



CITY OF COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

Disabilities Commission

To: Mayor and Council Persons
From: Columbia Disabilities Commission
Date: July 25, 2025
Subject: 2025 National ADA Symposium Experience

This year two (2) members of the Disabilities Commission were able to attend the National ADA Symposium which took place in Atlanta, Georgia from June 16 to June 18, 2025.

The National ADA Symposium is the most comprehensive in-person training conference available on the ADA. It is organized by the Great Plains ADA Center, our regional resource for the ADA and located here in Columbia, MO. The symposium provides the latest information and best practices on accessibility ideas around the country with input from US DOJ, US DOT, US Access Board, EEOC and hundreds of professionals and advocates. This year

Included below are experiences and reflections from Commission members:

Alexis Simmerman, Disabilities Commission Member:

For my first ADA Symposium, I intentionally selected several sessions on topics of which I was unfamiliar, with the hopes of absorbing as much wisdom as I could. This included sessions specific to employed people with psychiatric disabilities; incarcerated people with disabilities; and people of color with disabilities, all of which experience complex forms of discrimination in certain spaces. I was also surprised at how much I learned from topics of which I had believed to be more knowledgeable, like understanding how disabled working women face additional challenges related to pregnancy and menopause – and how both of those life experiences can lead to disabilities for previously nondisabled individuals. I have already been able to apply two other sessions in particular to my own life. I currently manage the social media accounts for my church, and “AI for Accessibility” helped me understand how I can use free artificial intelligence platforms to evaluate a post’s accessibility and offer suggestions, such as rearranging text to be more easily read by screen readers and adjusting text, graphic and background colors to create balanced contrast. In “The ADA and Collective Bargaining,” I more about my employee rights and how I can advocate for myself and others in my new role on my labor union’s bargaining committee, as we continue to bargain a contract with a new company who refuses to acknowledge the union’s status and has also removed all DEI language in employee contracts.

Another equally valuable experience I got out of the Symposium was the authenticity of the people as well as its overall structure. Both the space and the energy was intentional, making the inaccessible accessible without pomp and circumstance (bendy straws at the coffee bars!). Everyone I met was especially gracious without a hint of condescension, taking the time to understand what I was saying and then validating what I had to offer. It gave me a sense of great hope, as if the Symposium (the events, structure and people engaging with it) was a glimpse into a brighter future in which disability was both acknowledged and accepted, and accessibility was a foundation rather than an afterthought. I am immensely grateful for



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the opportunity to attend, and I know I will always remember that sense of disabled joy, if not the specifics of the event.

Cathy Dolles, Disabilities Commission Member:

This year, I had the opportunity to attend the ADA Symposium for the first time and it was a great experience. I attended sessions on managing psychiatric disabilities in the workplace, healthcare accessibility, accessible housing, and how to educate youth on accessibility and inclusion. In an accessibility wayfinding session, I learned about signage, architectural planning and remodels that can improve accessibility of a space for people with various disabilities. I also spoke with the vendors at the conference who showed me the latest technology and services available for improving accessibility including a robot that travels on sidewalks and collects data for accessibility. I came away with a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities to make our city more accessible, and I am grateful for the chance to attend.

Included below are experiences and reflections from City staff:

Adam Kruse, ADA Coordinator

The ADA Symposium is an outstanding conference and very helpful for people to better understand accessibility laws and modern ideas. There were a total of 85 breakout sessions available and attendees can pick a path unique to their professional field or interests. This year, I attended several sessions related to organizational accessibility management, first responders, accessible design, virtual meetings and digital accessibility. Some communities are utilizing communication cards and 24 hr access to virtual ASL interpreters for law enforcement officers and first responders when working with people with hearing impairments. This can improve communication and safety during these interactions. For planning, presenters discussed Departments anticipating interactions of their services and members of the public with common accessibility-related requests or barriers including effective communication, service animals, autism, mobility impairments and mobility devices, cognitive disabilities, mental illness, visual impairments, seniors, hearing impairment and chemical sensitivities. I also attended multiple sessions on accessibility in communication, writing and digital works including electronic documents and marketing. Technology and accessibility tools are rapidly changing and improving, so it is very helpful to receive the best and latest information in this area. I believe the information at this ADA Symposium helps to improve City services and accessibility of the community.

The Disabilities Commission is thankful for the support from Council, City Staff, and the Great Plains ADA Center. This is the third year this travel training has been available to the Commission. We look forward to continued work with the Council and City Staff as we progress towards accessibility for all persons.