FOCUS: DISABILITIES
Making the future accessible

People with disabilities emphasize the importance of removing barriers

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Jamie Lembeck has a simple way of helping people who have the use of their arms and legs understand his perspective.

"Anything can happen to anybody any day," said Lembeck, a quadriplegic who uses a wheelchair controlled by his chin and mouth. "Every person should consider their futures as vulnerable. All of us are really just temporarily abled."

That's Lembeck's way of letting people who don't consider themselves disabled know that fate - a car accident or stroke, for instance - can change their status.

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Elizabeth A. Mundsenk/Buffalo News
And, if not fate, the aging process often robs people of mobility.

That's why the accommodations made today for the disabled in Western New York could very well be used by a larger segment of the population in the years ahead.

Figures and projections from the 2000 Census show Erie and Niagara counties already have a substantial population of people with disabilities and indicate the potential for an increase in that population in the years ahead.

Census data shows:

- Roughly 19 percent of the population in both Erie and Niagara counties has some form of disability.
- While nationally 34.4 percent of the population is 45 or older, the figures for both Erie and Niagara counties are four percentage points higher.
- Nationally, the Census projects that the maturation of the baby boom generation will nearly double the current population of people 65 and older by 2030.

How accessible is Western New York nearly 15 years after the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act? That act required any group or individual providing services to the public to make sure that access was provided for the disabled.

Advocates said one big problem is that there isn't a lot of statistical data to say for sure how accessible the area has become.

"There's very little research on compliance (with the law)," said Ramon Garcia, a wheelchair user who works as a researcher for the University at Buffalo's Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access.

But anecdotally, those who are in the best position to know - the disabled - say that while there have been some improvements, things are far from OK. And some worry about backsliding.

"Buffalo's going backwards when it comes to access," said Doug Usiak, executive director of the Western New York Independent Living Project, which tries to help those with disabilities,
especially those looking to live as independently as possible.

Among other things, Usiak - who is blind - cited the City of Buffalo's elimination last year of its Advocacy Office for Persons With Disabilities and its volunteer advisory board. The office was closed as a result of the city's budget crunch.

"That's a message that tells people with disabilities that your issues no longer count in the community," he said.

Retired attorney William Mastroleo has represented a number of disabled clients in the area as they sought to enforce both the ADA and other laws dealing with equality in accommodations. His clients included three University at Buffalo students who settled with the school last year over non-compliance issues.

"On a scale of 1 to 100, I'd say we're up around 30," said Mastroleo, forced into a wheelchair in 2000 by a progressively debilitating condition that remains undiagnosed.

A dozen wheelchair users said access in the region could be better, with many focusing on the problems they have getting into, then moving around in, some restaurants and shops.

But many said that, given the large number of old buildings here, the situation is not as bad as it could be.

"The best thing to be said about around here is we're improving," said Tony Buchinger, a wheelchair user and architect who specializes in adapting homes for wheelchair users. "It's frustrating . . . but slowly, over time, things are happening."

Ramps provide access

A look around Buffalo's downtown landscape shows many of the city, county, state and federal buildings have made a number of adaptions for wheelchair access, the most ubiquitous of which is the ramp.

There's one at the back of the Dillon Federal Courthouse. Across the street at the Mahoney State Office Building, a short ramp comes off the sidewalk on Franklin Street. There's a long ramp leading into the Donovan State Office Building from Washington Street.

A ramp zig-zags up the Swan Street side of Erie Community College, while newer ramps enter the Rath County Office Building and the Central Library on Lafayette Square.

Wheelchair access to City Hall is through a ground level entrance in the rear.
However, writer Kris Ann Piazza said she had to speak to the Common Council from an aisle at the back of the chamber because steps precluded her from taking her wheelchair down onto the main floor.

"I should have been able to have been at the front," she said. "It isolated me from the group, which is something the disabled community has lived with all its life."

Access at the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library system, one of the few local institutions for which there is data, is uneven.

A 1998 study found that 42 of the system's 52 branch libraries were in at least partial compliance with ADA guidelines for accessible entries.

It also found that bathrooms in 21 of those branches were not in compliance. Library officials said newer figures were not readily available.

Newer public buildings generally are required to meet the federal standards for accessibility, but problems still plague wheelchair users attempting to get into restaurants, bars and stores housed in old buildings.

"What we get more (complaints about) are small restaurants and doctors' offices, things that were built a long time ago and there's no space to rebuild or put in the length of ramping they would need to make it accessible," said Emily Kaznicka, executive director of Erie County's Office for the Disabled.

The ADA requires such places to remove barriers if it can be done inexpensively and easily - for instance, by removing one step. Basic factors in deciding what is possible include cost, practicality and the financial resources of the business.

**Designing for the future**

Why are the barriers the disabled in Western New York face today important to the nondisabled?

Because as the region continues to age, more and more people will confront them. The 2000 Census showed 451,980 of the 1.17 million in Erie and Niagara counties were 45 or older.

"We have big problems on the horizon because we're not planning for an aging society," said Garcia, the UB researcher.

The realization that a greater percentage of the population will need the accommodations now made for the disabled is behind a type of architecture called "universal design," said Ed
Steinfeld, a UB architecture professor and the director of the center that studies access and design issues.

In such designs, things like no-step access, door levers instead of knobs, lower light switches, wider doors and larger bathrooms are incorporated into traditional homes. That way, residents need not move to specially designed homes if they lose mobility.

"As the baby boomer population ages, we're going to need a much greater supply of more accessible housing," Steinfeld said. "Not necessarily all the bells and whistles, but enough to make it comfortable for people to remain in their own homes."

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