

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE, BUT HOW DO I GET A TICKET TO THE SHOW?

Ticketing and Accessible Seating for People with Disabilities at Entertainment Venues

How do I buy a ticket for an accessible seat? Why can't I buy my tickets online? Where is the accessible seating? What if I want to buy a ticket at the last minute? What about when people stand up in front of me? What if I want to give my accessible ticket away to my friend who doesn't have a disability?

Getting a ticket to a popular concert or sporting event is an accomplishment in this day and age. Season ticket holders, winning teams and sell out crowds make it difficult to get a seat. But buying an accessible seat can be an even more difficult ordeal that adds another layer of stress and time to the process. Owners and operators of sports arenas, performance venues, and ticket vendors at box offices and over the internet, along with people with disabilities and their families and friends are grappling with ticketing issues as well. The serious economic and legal hurdles that venues face are relatively easy to identify—ticket availability and purchasing, transferring tickets, and preventing fraud and resale, though these issues only represent the tip of the iceberg when it comes to accessible seating at venues.

The Americans with Disabilities Act improved the accessibility of sports and other entertainment venues to people with disabilities by ensuring wheelchair accessible seats are available. However, the legal obligations and practical issues of implementation remain unclear to venue owners and operators, as well as to people with disabilities. There has been little guidance from governmental agencies beyond the required number of accessible seats a venue must have or that sight lines must be comparable to typical seating. This has made it difficult for venue operators to develop consistent workable practices and for people with disabilities to know what to expect when trying to access sports or performance venues.

The disability community shares common concerns with venues and operators that include verification of disability, fraud prevention, accommodation requests, companion seating for wheelchair accessible seats, seat location and lines of sight for accessible seating, transferability of tickets, retention and release of tickets, service animals and parking. Of course, these issues assume you can even purchase a ticket for an accessible seat. How tickets are purchased, whether through ticketing agencies or at the box office, through telephone sales, online booking or auction—all present ticketing challenges for people with disabilities as well.

What our experiences show is that the policies and training on these issues vary from venue to venue, leaving people with disabilities to navigate an unpredictable system for purchasing their tickets. Many ticketing policies do not address the real world needs of people with disabilities or the legal requirements for providing accessible venues. These experiences were echoed in a July 2002 National Center on Accessibility report on ticketing issues. Based on a survey of venue owners and operators across the country, the report confirmed that there are no uniform policies and practices throughout the industry regarding companion seating, reserving accessible seating for sold out shows, fraud prevention, and reseating for line of sight over standing spectators.

Disability Rights Legal Center (DRLC), through litigation and other advocacy efforts, is involved in ensuring that people with disabilities have the same rights, benefits and privileges related to accessible and companion seating at public and private entertainment venues. For example, when the newly built Kodak Theatre, home of the Academy Awards®, failed to provide a sufficient number of accessible seats and lines of sight over standing spectators, the DRLC represented a concert patron in her lawsuit against the Theatre. The suit settled in 2006 and required the Theatre to provide sufficient accessible seating and line of sight over standing spectators. In addition to changing ticketing policies, the settlement required staff training regarding customer service for people with disabilities. That case represented one part of the solution to the ticketing problem. DRLC also represented a purchaser of accessible seats from an online ticketing agency to ensure online sales were equivalent to the other online services provided.

We believe that the time is ripe to discuss shared concerns from all points of view. In November 2006, DRLC convened a "National Ticketing Dialogue" in Los Angeles comprised of all stakeholders—owners, operators, ticket vendors, and patrons with disabilities—to discuss common concerns as well as to start thinking creatively about solutions. Through ongoing collaboration with stakeholders, DRLC's goal is to assist in the development of model best practices that meet legal requirements and provide for more opportunities for people with disabilities to attend sporting and performance events. We are interested in receiving input from more people with disabilities about their experiences with ticketing issues at their local sports or performance venues. We will report back about the progress of our collaborative efforts and dialogue. Until then, enjoy the show! ■ **ABILITY**

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