

An Attorney's Duty to Effectively Communicate With Clients Under the ADA

By Christopher W. Smith

A client with hearing loss contacts your office wanting to draft an estate plan. She relies on American Sign Language (ASL) for most of her communication. You freeze, what do you have to do? The answer is simple: you need to provide her with the aids or services that are required for you and her to have a normal attorney-client relationship. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act ("ADA"), that will likely include a qualified ASL interpreter at your expense.

Most ethics articles about serving individuals with disabilities focus on an attorney's obligations under the Rules of Professional Conduct. Less talked about is an attorney's obligations under the ADA. Attorneys are generally aware that the ADA has accessibility requirements for law office buildings,¹ and that law offices may have certain responsibilities towards current and potential employees with disabilities.²

But what often gets missed is an attorney's ADA obligations to ensure that individuals with disabilities have the same full and equal enjoyment of our services as everybody else. At its core, that means ensuring that clients can communicate with you in the same and equal manner as any other client. Effective communication with our clients is not only an ADA obligation, but is also at the core of ensuring that we "maintain a normal client-lawyer relationship" with our clients under the Rules of Professional Conduct.³ For this reason, our ADA obligations are not only a statutory requirement, but also arguably a professional responsibility obligation. It is essential that attorneys understand what the ADA requires.

Attorneys Are Subject To the Americans With Disabilities Act⁴

Virtually every estate planning and probate attorney is subject to the ADA. A private attorney's obligations under the ADA lie in Title

III, which provides that "[n]o individual shall be discriminated against on the basis of disability in the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, or accommodations of any place of public accommodation by any person who owns, leases (or leases to), or operates a place of public accommodation."⁵ The definition of a public accommodation includes (among many other things) an "an office of an accountant or lawyer."⁶

Michigan attorneys are also a "place of public accommodation" under the Michigan Persons with Disabilities Act ("MPDA").⁷ Like the ADA, the MPDA similarly prohibits attorneys from denying an individual "the full and equal enjoyment" of legal services.⁸ Because the MPDA is essentially Michigan's version of the ADA for this article's purpose, the ADA will remain the focus. But it is important to remember that attorneys have statutory obligations under both federal and state law.

You are subject to the ADA and the MPDA, but what does that mean? Let's start with an easy one: no, you cannot deny someone your services just because he or she has a disability. Take the case of the deaf client contacting your office. Human nature might cause a slight pause to consider whether you want to take this client on. But the ADA states that an attorney cannot deny a client services (or provide that client with unequal services) on the basis of the client's disability, nor can you have systems in place to screen out these individuals.⁹

Duty to Provide No Cost Auxiliary Aids and Services

Now the client has retained you. What else does the ADA require you to do? Under the ADA, attorneys shall "take those steps that may be necessary to ensure that no individual

with a disability is excluded, denied services, segregated or otherwise treated differently than other individuals because of the absence of auxiliary aids and services”¹⁰ It is the attorney’s obligation to “furnish appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to ensure effective communication with individuals with disabilities.”¹¹ A client *cannot* be charged for these additional aids and services.¹² An attorney also must provide these services to a client’s companion (e.g., family member, friend, or associate) if doing so is an appropriate part of your representation.¹³

There are three considerations when determining the appropriate aid or service: (1) the method of communication used by the individual; (2) the nature, length, and complexity of the communication involved; and (3) the context in which the communication is taking place.¹⁴ Often this will be as simple as consulting with the individual client regarding what aid might be needed to ensure effective communication, and you should give great weight to the client’s preferences.¹⁵ But be careful. First, you cannot require the client to bring an accompanying adult to assist with effective communication.¹⁶ But even if the client offers or insists on bringing a family member or friend to help with the communication, this will often be inappropriate in estate planning or probate work. How can you ensure that the accompanying person is impartially relaying information to your client? Or how do you know that he or she understands or can communicate the complicated legal concepts that you are trying to convey? The assistance of someone outside of the client’s family and friends may be required to ensure the impartiality and effectiveness of your representation.¹⁷

A private attorney may have a legal defense to not providing an aid or services if the attorney can demonstrate that doing so “would fundamentally alter the nature” of the service or would result in an “undue burden, i.e., significant difficulty or expense.”¹⁸ In an estate planning or probate practice, rarely would an aid or service alter the

nature of the representation as nearly every aid or service would presumably be designed to enhance the representation.¹⁹ And even if a particular aid or service might cause an undue burden, the attorney is still required to provide a reasonable alternative aid or service.²⁰ Further, arguing an ADA exception does not necessarily absolve an attorney of his or her professional responsibility obligations.

The necessary aids and services will depend on the needs of the client and the nature of the legal services that you are providing. Regardless of the disability, the purpose of the aid or service is to ensure that the client receives the same legal services as someone without the disability. Just like a French interpreter would be useless to a client who speaks Spanish, an ASL sign language interpreter would do little good unless the client regularly utilizes ASL. While it would be impossible to discuss every potential fact scenario, there are specific thoughts that you should consider for clients with hearing or vision loss.

Deaf or Hard of Hearing Clients

If a client is deaf or hard of hearing, an attorney’s office must first accept Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS), Video Relay Service (VRS), or other adaptive calls to your office.²¹ While this should not be difficult, it is important for your staff to have a basic understanding of these types of services so that they are prepared to treat the call in the same manner as any other telephone call.²² Also, if your phone system has an automated-attendant system (e.g., voicemail), you should make sure that it is compatible with various auxiliary aids and services that deaf or hard of hearing clients might use.²³

The attorney should then interact with the potential client to come to some understanding as to what aids or services the client needs in order to have “equal communication access” as any other client. In a legal setting, handing notes back and forth will rarely be sufficient for effective communication except for the

occasional brief interaction.

A qualified sign-language interpreter will often be required.²⁴ Start out by asking the client if he or she has a preferred interpreter and then inquire whether that individual is sophisticated enough to interpret the matter at hand. Under the Deaf Persons' Interpreters Act, Michigan has codified the different requirements for qualified sign language interpreters.²⁵ According to the Michigan Department of Civil Rights, an attorney should seek a qualified interpreter eligible to work in a "Standard Level 3" setting with a Legal Endorsement.²⁶ If the client is deaf-blind, then a deaf-blind endorsement is also required. A qualified interpreter can be found using the Michigan Only Interpreter System that can be found at <https://w2.lara.state.mi.us/interpreter/>. If you live in a location where it would be difficult to get a qualified interpreter on site, discuss with your client the possibility of using a Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) service.²⁷

But some clients may not use sign language or might prefer another mode of communication. Real-time captioning (a.k.a., CART) might be a good (or even preferred) alternative. This computer-aided technology is similar to what court reporters now frequently use. Federal regulations also list some other possible alternatives to consider.²⁸

Obligations to Clients Who Are Blind or Have Vision Loss

The federal regulations offer another list of possible aids and services that might be suitable for a client who is blind or has significant vision loss.²⁹ Recent technology offers a lot of improved options for the blind or other individuals with vision loss to be able to communicate effectively. You can often assist these clients by merely providing electronic copies of any materials before and after meetings, which may allow the client to use electronic reading software, text magnification, or similar assistive device.³⁰ Documents in a word processor format (e.g., Microsoft Word) will typically work best, as scanned PDF documents

may be unreadable.³¹ However, your client might prefer someone who will read the material out loud, braille, or some combination of all of these options. Again, the key is working with your client to provide what the client needs.

Resources

If you need further information or have additional questions, there are a number of resources that are available to you:

- **ADA.gov.** Not only does ADA.gov have resources available on their website, but you can also call and speak confidentially with an ADA Specialist at (800) 514-0301.
- **Michigan Department of Civil Rights/ Division on Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing.** In addition to the Michigan Department of Civil Rights being a good potential resource itself, the Division on Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing is within the department and can be reached at (313) 437-7035.
- **State Bar of Michigan Equal Access Initiative.** The equal access initiative offers a lot of resources and updates regarding the Bar's efforts to ensure that all individuals have access to the courts and legal services. More information can be found at: <https://www.michbar.org/programs/equalaccess>.
- **Michigan Protection and Advocacy Services.** MPAS is a private nonprofit organization that advocates for the legal rights of individuals with disabilities in Michigan. MPAS gets its funding through various appropriations and grants. You can reach them on their hotline at (800) 288-5923.

Yes, attorneys are legally subject to the ADA by offering our legal services to the public. But it would be short-sighted to view the ADA's requirements as a significant burden to your practice. Embracing the ADA simply involves making common sense adjustments to ensure

https://www.americanbar.org/content/newsletter/publications/law_practice_today_home/lpt-archives/july13/serving-clients-with-disabilities.html (Last Accessed July 2013).

31. *Id.*



Christopher W. Smith is an attorney with Chalgian & Tripp Law Offices and practices primarily out of Jackson and Southfield. He concentrates his practice on special needs planning, elder law, and estate planning. He is licensed to practice law in both Michigan and Indiana and started his law career as a litigation attorney in Indianapolis. He is a council member of the Elder and Disability Rights Section of the State Bar of Michigan and is the Section Chair of the Government Assistance Program Section of the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys. He has been named a “Rising Star” by Super Lawyers magazine since 2012 and speaks regularly on Medicare, special needs, and other elder law issues.