

ADA CRITERIA FOR BENCHES

What are the ADA requirements for outdoor benches?

Confusion abounds, mostly as a result of a misinterpretation of Section 903 of the ADA and ABA Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities Section 903 requirements were developed to enable people in wheelchairs to transfer to benches in certain function- and situation-specific settings. It defines bench requirements for these enumerated facilities, rooms and elements: 612 Saunas and Steam Rooms (Chap 6); 803 Dressing, Fitting and Locker Rooms (chap 8); 807 Holding Cells and Housing Cells and 808 Courtrooms (chap 8).

The US Access Board confirms that Section 903 applies only to the above and that there are no ADA requirements specified in Section 903 for outdoor benches.

Nevertheless, efforts are sometimes made to apply the Section 903 standards to benches in outdoor public environments, no doubt prompted by the desire to ensure seating opportunities for people in wheelchairs. We believe this misapplication of standards may provide little real benefit to people in wheelchairs while actively disadvantaging other populations. Here's why:

- People in wheelchairs typically do not transfer to benches outdoors. Rather, they pull up next to or across from people sitting in benches or movable chairs or seating walls or picnic tables to join in social activity. Current approaches to site design and furniture are focused on creating more flexible elements and spaces. Fixed and dimensionally restricted benches limit choices and risk isolating people in wheelchairs, rather than expanding choices and bringing them closer to the center of action.
- Benches with high, exceptionally deep seats and without side arms, as specified in Section 903, are dysfunctional for people with other disabilities and needs, including:

A smaller person, who can't sit in high, deep benches without having their legs dangle above the ground. People with mobility problems and the visually impaired who often need side arms to help them sit down and get up.

Anyone needing back support. (It is difficult, if not impossible, to sit back in a bench seat so deep that it keeps the knees from bending.)

A single ADA guideline for outdoor benches appears in The Revised Draft Guidelines for Accessible Public Rights-of-Way. Although not currently an enforceable ADA standard, the guideline specifies a bench seat height of 17 inches minimum and 19 inches maximum above the ground or floor space. In addition, the Access Board has issued Advisory R307.6.3.2, which states, "Benches will be most useful if they have full back support and armrests to assist in sitting and standing."

Benches meeting these simple height guidelines and back and armrest advisements are readily available from Landscape Forms and other site furniture manufacturers.



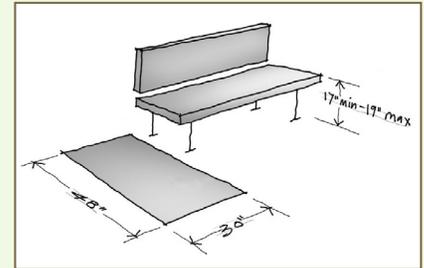
Beyond The Bench

People in outdoor spaces don't just line up on benches like birds on a wire. They sit in multiple configurations of seating and in optional locations that provide variety – in seating type, in exposure to sun and shade and wind, in aspect and views, in degree of proximity to other people and activities. Movable seating has contributed to the success of outdoor spaces, such as New York's iconic Bryant Park, and it might be noted that the wheelchair is the ultimate movable chair.

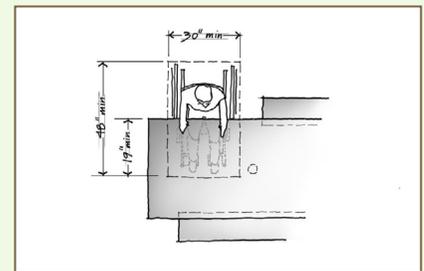
To enable people in wheelchairs to find a quiet place or join the party:

- Provide firm, stable ground surfaces with adequate clear ground space to permit maneuverability in public spaces. (A minimum 30" x 48" clear ground space is required to accommodate a single stationary wheelchair with occupant.)
- Provide adequate space around seating elements – for example facing groups of chairs and at the end of benches parallel to the short axis of the bench. (See illustration.)
- In outdoor eating areas provide picnic tables with one seat removed or with one bench made shorter on a side to permit wheelchair approach. ADA requires 36" clearance along all usable sides of the table measured from the back edge of the bench, and sufficient knee and toe clearance under the table (27" height, 30" width and 19" depth) for access, maneuverability and comfort. (click [here](#) for details) (See illustration.)

NOTE: Landscape Forms 3-seat Carousel Table meets ADA requirements and special adaptations are available for other Landscape Forms picnic tables to meet compliance criteria.



Credit: Robert G. Chipman, ASLA



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The challenge is to provide variety and options in outdoor seating that offer more abundant accessible opportunities for all. There are many creative ways to make that happen.

We thank Bill Botten of the Access Board for his expertise and review. For technical assistance call the Access Board hot line: 1-800-872-2253 or send inquiries to ta@access-board.gov.