have doorless entry that meet requirements for accessible paths of travel.
<b>Trash Cans (Multi-Use)</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>37AA.</b> A trash can is placed in the accessible stall in all men's restrooms (at minimum), out of the turning radius, does not protrude, and does not restrict access to grab bars or reach.	<input type="radio"/> —

# Preparation and Back of House

Accessible work stations, break rooms, communications, and tools for employees can improve morale and efficiency.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Employee Space For Personal Belongings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>38A.</b> Employees have a secure, accessible place to store belongings. If that does not exist in place, then one can be provided readily.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>
<b>Workstations: Reach and Height</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>39A.</b> A reasonable percentage of service items required for order preparation are located within ADA-specified reach ranges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>39AA.</b> All workstations in order preparation and delivery areas leverage California Building Code requirements for reach ranges, heights, clearance, and approach.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>
<b>Workstations: Force and Dexterity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>40AA.</b> Equipment and tools used in order preparation and delivery areas leverage California Building Code requirements for force and dexterity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>40AAA.</b> Equipment and tools used for order preparation and delivery leverage CBC guidance for force and dexterity, and can be operated with one hand either as-built or with available add-ons.</li> </ul>

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Workstations: Notifications</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>41AA.</b> All status and process indicators on food and beverage preparation equipment have one alternate mode of notification available upon request.	<input type="radio"/> <b>41AAA.</b> All status and process indicators are designed to be available in two or more formats (visual, audible, tactile), and can be selected based on the employee's need.
<b>Product Placement at Point of Sale</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>42A.</b> Any store-provided products kept at the Bar and BOH are labeled leveraging ADA signage guidelines and legible from 3 feet away.	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Operational Information</b>	<input type="radio"/> <b>43A.</b> Operational reference materials are produced according to best practice for print materials to optimize legibility and accessibility.	<input type="radio"/> <b>43AA.</b> Operational reference materials can be perceived in 2 or more accessible formats.	<input type="radio"/> —
<b>Point of Sale: Ease of Entry</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>44AAA.</b> Verbal customer orders can be input into systems with minimal effort.
<b>Employee to Employee Communication</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>45AAA.</b> Employees have readily available tools to communicate with each other via two or more methods.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Order Details</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>46A.</b> Automated labeling distinguishes customer orders throughout the production process, leverages best practice for print materials.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>46AA.</b> Order details and status are legible throughout the production process.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>46AAA.</b> Order details and status are available in two or more accessible formats throughout the production process.</li> </ul>
<b>Point of Sale: Interface</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>47AA.</b> All POS stations apply ADA and CBC design standards to the employee POS interface.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>47AAA.</b> Workstations for taking and processing orders are built to include adjustable height options where possible.</li> </ul>
<b>Multiple Methods for Preparation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>48AA.</b> Key components used in order preparation can be easily distinguished by accessible visual, tactile, or audible methods.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>48AAA.</b> Key components used in order preparation can be easily distinguished by accessible visual, tactile, or audible methods.</li> </ul>
<b>Employee Supplies Reach Range</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>49AAA.</b> A reasonable percentage of all supplies for tasks such as restocking and cleaning are available within ADA-specified reach ranges.</li> </ul>
<b>Employee Auditory and Visual Stimuli</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ —</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>50AA.</b> Auditory or visual stimuli in employee work and rest areas are minimized to reduce cognitive strain.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>50AAA.</b> Auditory and visual stimuli are minimized in employee work and rest areas to reduce cognitive strain.</li> </ul>

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Accessibility Add-On Features</b>	○ —	○ <b>51AA.</b> A catalog of readily available add-on solutions exists that employees can choose from for meeting employee needs.	○ <b>51AAA.</b> Equipment and tools used for order preparation and delivery can be operated without visual ability either as-built or with available add-ons.
<b>Cleaning and Restocking: Single Hand Operable</b>	○ —	○ —	○ <b>52AAA.</b> Equipment and tools used for tasks other than order preparation and delivery—such as cleaning and restocking—can be operated with one hand either as-built or with available add-ons.
<b>Cleaning and Restocking: Operated Without Visual</b>	○ —	○ —	○ <b>53AAA.</b> Equipment and tools used for tasks other than order preparation and delivery—such as cleaning and restocking—can be operated without visual ability either as-built or with available add-ons.
<b>Cleaning and Restocking: Force and Dexterity</b>	○ —	○ —	○ <b>54AAA.</b> Equipment and tools for tasks other than order preparation and delivery—such as cleaning and restocking—leverage California Building Code requirements for force and dexterity.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Cleaning and Restocking: Reach &amp; Manuvering</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>55AAA.</b> All workstations and operable parts for tasks other than order preparation and delivery—such as cleaning and restocking—leverage California Building Code requirements for reach ranges, manuvering clearances, and operable parts.
<b>Physical Action Job Duties</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>56AAA.</b> Job duties that require physical actions or manipulations exceeding CBC requirements for force and dexterity of operable parts leverage innovative automation, technology, or assistive devices where feasible.
<b>Employee Support Interactions</b>	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> —	<input type="radio"/> <b>57AAA.</b> Interactions that require counting, measurement, or memorization, leverage automation or other assistive devices where feasible.

# Ambience

A comfortable space for all to enjoy offers lighting, acoustics, and furnishings matched to a variety of sensory preferences.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
<b>Lighting and Acoustics: Customer Needs</b>	○ <b>58A.</b> Light and sound are optimized for a broad range of sensory needs through the store.	○ <b>58AA.</b> Lighting and acoustics can be adjusted in customer areas upon request to meet the sensory preferences of individual customers.	○ —
<b>Lighting and Acoustics: Employee Spaces</b>	○ <b>59A.</b> Lighting and acoustics in employee areas are optimized for a broad range of sensory preferences.	○ —	○ <b>59AAA.</b> Lighting and acoustics can be adjusted in employee areas upon request to meet the sensory preferences of individual employees.
<b>Accessible Furniture</b>	○	○ —	○ <b>60AAA.</b> All furniture is designed to be accessible to customers who use mobility devices, and there are open and companion seating areas.

	Tier A	Tier AA	Tier AAA
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**Store Temperature**

**61A.** Store temperature is maintained at a comfortable level, adjustable upon request, and employees are not exposed to severe weather conditions for long periods of time.

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## Other Retail-Focused Tools

### *Design Playbook for Inclusive Spaces:*

A practical inclusive design playbook with similar concepts and additional concepts to this playbook, written by authors located in Singapore. The playbook is centered around a set of principles and experiences for inclusive design.

### *Microsoft Inclusive Design:*

Microsoft's guide to inclusive design for digital environments. Principles, tools, activities, and practical application are provided from the Microsoft perspective through text and video.

### *ADA National Network:*

A free, federally funded national technical assistance network that has ten regional offices around the country and provides support on the ADA to businesses, employers, state and local governments, architects, and disability organizations and individuals.

### *U.S. Access Board:*

An independent federal agency that develops accessibility guidelines and standards. The guidelines and standards have drawings and visuals that may be helpful for teams in designing.

### *Gallaudet University DeafSpace Design Guidelines:*

A two volume guide of history and cultural background and DeafSpace Design guidelines written by Gallaudet University.

### *The Kelsey Multifamily Housing Inclusive Design Standards:*

First-of-its kind standards on inclusive design in the housing design and operations space. The standards are downloadable from the link with additional information about The Kelsey.

## Moving Forward

- 1. Start small and specific.** Choose one or two resources that best match your current priorities—for example, customer-facing areas, back-of-house employee spaces, or digital retail touchpoints.
- 2. Extract what is actionable.** Focus on checklists, example policies, and design details you can integrate right away.
- 3. Adapt to your brand and space.** Replace generic examples with store-specific layouts, product displays, and operational procedures.
- 4. Revisit regularly.** Inclusive design standards and expectations evolve. Establish an annual review or project milestone check-in to keep your practices current.
- 5. Be intentional about costs.** Follow areas of momentum and re-design, ensuring inclusive design is integrated from the start.

## Chapter 5:

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# Inclusive Design in Emergency Preparedness

The first four chapters provided resources and guides for getting established and building inclusive design in your business. This chapter provides practical suggestions on what to do in emergencies, through the lens of accessibility. Emergency situations, such as climate-fueled extreme weather, active shooter situations, and structural or environmental emergencies, are increasing in frequency and impact. Best practice is for businesses to have an emergency preparedness and continuity of operations plan to survive these events. A best-in-class emergency preparedness, resilience, and sustainability plan is built through the lens of accessibility, not only because one in every four people is someone with a disability, but a plan founded on accessibility exponentially increases the number of people who will survive and be safe. Additionally, businesses with a strong emergency preparedness and continuity of operations plan (COOP) are able to return to business quickly, increasing the trust of their customers and community partners, and building stronger relationships and ROI.

# 3<sup>rd</sup>

A 2025 study identified natural disasters as the third most concerning risk to businesses across 100 countries.<sup>6</sup>

# 40%

40% of businesses who do not return to functioning within the first few weeks after a disaster generally will not reopen.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <https://commercial.allianz.com/content/dam/onemarketing/commercial/commercial/reports/Allianz-Risk-Barometer-2025.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/ready\\_business\\_hurricane-toolkit.pdf](https://www.ready.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/ready_business_hurricane-toolkit.pdf)

## Importance and Assumptions

In the event of an emergency, people may already be onsite or flee to your business space for protection. This chapter does not encourage your business to position itself as a place of refuge. However, establishing competence in whole community emergency preparedness is an opportunity for a business to become a model of resilience: a place that not only has an emergency preparedness plan, but also works with its employees, vendors, customers, neighbors and community partners as part of a larger network of preparedness and risk reduction.

From a purely economical perspective, it's also worth noting that a 2025 study identified natural disasters as the third most concerning risk to businesses across 100 countries.<sup>6</sup> Further, a collaboration between the Department of Labor (DOL) and the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) found that 40% of businesses who do not return to functioning within the first few weeks after a disaster generally will not reopen, and 75% of businesses without a recovery plan will fail within 3 years after a disaster.<sup>7</sup> How well your business navigates a disaster is directly related to the resilience you build through preparedness planning.

## Approach

Developing an emergency preparedness and continuity of operations plan is an opportunity for the business to take a strategic assessment of their structure, resources, systems, and community networks. It is important to look at emergency preparedness planning as an opportunity to proactively leverage your assets and improve the business rather than from a 'what-if' or 'fear-based' perspective. The first step in emergency preparedness for a business is to conduct a risk assessment. External and internal hazards can be potential threats to business resilience, and an honest risk assessment can identify and prioritize areas of vulnerability and potential growth.

Following a comprehensive risk assessment that is unique to your business, an asset inventory will help to identify potential strategies to address those hazards and vulnerabilities. It is a common mistake to include the needs of people with disabilities

in the risk assessment but to exclude them from the asset inventory. Employees and customers with disabilities may be a significant asset to your disaster planning and should be considered and actively included in the evaluation and planning process.

The final steps to preparedness planning are to remediate the identified gaps and threats by using the human, political, financial, and social capital identified in your asset inventory. Businesses that center people with disabilities and prioritize accessibility and universal design in this phase of the process achieve the most robust plans and the greatest resilience in their business. By centering inclusion and intentionally involving people with disabilities in leadership, those businesses are automatically more likely to develop plans that meet the needs of all employees and consumers.

Following a structured strategy will help businesses take on what might seem like a mammoth task. Asking simple questions such as:

1. What does accessibility look like in our daily policy and practice, and how will this transfer to a disaster scenario?
2. What are our current resources and capital and where do we need to invest our time and resources to achieve accessibility?
3. How can we align our plans with the plans of our employees and clients with disabilities, and those who have family members with disabilities?
4. Where are potential resources and allies that aren't in our plans?
5. Can we operationalize our plan? (Can we do what it says on paper?)

Every business is unique and will have its own set of risks, hazards, needs and assets, so the initial assessment can be internal; but most businesses find that it is most advantageous to work with experts to help them guide their progress.

## Engaging with External Partners

When engaging in inclusive preparedness and continuity of operations planning, businesses should look for partners with expertise in two core areas:

### 1. Disability Competence:

including but not limited to digital and physical accessibility, WCAG compliance and functional accessibility of products and services, accessible and effective communication mechanisms, accommodations, cultural competency, disability rights, and inclusive design.

### 2. Emergency Preparedness:

including but not limited to individual and household preparedness, corporate and organizational preparedness, continuity of operations, gap analysis, disaster legal obligations and mandates, developing and sustaining critical partnerships, whole community inclusion, disaster risk reduction, and building resilience.

By engaging with subject matter experts, all businesses, regardless of size or service, can protect their most valuable resource—their employees and clients, build internal resilience, and position themselves to be leaders in their community before, during, and after disasters. To take a brief survey that helps you identify the strengths and risks of your business, [click here](#).



# 2.0x

Disability Inclusion Champions [as defined by the research] were twice as likely to have higher total stakeholder returns than the peer group.

Source

# Stories of Business Preparation & Resilience

## Beyond the Plan

When the hurricane ripped through the coast, the damage was staggering. Whole neighborhoods were flattened, schools and hospitals shuttered, and yet companies pushed urgently to reopen, knowing the economy's restart depended on it. Senior executives filed back into their offices, except one.

A C-Suite leader, vital to the company's recovery, suddenly had no plan. Her home was gone. Her 9-year-old autistic son's school was destroyed. The teachers, support workers, and neighbors who formed his circle of support had scattered, struggling with their own losses. Despite financial means, she was stranded in a crisis.

While her peers resumed critical operations, she could not. The company had never built a plan for workers with disabilities or for those responsible for children, older parents, and family members who depend on them.

The lesson was stark: businesses of all sizes that move beyond cookie-cutter preparedness, to engage all their workers in planning for the unthinkable, are the ones best equipped not just to survive, but to drive community-wide recovery when disaster strikes.

“

Embedding disability specialists within state, territorial, and local health departments [during the COVID-19 pandemic] improved [the] ability to meet evolving public health needs for the entire community, including people with disabilities.”

National Institute  
of Health (NIH)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11732728/>

## Rising from Ashes

When a fast-moving fire swept through a small town in the Pacific Northwest, it left devastation in its wake. A beloved stretch of local businesses was reduced to rubble—cafés, shops, and salons all gone in a single afternoon. Most never reopened—except one.

A modest nail salon had, months earlier, taken part in a community preparedness training focused on inclusion—especially for people with disabilities. The owner had wanted to make the space more welcoming and accessible, but the training offered more than design tips. It taught strategies for emergency planning, continuity of operations, and how to serve all customers during crisis and recovery.

That foresight made all the difference. While others struggled with rebuilding, the salon had already laid the groundwork. It reopened within three months, becoming the only business on the block to return. Customers—many of whom had disabilities—flocked back, grateful for a space that had considered their needs from the start. The salon didn't just survive. It thrived and became a hub for their community. Inclusion isn't an afterthought. It's a strategy for survival.

“

Companies that are transparent about their ongoing business continuity efforts are communicating something very powerful to their customers: We are putting the right pieces and parts in place so we can be there for you, no matter what.”

BCM Metrics<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> <https://bcmmetrics.com/blog/benefits-business-continuity-planning>



Each \$1 invested in disaster preparation saves \$13 in economic costs, damages, and cleanup.”

U.S. Chamber of Commerce<sup>10</sup>

## The Signal and the Shift

When citywide alarms sounded and residents were evacuated to emergency shelters, one entrepreneur quickly noticed what others missed. The shelter had accessibility gaps and just as importantly, responders and volunteers lacked the knowledge they needed to deliver a disability-inclusive response.

Earlier that year, the young woman with a disability who had experienced many closed doors to employment due to her disability, had decided to start her own business instead. As a part of starting her business, she took an emergency preparedness workshop focused on accessibility. It had reshaped how she approached her consulting work, embedding inclusive planning into everything from customer service protocols to communication strategies. Now, faced with a real crisis, she put that knowledge into action.

Upon arriving at the shelter, she began training people on the spot—how to adapt spaces, communicate clearly, and support evacuees with disabilities. Her guidance helped transform the shelter from a reactive space into one that truly served the whole community.

After the disaster, demand for her expertise surged. Community groups, responders, nonprofits, and businesses turned to her for solutions. Her business grew rapidly, not just because she responded well in a crisis, but because she had planned for everyone from the start.

The experience made one thing clear: inclusive preparedness isn't just compassionate—it's essential. When systems are designed with accessibility in mind, communities respond better, recover faster, and build resilience that lasts.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.uschamber.com/security/the-preparedness-payoff-the-economic-benefits-of-investing-in-climate-resilience>

## Chapter 6:

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# Capture the ROI and Tell the Story

Most capital requests fight for space in the same budget. If accessibility is framed only as a compliance cost, it will lose to initiatives that promise growth. But when accessibility improvements are framed as investments that generate a positive return, which has been demonstrated time and time again, it becomes significantly easier to build consensus and drive adoption of more accessible stores.



# \$1.3 trillion

People with disabilities represent \$1.3 trillion in collective disposable income in the U.S.

Source

Take a few hypothetical examples:

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Retail Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) are often pleased to learn that when restrooms have baby changing tables and other family-friendly amenities, families spend more money on unplanned (impulse) purchases and foot traffic for millennial parents measurably grows.

Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) find that low-to-no cost improvements have generated a substantial amount of positive earned media.

Store planners see dramatic improvements in dwell time and foot traffic when facilities are accessible.

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The business case will certainly look different for every retailer and every proposed accessibility improvement, but being “ROI-aware” from the outset is an important way to drive cross-functional support and proactively eliminate roadblocks. Shifting the conversation from compliance to ROI shifts the response from “where are we finding the money for this project?” to “how quickly can we roll this out?”.

## Ideas for Retailers Who Want to Measure ROI

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Larger purchases  
(tickets or basket size)

Higher rates of repeat visits

More in-store shopping (compared to pick up / delivery), leading to more unplanned purchases

Increased dwell time

Earned media

Higher loyalty and wallet share

Increased rate of signing up for loyalty programs

Higher employee retention and satisfaction

Improved brand perception

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## Rationalizing Your Measurement Approach

You don't need a data science group to prove return on investment (ROI). The aim is to show a credible link between an accessibility improvement and a business result, using whatever tools your teams are already using.

For small pilots or single-store upgrades, a quick benchmark is often enough. Pick one or two metrics that the site already tracks, such as average basket or foot-traffic counts. Record the numbers for a few "control" weeks, install the improvement, then look at the same metrics afterwards.

Mid-size retailers with multiple locations with basic reporting can widen the lens. Identify several stores that will receive the upgrade, pull 6-12 months of history for key metrics or take your new metrics for a duration that will provide you with a baseline or control, and chart those figures after the accessibility upgrades are completed. Basic analytics tools can handle the visuals, and short shopper interviews at the door can supply the nuance that numbers alone may miss.

Large retailers that already run controlled pilots can follow a "test-and-control" design. Match each "test" store with a similar "control" store on traffic, format, and demographics, then gather baselines, and roll out the change only in the test group. Track the difference between test and control for at least one full season. Focus groups or customer interviews can provide qualitative data to demonstrate the real impact and additional nuance.

Whatever the measurement method, start with a baseline, choose metrics that matter to your key decision makers, and keep a simple log of outside influences, so improvements are not credited for unrelated spikes or dips. When it is time to share results, use plain language and a clear picture. A single chart that shows a seven percent lift in dwell time after an accessibility improvement will resonate far more than an academic regression table, especially for teams that are still building their analytics capabilities.



We're committed to creating a Walmart and Sam's Club for everyone. We recognize that advancing accessibility is a shared responsibility. By ensuring accessibility remains a core part of our design, building, and operations, we're not just removing barriers—we're opening new opportunities. Through collaboration with peers in The Access Coalition, we're shaping a future where inclusive design is the standard."

**Gayatri Agnew**  
Senior Director Global Associate Experience and Head of Accessibility Center of Excellence, Walmart and Sam's Club

## Case Study:

# Target Restroom Upgrades

Millennial parents are a key, high-spending customer segment for retailers. In 2021, Target sought ways to improve the in-store experience and found that parents often cut visits short due to challenges with taking their children to the restroom. Target installed baby changing tables and Step 'n Wash sink steps in 95% of their store restrooms and saw a 14% increase in millennial foot traffic over the following 18 months ([source](#)).

Such improvements were specifically made to improve restroom accessibility for millennial parents, but Target has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from other customer segments too. Grandparents and caretakers appreciate having consistent access to baby changing tables, and Little People and other adults of shorter stature appreciate having accessible handwashing with the retractable step stools.

## Retrofits Versus Remodels and New Builds

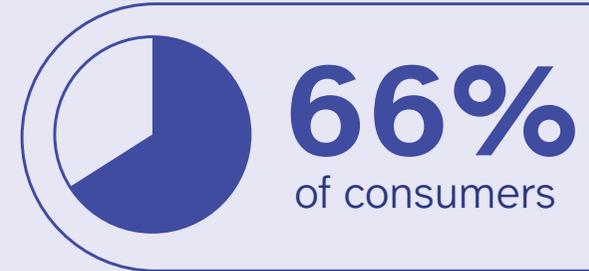
Accessibility upgrades that go above and beyond compliance are not “all or nothing”. Many pay for themselves when folded into pre-planned work for remodels or new builds. Think of them the way you think about LED lighting or low-flow plumbing: easiest to justify when work is already planned.

Most retailers have a roster of stores scheduled for remodels or upgrades in the next 3-5 years. Tag those projects as the default home for features that would be expensive to retrofit but less expensive to specify up front. As discussed in previous chapters, accessibility and inclusive design should always be included at the beginning, but that is not always possible. It will be less expensive when accessibility changes can be aligned with remodels and upgrades already planned. By swapping the material only in new builds and planned remodels, some retailers raised accessibility and shaved a few dollars per square foot at the same time.

Next, separate “lift-and-replace” items from true construction moves. Fixtures such as universal changing tables, step stools at the sink, or lever-style door hardware can usually be added between remodel cycles with a small service call. Larger, structural changes such as lowering a checkout belt, swapping out tile, or widening a doorway likely make more sense during a pre-planned remodel.

Finally, bake the learning into your standards. Update the prototype store drawing set and procurement lists so every new project ships with the accessible option by default. That keeps store planners from having to fight the same battle later and locks in the best cost each time materials are bid.

The result is a rolling upgrade plan that is ROI-focused: low-cost, high-impact fixtures go in now, larger improvements slide into upcoming remodels, and anything structural rolls forward into the next ground-up build. Shifting the frame from “retrofit or bust” to “right feature, right project, right time” turns accessibility into a regular habit instead of a special initiative.



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Consumers are also increasingly drawn to companies that demonstrate social responsibility and inclusion. Nielsen reports that 66% of consumers are willing to pay more for products from companies committed to positive social impact.”

Source

## Don't Ignore the Value of Storytelling

A smart accessibility upgrade can generate returns long before metric improvements can be measured, simply by giving people something worth talking about. As noted in chapter 4, when Walmart first introduced their “Sensory Hours” initiative, it landed in Good Morning America, Forbes, Inc, and dozens of local outlets. In a matter of days, the company collected millions of unpaid impressions and a flood of positive social posts.

Reporters love telling human impact stories. Here are ways to make your story come alive:

1. Start by naming the barrier you removed: “Many customers with sensory sensitivities were skipping early-morning errands because the store felt overwhelming”.
2. Put a human face on the change with a quote from a shopper, associate, or community partner. Show the solution in action with photos or a short video.
3. Make it easy for others to spread the word. Provide press-ready images that capture the upgraded space, keep the caption short, and flag any inclusive design details that might not be obvious at first glance.
4. Encourage store managers and frontline staff to share the post, because their authentic voice often carries further than the voice of the comms team.
5. Inside the company, package the same elements for different teams. Finance leaders care that earned media replaced a six-figure campaign. Store planners appreciate seeing how a low-cost adjustment triggered nationwide praise. HR can use the story to underline a culture of inclusion. By tailoring the angle, you turn a single win into multiple proof points.

The lesson is simple: data convinces, but stories travel. A small change can produce outsized brand value when you capture the human angle.

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# Connect with Us

Throughout this Playbook, we have shown how accessibility and inclusive design are catalysts for innovation, community, and business growth. The work is iterative, human-centered, and deeply interconnected. Every choice, from furniture selection to lighting to digital interfaces, shapes how people experience belonging in your space. The decisions made today ripple far beyond compliance as they determine whether your stores become places where every person feels welcome, independent, and valued.

This journey of inclusive design is ongoing. The most successful teams don't wait until everything is perfect. They begin, they test, they learn, and they evolve. Start small and move with intention. Build on what

already works. Share what you learn. Inclusive design thrives when organizations collaborate rather than compete, when best practices are open-sourced and collectively improved. Each store that integrates inclusive design raises the bar for what retail and community can look like for everyone.

The Access Coalition was founded on that very idea, that we can accelerate progress by working together. As more companies join this effort, we are proving that inclusive design is not a niche initiative, but a powerful driver of brand loyalty and ROI. Our Coalition exists to connect leaders, build evidence, and celebrate what's possible when we design for everyone.

What comes next? Bring your teams into the conversation. Walk and roll your spaces with a new perspective. Pilot new ideas and measure their impact. Then, share your insights. Together, we can grow this work, strengthen our communities, and continue designing a future where inclusive design is not the exception; it is the standard.

# Join us.

## Be part of The Access Coalition.

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Help us shape the next generation of spaces that welcome everyone in.

[Learn More](#)