BUILDING CODES AND ACCESSIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

WHAT IS A MODEL BUILDING CODE?
A model building code is a collection of documents that are referenced as minimum requirements for the construction and alteration of buildings. The health and safety of the building users are the concerns addressed. The model building code embraces all aspects of building construction, including accessibility for people with physical disabilities.

WHO NEEDS A BUILDING CODE?
We all do—whether in our homes, offices, schools, stores, factories, or places of entertainment. The code’s regulations range from fire and structural safety to health, security, energy conservation, accessibility, and other issues of public welfare.

HOW IS A CODE DEVELOPED?
The model building codes generated by the International Code Council® (ICC®) are published every three years. Two complete cycles of code-change proposals move through a special hearing process between each edition. Decisions on proposed code changes are made during a regulated public hearing and voting process. Through this development process, model codes provide due process for all persons affected and keep pace with rapidly changing technology. Any person or group can propose a code change to one or more of the International Codes®. Participation in this process can start with a visit to the ICC Web site, www.iccsafe.org under “Code Development,” or by writing to us at International Code Council, Codes and Standards Department, 4051 West Flossmoor Road, Country Club Hills, IL 60478.

HOW IS A BUILDING CODE ADOPTED?
The authority having jurisdiction, typically a township, city, county, or state, passes an ordinance or law concerned with minimum standards for building construction. Jurisdictions use model codes as reference documents so they do not have to create and maintain their own set of requirements. An ordinance will reference a specific edition or each adopted code (e.g., 2003 International Building Code®).

WHERE ARE THE PROVISIONS FOR ACCESSIBILITY LOCATED IN THE INTERNATIONAL BUILDING CODE®?
Chapter 11 of the IBC is titled “Accessibility.” This chapter contains a good portion of the “scoping” requirements related to access into and through buildings for persons with physical disabilities. Scoping issues are the “what, where, and how many” of an element that is required to be accessible. However, some accessibility issues are also related to general safety issues and have been “mainstreamed” into other areas in the code. For example, the provisions limiting protruding objects are found in Chapter 10, and visible alarms are found in Chapter 9.

The IBC relies on reference to a nationally-recognized standard for technical requirements, or the “how” to make elements accessible. This standard is ICC/ANSI A117.1, Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities.

About the International Code Council
The International Code Council® (ICC®), a membership association dedicated to building safety and fire prevention, develops the codes used to construct residential and commercial buildings, including homes and schools. Most U.S. cities, counties and states choose the International Codes®, building safety codes developed by the International Code Council.
WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF ACCESSIBILITY PROVISIONS IN THE IBC?

The IBC requires all new construction to be accessible. Chapter 11 provides for a series of exceptions that allow for a level of nonaccessibility that is reasonable and logical. For example, the IBC does not require vehicle parking spaces, but when parking is provided, the building code specifies how many spaces must be constructed as accessible and where they should be located. The IBC then relies on the referenced technical standard, ICC/ANSI A117.1, for the width, surface slope, and signage for the accessible parking spaces.

The IBC addresses issues that allow a person with a physical disability to get to, enter, and independently use a site, facility, building, or element and to access the routes for emergency exiting. The IBC includes special requirements for specific uses such as dwelling units, assembly seating, judicial facilities, recreational facilities, and self-service storage facilities. The IBC includes provisions for special items such as bathrooms and kitchens, storage facilities, seating at tables, counters and work surfaces, service facilities, operating controls, and signage.

When renovations are being performed, there is the opportunity to improve accessibility. While meeting new construction requirements is the ideal, alternatives are available giving consideration to cost, technical feasibility, or historical significance. The goal is that all existing buildings will become fully accessible over time. Requirements for existing buildings are found in Chapter 34 of the IBC or the International Existing Building Code™ (IEBC™).

DO REQUIREMENTS IN THE IBC MATCH THOSE FOUND IN FEDERAL LAWS THAT DEAL WITH ACCESSIBILITY?

The ICC has been working with the Department of Justice (DOJ), the U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (a.k.a. Access Board), and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to coordinate the accessibility requirements found in the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) and the Fair Housing Accessibility Guidelines (FHAG). HUD has reviewed the IBC as a “safe harbor” document for compliance with the FHAG. ICC has asked the DOJ for technical assistance in evaluating the 2003 IBC for compliance with the current ADAAG. In addition, the ICC has been working with the Access Board throughout the development of the new ADA/ABA Guidelines for coordination between the two documents. It is ICC’s goal to meet or exceed the requirements of these two federal laws that cover building and facility access.


HOW ARE BUILDING CODES ENFORCED?

The code-enforcement process is normally initiated by an application for a permit to construct or remodel a building. The code official is responsible for processing applications and issuing permits for construction or modification of buildings in accordance with the building code. The code official will review the construction drawings for code compliance as well as perform inspections during the construction phase. If a deficiency exists or if the building or a component does not comply with code requirements, it is the responsibility of the code official to issue orders to correct the illegal or unsafe condition. These corrections must be completed and approved before the building may be occupied.

WHAT IS THE ADVANTAGE OF USING THE MODEL BUILDING CODES?

Model building codes are continually updated so they can take advantage of new technologies, new ideas, and specific situations. In addition, the requirements in the building code are addressed as part of the design and construction process, when it is easier and more cost effective to fix problems. It also lead to greater compliance with the accessibility provisions because of the local contact, review, and inspections done by the code official. Finding problems after the building is occupied can lead to expensive retrofits as well as delays in operation for the building users/occupants.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
www.iccsafe.org/accessibility

BUILDING CODES AND ACCESSIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

(continued)