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District V Addresses Incorporating ADA Concerns Into Facility Planning

By Ray Waddell

Jacksonville, Fla. – The Americans with Disabilities Act and its effect on facility management is an issue continuing to evolve.

As new stadiums and arenas go up, officials are more able to incorporate ADA-friendly ideas into facility plans. ADA issues, including an emergency evacuation plan for the disabled, were addressed at a session during the District V meeting of the International Association of Assembly Managers here.

Session speakers were Jack Gilrup, the City of Jacksonville's disabled division chief, and Kevin McGuire, Chairman and CEO of McGuire Associates, Newburgh, N.Y. The fact that both speakers were disabled added to their ADA credibility for facility managers.

EMERGENCY TECHNIQUES

McGuire said his company offers facility managers proactive responses when dealing with ADA issues, including developing emergency evacuation procedures for the disabled, as well as training executives, managers, supervisors and front-line employees.

"We're brought in by the facility owner during the design stage to make sure those issues that keep cropping up with the Department of Justice (regrading ADA) are addressed," McGuire said. "We also

deal with policies and procedures of buildings to make sure they work properly."

SENSITIVITY

McGuire said he also works to "sensitize" front-line employees. "You can spend \$100 million on access issues, but one insensitive comment can put the (facility) owners back in a position of dealing with the Department of Justice," he said.

All issues are magnified in an emergency. "The first thing you need to do in an emergency is to go up and ask those with disabilities if they need assistance and if so, what kind," said McGuire. "Whether they are deaf, sight impaired or in a wheelchair, you need to identify staff members who are designated to check on the disabled seat locations and get a number count in the first quarter of any event. That way you know what you're dealing with."

Every disability has special requirements, McGuire said, particularly in the areas of sensitivity. "For example, with low vision issues, generally speaking, to walk up and grab a blind or low vision person is a no-no," said McGuire. "It can really freak them out. Approach them, tap them on the elbow and identify yourself. The only time you're allowed to grab someone who is blind, in an

acceptable manner, is in an emergency situation."

SERVICE ANIMALS

Another set of rules applies to service animals. "The rule of thumb is if a dog is in a harness, it is on duty and you're not allowed to interact with it." McGuire explained, "If the dog is on a leash, it can be interacted with by permission of the owner." Most service animals can't handle escalators, most of them tend to get caught up in the lip at the bottom," he said. "What you can do if you are confronted with an escalator is pick up the dog, the dog will have no problem with that."

SIGN LANGUAGE

McGuire said concerns of the hearing impaired are a little more distinct. "The deaf need visible maps, at points of entrance to the different seating areas, that tell them which way to go in an emergency," he said. "Your staff should be trained with minimal sign language skills and your people should have a pad and pen."

Visual fire alarms are important, but they should not be too close together; they can cause epileptic seizures. Visual fire alarms also need to be a different color from the rest of the lighting so they stand out in an emergency.