

# Position Paper

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## ISSUE: Why we should update the Handicapped Parking Sign

### WHAT DO ALL THESE PEOPLE HAVE IN COMMON?

John was tough, strong, and headed to Afghanistan to fight for his country. He never paid much attention to accessibility issues. That changed after an IED explosion left him partially paralyzed from the waist down.

Seven-year-old Crystal was born with a partially formed lower leg and foot. Up until recently, she had spent more than her fair share of time in doctors' offices and hospitals. But today her world is boundless thanks to her new carbon fiber purple prosthetic leg.

Wanda just turned 86 and her body isn't what it used to be. Her doctor wants her to use a walker but she manages just fine with her cane... thank you very much! She enjoys going to the mall every day to have coffee, socialize with friends, and window shop.

What do all of these people have in common? They don't think of themselves as disabled and they certainly don't want others to think of them that way. Terms like "handicapped" and icons depicting helpless figures in wheelchairs are no longer accurate or acceptable representations of people with accessibility needs. Let's get rid of outdated public symbols and perceptions of people with physical challenges!

### CALL TO ACTION

We are calling on lawmakers to update accessibility statutes and regulations to incorporate the new Accessibility Icon and eliminate the word "handicapped" and replace it with "reserved" for parking spaces. This can be done in a budget-neutral manner by applying the change only to new installations and signs that need replacement.



**CHANGE THE SIGN. CHANGE THE *ATTITUDE*.**

**"Handicapped"** → **"Reserved"**

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## BACKGROUND

More than 45 years after it was first created, the international symbol for access has gotten a needed update. The old symbol characterizes a person who is stationary and helpless and it focuses attention on the wheelchair. The new symbol, while still employing the use of a wheelchair, suggests independence and engagement and focuses on the person, not the wheelchair. The new symbol is universally viewed as a more positive depiction of a person who has accessibility needs.

Unfortunately, it's not being used in very many places... yet.

The new symbol has received praise for both its innovativeness and its artistry. In early 2015 it was displayed in the Modern Art section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The new icon, created by Tim Ferguson-Saunders, Brian Glenney and Sara Hendren, started out as a grassroots effort in Boston with supporters placing stickers featuring the updated graphic over signs with the old, static wheelchair symbol.

Even more outdated is the term "handicapped." In the context of disability, the etymology of the word dates back to 1915 when it was applied to children with physical disabilities. By the 1950s the term was extended to adults with physical disabilities and people with intellectual, developmental, and psychiatric disabilities. Today, the word is used to describe people and is strongly associated with pity, charity, and helplessness.

So far New York is the only state to have adopted legislation requiring the use of the new accessibility icon and respectful language. Meanwhile, a small but growing number of corporations, non-profit organizations, and municipalities are also moving forward. These include Cambridge, Mass.; Phoenix; and El Paso. More recently, the new accessibility icon has been adopted by the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars, Twitter.com, and the Cincinnati Art Museum.

## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

1. Changing an offensive word like "handicapped" to an emotionally-neutral and well-defined word like "reserved" just makes good sense.
2. The icon change is not perfect but it is a significant improvement. Obviously, everyone who has an accessibility need doesn't use a wheelchair. However, this symbol is an internationally recognized icon and international icons have value. If you're in a place where you don't speak or read the language, recognizing the symbol for poison could save your life and recognizing the gender symbol on a bathroom door could save you public embarrassment. Making a more radical change to the international Accessibility Icon just isn't realistic. This is important progress that doesn't invalidate or confuse current international icon usage.
3. People with accessibility needs don't need charity, handouts, or pity. They just need to be able to live as independently as possible. A fully accessible community makes that possible. And let's face it, we will all need an accessible community at some point in our lives.

## WHO DOES THIS EFFECT?

People who have accessibility needs vary widely and include people who have temporary injuries or certain illnesses (e.g., a heart condition). It includes people who are frail, parents of kids with physical limitations and adults with physical challenges. It also includes accident survivors, crime victims, and injured combat soldiers.

Not surprisingly, most people who have accessibility needs don't use wheelchairs but they do need to be close to an entrance. Less recognized is that many people who use wheelchairs don't need or want to be close to the entrance but they do need the extra wide parking space for their lift or ramp.

## CONCLUSION

Most people don't exceed the expectations that society puts on them. That's why it's such a big story when someone does. Yet everybody wants to be seen as capable, confident and independent. This issue is not about changing a sign. It is about changing expectations. It's not about changing the community for a few of us. It is about improving the community for all of us. It's time to rethink *disability!*