Easy Read

Health Care Accessibility: Further Efforts Needed to Address Barriers for People with Disabilities
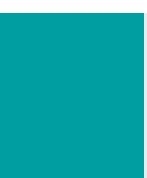
December 2025 | GAO-26-108563

GAO

U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

Contents

Introduction

This is an **Easy Read** version of a report we wrote. **Easy Read** is a way that some groups have made their written information easier to understand. This can include shorter sentences or simpler language.

In this document, certain words and phrases are in **bold**. These words are important to the content of this report. We explain what these words and phrases mean in more detail when they are used.

Some words are blue and underlined. These are links that will go to GAO reports and other helpful information.

Why is GAO creating this document?

We created this Easy Read version to make our work more accessible to everyone, including certain people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. This document is one way we are working for full inclusion of people with disabilities.

You can see the **full report** on our website (https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-26-107120)

GAO and Congress

What is GAO?

The **Government Accountability Office**, or **GAO**, is part of the Legislative Branch of the United States government. We are an independent agency that works for Congress. We help keep Congress informed about how agencies are working. If we find ways agencies can work better, we make **recommendations**.

Recommendations are changes we think agencies should make to improve.

Why did we make this report?

Congress asked us to look at what the federal government is doing to make sure people with disabilities can get treatment in health care.

What does it mean to have a disability?

One in four adults in the United States reports having a disability. A disability can affect many things, including making it hard to

- walk or move,

- hear or see,

- focus or remember, or

- take care of yourself.

Accessibility Laws and Regulations

This report will talk about several laws that help ensure the accessibility of health care for people with disabilities:

What is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990?

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) protects people with disabilities from being treated unfairly in everyday life. It makes sure people with disabilities can use public places, such as hospitals. For example, public places may be required to have a ramp for people who use wheelchairs.

What is Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973?

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prevents any program that receives federal money from excluding people with disabilities. This includes any health care program or facility that receives money from the federal government.

What is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act?

Part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, often called the Affordable Care Act or ACA, prevents health care programs that receive money from the federal government from refusing to treat a person with a disability.

Federal Agencies and Programs

Several government agencies and programs have a role in ensuring the accessibility of health care for people with disabilities:

What is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is a federal agency that works to support the health and well-being of Americans.

What are Reasonable Modifications?

Reasonable modifications are changes that organizations make to their rules, tools, or buildings to help people with disabilities use their services. These changes should be practical for people with disabilities and not too expensive or difficult for the organization.

For example, a hospital might change its "no pets" rule to allow for service dogs. Organizations that receive federal money must make reasonable modifications.

What is in This Report

This report looks at three questions:

1. What barriers do people with disabilities face when using health care?

2. What information does HHS collect about disability and health care accessibility?

3. How does HHS review how people with disabilities are being treated in health care settings and services?

To answer these questions, we:

- reviewed laws and regulations,

- reviewed federal agency policies and documents,

- reviewed federal surveys about health care,

- reviewed studies about health care and disability,

- talked to federal officials,

- talked to researchers and health care organizations,

- talked to groups that help people with disabilities, and

- talked to people with disabilities about their experience with health care.

For more information on our approach, see our full report (https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-26-107120).

Barriers to Health Care for People with Disabilities

In this section we answer the question: What barriers do people with disabilities face when using health care?

We identified four main areas where people with disabilities may face barriers when using health care. These areas include:

- medical settings and equipment,

- technology,

- communication, and

- lack of training.

How can medical settings and equipment be barriers to health care?

Medical settings, like hospitals and doctors' offices, can be hard to use for some people with disabilities. For example:

- Someone who uses a wheelchair may need ramps or wider doorways to enter a hospital.

- Someone with autism may have a hard time with bright lights or noise in a waiting room.

- Someone who uses a wheelchair may need an exam table that can change heights or a scale that can fit a wheelchair.

There are no options for a private waiting area. [The person I care for] gets overstimulated by a noisy waiting room…

—A caregiver for a person with autism

How can technology be a barrier to health care?

Technology can make some areas of health care easier, but some technology like telehealth, electronic health records, and check-in kiosks can be barriers for people with disabilities. For example:

- Some telehealth programs only allow one person to log in to appointments, and some people may need a sign language interpreter.

- Electronic health records can be complex and may be hard to read for someone with a learning disability.

- Check-in kiosks may not include a screen reader for someone who is blind.

I have done two telehealth calls. Neither had captions or a chat box.

—A person with a hearing disability

## How can communication be a barrier to health care?

People with disabilities may have a hard time communicating with their medical team, which can negatively affect their care. Communication can be especially difficult for people who are blind, deaf, or have an intellectual disability. For example:

- Doctors may not know how to use verbal cues with someone who is blind.

- Someone who has a hearing disability may need a sign language interpreter and more time to communicate with their doctor.

- Medical terms can be hard to understand, which can be especially difficult for someone with an intellectual disability.

There is a lack of [sign language interpreters]. All my appointments require waiting a [long time] to get an interpreter.

—A person with a hearing disability

How can training be a barrier to health care?

A lack of training about disabilities can lead to bad treatment or less care. For example, if medical staff do not have training they may

- not know how to operate accessible equipment,

- not know how to change how things are typically done to help someone with a disability, or

- let bias change the services they offer.

> Even living in a city with access to very skilled doctors at research and teaching institutions, there are very few health care providers who have a functional working knowledge of my condition.
>
> —*A person with a physical disability*

What are medical providers doing to get rid of these barriers?
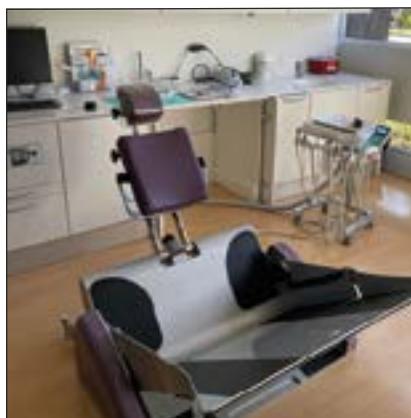
Some medical providers have taken steps to get rid of barriers that may affect people with disabilities. For example, some providers

- have updated their offices with automatic door openers,

- have updated their signs to make them easier to read,

- use wheelchair scales and other accessible medical equipment, or

- offer training about disabilities.

Source: GAO (photos from GAO-26-107120). | GAO-26-108563

Collecting Information on Disability and Health Care Accessibility

In this section we answer the question: What information does HHS collect about disability and health care accessibility?

HHS sometimes collects information from people across the U.S. about their disability but not about certain barriers they may face when getting health care.

What information does the federal government collect about the accessibility of health care for people with disabilities?

HHS has national surveys that ask people with disabilities questions like

- if they have health insurance,

- where they normally go for medical care, or

- if they have visited the emergency room.

However, these surveys do not ask people with disabilities questions like

• if they need more help because of their disability,

• if they can easily move around their doctor's office, or

• if they understand what their doctor is saying.

This means HHS may not have good information about barriers people with disabilities may face when getting health care. Without good information about barriers to health care, HHS may not be able to fix problems related to disability.

How does HHS know if a person has a disability?
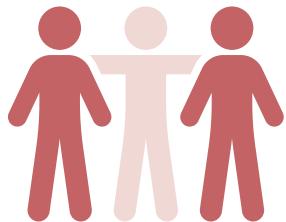
HHS uses six questions in national surveys to find out if someone has a disability. These questions ask about

- hearing,

- seeing,

- remembering and focusing,

- walking,

- taking care of yourself, and

- doing things on your own.

These questions are known as the **Census Bureau's American Community Survey six questions or ACS-6**.

However, we found these questions are sometimes not included in HHS's surveys. This means HHS may not have good information on the various types of disabilities in the U.S. HHS needs good information about people with disabilities to make health care programs better.

Ensuring Health Care Accessibility for People with Disabilities

In this section we answer the question: How does HHS review how people with disabilities are being treated in health care settings and services?

HHS issues some instructions about how to serve the specific needs of people with disabilities and performs some reviews to make sure health care organizations are doing so. But HHS has not updated their instructions with new accessibility requirements.

What instruction does HHS give to health care organizations?

HHS issues health and safety standards that must be followed by health care organizations that receive certain federal funds. These standards focus on things like patient rights, quality of services, building safety, and safe practices. Any hospital, nursing home, or other health care organization that receives money from the federal government must follow the health and safety standards.

Some of these standards relate to accessibility and the safety of patients with disabilities. For example, some standards state that medical information must be written in plain language and accessible to people with disabilities. Other standards say medical spaces must be safe and accessible for people with disabilities.

HHS performs different kinds of reviews to make sure health care organizations are following disability laws. During these reviews, HHS officials can look at records, talk to staff, and check policies. If problems are found, HHS can ask for changes, like better training or fixes.
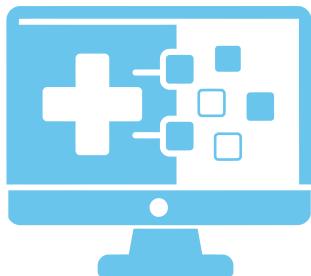
How does HHS make sure its instructions and review process are up to date with laws and requirements?

HHS has not changed their instructions or review process to include July 2024 updates to accessibility requirements. New requirements were added such as:

- Health care organizations should have accessible equipment like wheelchair scales.

- Websites and phone apps should be accessible to people with disabilities.

Health care organizations may not be aware of these new requirements. Some groups who work with people with disabilities are concerned that if HHS does not change its instructions and review process to include these new accessibility requirements, health care organizations will not follow practices that could help people with disabilities.

Recommendations

What are GAO's Recommendations?

Recommendations are changes we think agencies should make to improve.

We are making **five** recommendations including that:

- HHS should make a plan to collect information from people with disabilities about the barriers they may face when using health care.

- HHS should collect information from people about disability using the same questions.

- HHS should find a way to review health care organizations' accessibility efforts to make sure that they follow new accessibility requirements for people with disabilities.

Our other recommendations focus on changes HHS can make to update and share information about accessibility.

For more information about our recommendations, see our full report (https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-26-107120)

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Easy Read Staff Acknowledgments

Erin Godtland (Assistant Director), Dana Hopings (Analyst in Charge), Alex Galuten, Michael Murray, Mimi Nguyen, Nhi Nguyen, Joy Solmonson, and Curtia Taylor.

Additional Acknowledgments

Randi Hall, Gina Hoover, Anne Ordway, Emma O'Shea, and Srinidhi Vijaykumar.

Additional Sources for Images

This appendix contains source information for images in this product.

	Department of Health and Human Services
	GAO

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