

**Law & Advocacy:
Maintaining Accessibility**

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My wife worked for an arts advocacy organization for about ten years. During that time I wrote several call-to-action letters. This week I wrote a letter on accessibility to mental health on university campuses for people with disabilities. I went to a presentation on accessibility a couple of years ago and learned a few interesting points. The first, is that accessibility often gets lumped into equity. This is understandable since accessibility is defined as offering equitable access to everyone regardless of ability (*Disability Services*, 2023 & *What is Accessibility?*, 2024) and is seen as an integral part of DEI programs (*History of DE&I*, n.d.). Unfortunately, as DEI offices in public institutions are being closed by political administrations, accessibility may suffer setbacks as offices are realigned and duties reassigned (Atkinson, 2024).

Very few people would bat an eye at funding for wheelchair access to enter a university building. But what if different access was needed for a student with a less visible disability such as a vision impairment? Preparing for disabilities takes money, foresight, and planning. It recently struck home when my mother had to have emergency surgery on her eyes. She went from being fully sighted to blind in less than a day. Luckily for my mom, she will regain most of her vision. For about two months my mom lost access to much of her world and her. Now, imagine you are a student with a vision impairment and need telehealth services for depression but your university no longer has a DEI department. You try to get service, but your screen-reader program can't read the university's website correctly and you can't get to your appointment. Because of a lack of government foresight, you lose access to the potentially life-saving treatment you need.

We are all just one accident, one fall, or one infection away from a disability. That should make it simple for us to imagine losing the things that make our lives easy. While advocating to change laws, regulations, and government processes is important, we can also work more locally on changing the things we have a direct say in. For instance, this week I started big with a letter to the North Carolina state legislature about maintaining operational accessibility programs as they close state university DEI offices. I reviewed several call-to-action letters from the AMHCA and ArtsNC and based my letter on the structure and language found in those letters. I then emailed the letter to my local state representative, the secretary of the NC Department of Health and Human Services, and the superintendent of public instruction. However, government processes tend to move slowly, so I acted locally as well. I proposed to my site supervisor that we have our practice's website audited for accessibility. Then, I took it upon myself to begin learning American Sign Language. It's all about keeping our minds open to understanding other people's experiences and finding ways to improve them.

References

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