

“Any Questions?” Podcast Transcript

Episode 13 : Disability Justice

[Jazzy Instrumental Intro Music]

Ashlyn: Welcome to this episode of the Any Questions University Health Center podcast. My name is Ashlyn, I use she/her pronouns and I'm a current peer leader with the Health Promotion and Wellness Services of the University Health Center.

Breannah: And I'm Breannah, I use she/her pronouns and I'm also a peer leader with the Health Promotion and Wellness Services of the University Health Center. Today we are going to be talking about the American with Disabilities Act or the ADA and we will discuss what exactly accessibility means for people with disabilities. We'll then talk about the difference between accessibility and usability and then we'll dive into some of the accessibility and usability issues on UMD's campus for those with disabilities. To wrap up, we'll speak to how this can impact the wellness of people with disabilities.

Ashlyn: So I started thinking about this topic a little while ago when I stumbled upon this TedTalk from 2016 presented by Elise Roy and in this TedTalk, Elise talks about her experiences as a disability rights lawyer and a design thinker as a deaf person and she brings up this one point that really jumps out at me.

Breannah: As an able-bodied person I never really put much thought into accessible designs prior to hearing this TedTalk but ever since I feel I have been much more aware of both accessible designs that are usable and convenient for everyone and also some designs that are technically accessible but are not necessarily usable. This led to both of us wanting to do more research on the topic and having this conversation today but before we get into the bulk of the podcast, Ashlyn can you break down what exactly a disability is so we're all on the same page?

Ashlyn: Yeah, of course. So the CDC defines a disability as any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person with a condition to do certain activities and interact with the world around them. According to the World Health Organization, disability has three dimensions. One being impairment which refers to the weakness or damage of a body structure, function, or mental function. Two being activity limitation such as difficulty seeing, hearing, walking or problem solving. And then lastly participation restrictions in normal daily activities such as working, engaging in social and recreational activities, and obtaining healthcare and preventative services. And it's also super important to note that this is just one definition and it may not necessarily encompass all individuals who have a disability. So for example, someone who has been diagnosed with a mental illness may not consider themselves to be someone with a disability but another person with a mental illness may consider themselves disabled so it really just depends on the person.

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Ashlyn: So now that we've gone over a very quick synopsis of the medical definition of a disability, we're just gonna dive into the Americans with Disabilities Act or the ADA and we're gonna talk about what exactly it provides for people with disabilities.

Breannah: The Americans with Disabilities Act is a civil rights act that was enacted in 1990 so, really not all that long ago. It prohibits discrimination against folks with disabilities in all areas of public life such as jobs, schools, and transportation. It's goal is to ensure that individuals with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as those without disabilities. The ADA is split up into five sections that relate to different areas of public life. These include employment, state and local government, public accommodations, telecommunications, and a miscellaneous category for aspects of public life that do not fall into the other sections.

Ashlyn: So the aspect of the ADA that we're going to be focusing on today is their accessibility standards. This is an incredibly long list of standards and regulations that the ADA requires for commercial facilities, state and local government buildings, places of public accommodation, and public universities like UMD. I think the most important takeaway from their list of standards is that they really focus on the minimum that public spaces need to follow such as the minimum amount of handicap parking spots or the minimum number of bathroom stalls that can accommodate individuals with disabilities. So this means that many public spaces will also focus on this minimum and follow the guidelines to the exact minimum number which may not always be the most helpful to individuals with disabilities.

Breannah: I also noticed that going through this list online on the ADA's website was really confusing. The list rather than always being explicit about what it expects public spaces to follow mainly links to other places in the standards list. For example, standard 227, sales and services, immediately links to standard 904, checkout aisles and sales and service counters, meaning that standard 227 must also follow standard 904 as well. But it gets even more confusing because standard 904 also links back to standard 403, walking services, which also links to other standards and if you are confused trying to follow what I just said you would be feeling what I was when I was trying to understand the website. I feel like this makes it very hard for folks to understand the website especially if they feel a public place is not following ADA standards because the list just links them to many different places without explicitly saying what it is and for saying.

Ashlyn: And I do wanna add on that, however, standards while they are confusing, they're very in-depth and they give guidelines for truly all things about public spaces like walkways, doors, elevators, kitchen layouts and apartments, and so much more. So while the ADA is really great for making sure that spaces are accessible for folks with disabilities, accessibility can be a lot different than usability. So what exactly is this difference between usability and accessibility?

Breannah: So the difference is subtle but super important. The two words have a lot of overlap but if something is accessible but not usable this makes a world of a difference for folks with disabilities. Accessibility refers to something's ability to access all people while usability refers to how easy a system is to use. Oftentimes, usability tests are devised to create usable designs which is which are both easy and efficient to use. However people with disabilities are not always included in usability tests so what exactly does this mean?

Ashlyn: Yeah and that's a great question. So unfortunately this means that many products that perform well in usability tests are not necessarily accessible to people with disabilities and then this carries over to the ADA. So almost everywhere you look you can find an ADA compliant design that is definitely accessible but when you look a little harder you may say to yourself how is this even functional. So for example, according to the ADA sidewalks must be at least 36 inches or 3 feet wide so several years ago I was in a wheelchair for a few months and I was enjoying a nice night out on the town and my friend was pushing me and my wheelchair on the sidewalk and while the sidewalk was definitely wide enough for my wheelchair every so often we would bump into a light pole because it was literally placed in the middle of the sidewalk so that my wheelchair could not fit around it. So yes the sidewalk technically was wide enough but was it usable all the time? Definitely not. Also not to mention that I definitely felt like an annoyance to other people who were trying to walk around on the sidewalk because my wheelchair took up the entire width of the sidewalk so others had to walk either on the street or on the other side of the road. And I was only in this wheelchair for a few months so this was super temporary for me yet I still felt the frustration of the designs not being super usable and so I can only imagine the countless other structural barriers that folks who depend on a wheelchair, a walker, or crutches for most movement may face on a day to day basis.

Breannah: And I can only imagine how frustrating that is.

[Jazzy Instrumental Transition Music]

Breannah: In recent years, UMD students have been speaking out about design and structures on our campus that are just not usable and convenient for those with disabilities. Let's talk about some of these accessible yet unusable structures on campus. But first we want to acknowledge that many of the examples we will touch on here aren't UMD specific and can be seen in many other public spaces in our society but we want to center the conversation around UMD to give everyone a clearer picture of some of the usability issues on campus. We wanna make clear that to our knowledge UMD's campus follows ADA guidelines. We are strictly talking about ways UMD could be more usable for students and faculty members rather than just accessible. We also want to acknowledge that we got many of our examples from various Diamondback articles about the topic.

Ashlyn: Yeah and speaking of Diamondback articles. I actually saw an article a few years back that first got me interested in the topic and that mentioned how the bathrooms in the South Campus Dining Hall are only accessible by stairs and there isn't even an elevator or ramp to take students up who can't use the stairs. It's just simply unusable and this led me to a rabbit hole of research on my end which ended in me discovering that in 2019 one student on campus published a 43 page report on the usability issues he faced while being a student which included not being able to access some of his friend's dorms, elevators not working in academic buildings leading him to either miss or be late to his classes among others. This even goes as far as the layout of campus where some wheelchair users experience trouble going up certain hills by themselves such as the one up McKeldin mall to Tawes plaza leading them to either having to ask someone to help them up there or going out of their way to find a useful route. And again I want to make it clear that from an ADA perspective campus is definitely accessible however many students with disabilities experience usability issues on campus literally everyday.

Breannah: One thing that's super important to mention is some of the buildings on South campus are technically exempt from having to follow ADA guidelines. ADA does not require buildings built during or before the 1940s to strictly follow the guidelines. While these buildings need to perform any readily available upgrades to follow the guideline if something would be too expensive or too difficult to upgrade they are exempt from having to follow that specific ADA guideline. So while these buildings including four dorms are not technically accessible, they are ADA compliant which can pose many usability issues for folks on campus.

Ashlyn: Yeah and we also want to acknowledge the budgeting constraints when it comes to making campus more accessible for folks with disabilities. So while we would definitely consider making campus more usable a pretty big priority some of these projects may take precedence over it and that is just not a UMD specific issue. There's just not a lot of representation for folks with disabilities in many authority roles and so when budgeting comes up these may not be issues that are considered priorities to able-bodied folks who do not have to experience these usability constraints.

Breannah: But speaking of budgeting we also want to mention where UMD has shined in terms of financials. Many of the new buildings on campus were funded through donations that were earmarked, which is a fancy way of saying that the money could only be used for a certain cause, in this case making new academic buildings. Campus used this to their advantage with ESJ by upgrading an old hall, Holzapfel Hall, which previously got many complaints about being unusable by folks with disabilities on campus. The part of ESJ that faces the mall is actually the outside of Holzapfel and UMD used the donated money to make that building usable while also upgrading it and adding a whole new section of the building, making the ESJ we know today. UMD essentially used a loophole with earmarking in order to make a building on campus more usable for individuals with disabilities which I think was a brilliant thing to do.

[Jazzy Instrumental Transition Music]

Breannah: So, what are the implications of all of these usability issues that we see on campus and on college campuses around the nation?

Ashlyn: Yeah and that's a great question and even before we get into that, I just want to mention that Stella Young who is an Australian Comedian, journalist, and disability rights activist said in a TedTalk from 2014 that disabled people are actually more disabled by their society than they are by their bodies and their diagnoses. Yeah, I'm just going to let that, let that marinate for a second and sadly Young passed away a few months after that TedTalk aired but she left that very important message. The wellness of people with disabilities is not affected by their disability itself but truly by the barriers in life that society creates. We want to reiterate that when we speak of the certain structural barriers that impact the wellness of people with disabilities we mean that having a disability in itself does not have to negatively impact wellness and as Stella said people with disabilities use their bodies to the best of their capacity just like non-disabled people do.

Breannah: We also want to acknowledge that we are both able-bodied people so we are truly speaking from research rather than experience and from a peer lens where we examine how our identities can impact our wellness. Also, the lived experiences of people with disabilities can vary greatly as we know that physical disabilities are not the only disabilities to exist. The experiences of those with invisible disabilities are also super valid and honestly we could do an entire podcast episode on just invisible disabilities but for the sake of this podcast we will

specifically be looking at how the lack of usability of some of these physical structures both on campus and off can impact the wellness of people with disabilities.

Ashlyn: So intellectual wellness can definitely be greatly affected by some of the barriers that Breannah mentioned. A lot of disabled students may face delays in getting to class because they have to take an alternate route because some of the streets on campus like campus drive and union lane are extremely steep and do not allow for someone who is using an electric wheelchair. Also, it can be extremely time consuming if an elevator is not working and then maintenance has to be called to fix the elevator so then you have to wait for maintenance to get there and then you have to wait for them to fix the elevator so, it can take a lot of time. Both of these things can lead to someone routinely being late for class and thus missing important notes especially if the lecture is not being recorded and although someone may say you know just plan ahead and leave earlier in actuality these spaces really just need to be more usable for disabled people just as they are for able-bodied people.

Breannah: Also as you can imagine, social wellness can be affected too. If a lot of the spaces on and around campus are accessible but not super functional and usable, it could be hard to socialize with friends to make new connections. For example, not all of the residence halls have to technically be accessible. So someone may find that it is extremely hard to go hang out with their friend at their place because there is not an accessible entrance.

Also on Baltimore avenue the sidewalks are definitely wide enough but there are a lot of uneven cracks on the sidewalk which could make it difficult for someone to safely navigate on Route 1. I could imagine that this could really deter someone from wanting to eat dinner at Route 1 or to just even hang out with their friends there too. Although I am sure every dimension of wellness can be affected by the structural barriers that exist pretty much everywhere we go, these are just a few examples. And before we sign off, let's get into some resources at UMD that do exist for disabled students.

[Jazzy Instrumental Transition Music]

Ashlyn: Yeah so the Accessibility and Disability Services or the ADS is a great resource within the Counseling Center that helps students with any accommodations that they may need whether it relates to testing, reduced course load, captioning, accessible housing, or ADHD and autism clinics or support groups. This wonderful group of counselors and other well-trained professionals are here to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals to ensure equal access to services, programs, and activities sponsored by the University of Maryland. For more information about the services that ADS provides, please feel free to head to www.counseling.umd.edu/ADS and you can also head over to the Health Promotion and Wellness Services website, that's where we're from, to check out some of our resources like wellness coaching, daily meditation, alcohol and other drug education, sexual health education, nutritional services, and truly so much more. The website is health.umd.edu/wellness-advocacy.

Breannah: The Counseling Center is also a great resource for students looking for short term group, individual, and couples counseling. Sessions with the counselor at the Counseling Center are completely free for 8 sessions within a 12 month period. First a student can schedule an intake appointment where the student situation is evaluated and then the counselor will refer them to counseling at the Counseling Center, the ADS office, or the Behavioral Health Unit of the Health Center for psychiatric services. To learn more about the resources that the Counseling Center offers as well as how to schedule an intake appointment, please feel free to

head to counseling.umd.edu. And we want to end this podcast by saying that since the 1990s, the United States has come a long way in providing equal access to individuals with disabilities. From prohibiting discrimination in education, transportation in jobs, and by having a set of guidelines that all public spaces need to follow to make them accessible. However, accessible does not always mean usable for these individuals which can greatly impact the wellness of individuals with disabilities. Both on the campus level and on a more macro societal level, we still have a long way to go but there are steps we can take to make our public spaces more usable for all folks. And we want to thank you for listening to this episode of Any Questions. Don't forget to tune in next time.

[Jazzy Instrumental Outro Music]