

Creating Seating Space for People Who Use Wheelchairs by Shelly Christensen

When making changes to create space so someone who uses a wheelchair can sit IN the congregation as opposed to the back row, aisle, front of the sanctuary, consider this:

Removal of seating: If bench seats, shorten them on the aisle side so someone using a chair can sit without taking aisle space. These are called pew cuts. Spread these out throughout the sanctuary so that people who use wheelchairs and those seated with them aren't in a "wheelchair section." If people sit in individual chairs, removal of more than one to accommodate someone using a wheelchair may be necessary as wheelchairs are often wider than sanctuary chairs.

Be sure that there is good lighting -- this should be standard for all congregants anyway, but it is important to make sure they don't put these spaces where the lighting is bad.

Consider traffic flow to restrooms, social hall, etc. and eliminate any barriers or things in the way.

Some congregations reserve seats next to the pew cuts for family members and friends, especially during peak times. One synagogue had a sign that read, "reserved for wheelchairs." It was unclear if those spots were parking spaces for the chairs themselves rather than for the people who use them. Language is important! Signs should reflect person first language, i.e., "reserved seating for people (congregants) who use wheelchairs."

Congregations can get additional information about creating spaces for people who use wheelchairs by consulting with their State ADA offices to learn about architectural accommodations. Many congregations find it helpful to consult an architect within the local community who has experience with renovating or building churches/synagogues and to

reach out to other congregations in within the nearby community to learn how they have successfully increased access.

Sometimes a congregation is on a national or local register of historic places and there is concern about making changes. Those congregations should follow up with the designating agency or organization to present their concerns and to find an acceptable way of creating spaces for people who use wheelchairs.