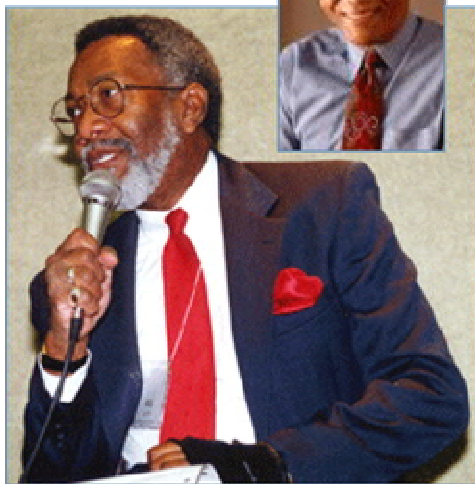


✦ FOCUS ON SPINAL CORD INJURY ✦

Ensuring Access for All



Ensuring that businesses and other public places are accessible to people with disabilities is an often ignored and sometimes challenging issue, says Bill Scott, founder of Abilities Unlimited, a Phoenix-based consulting firm. But, he believes, the challenges are surmountable – and always worth the effort.

“Much of the problem can be solved by direct communication,” says Mr. Scott. “Businesses and organizations can ask their employees with disabilities what they require to do their job effectively, and people with disabilities can speak up and let those same people know what they need.”

Mr. Scott identifies three issues that sometimes stand in the way of businesses' compliance with disability standards. The first is cost — making the structural or utility changes to comply with codes can be expensive.

Next is attitude — on the part of businesses and organizations as well as people with disabilities. According to Mr. Scott, organizations don't understand the needs of people with disabilities, and many people with disabilities are so used to inaccessibility that they don't realize their rights to fully accessible facilities.

Finally, the current structure of compliance codes often stands as an impediment to creating an environment that works for people with disabilities. This poses a significant problem in developing effective evacuation strategies for people with disabilities.

For example, Mr. Scott notes, fire codes state that if a building has a sprinkler system, it is not required to have areas of refuge. “But that's not enough,” says Mr. Scott. “People need areas of refuge where they can avoid harmful chemicals in the air until the fire is out or elevator service is restored.”

Developing evacuation strategies for people with disabilities is one of Mr. Scott's many interests. The impetus for his commitment to these strategies dates back 20 years to his involvement in the National Task Force on Life Safety.

Since that time, he has conducted interviews with survivors of the 1993 World Trade Center attack to provide recommendations to Blue Cross Blue Shield on improving evacuation strategies. He now provides workshops on the subject of emergency

preparedness for people with disabilities.

Mr. Scott's path towards creating Abilities Unlimited began with his volunteer work with the National Parks Service (NPS). From 1981-89 he worked with the NPS to make sure that the Statue of Liberty was wheelchair accessible. This volunteer work led him to training Parks Service personnel in compliance with disability codes.

Finally, Mr. Scott realized that while there were government and advocacy groups devoted to making the workplace accessible to people with disabilities, there were no private sector professional companies devoted to this effort.

Colleagues met his idea to start such a company with skepticism. "They all thought I was wasting my time, since no one would pay for a service that the government offered for free. But nearly 20 years later, I'm still here and still working," he says.

The list of businesses and organizations that have utilized Mr. Scott's services is long and diverse. It includes advanced technology firms, aviation facilities, universities, convention centers, office buildings, government buildings, health care organizations, hotels and resorts, public schools, sports venues and housing complexes.

One of the projects that Mr. Scott is most proud of is his company's work for Wells Fargo Bank. In 90 days, his company profiled an astounding 142 branches and provided architectural recommendations for every branch. He says, "This kind of accomplishment reminds me how far-reaching the work that I do really is. It keeps me going."

As a long-time advocate for people with disabilities, as well as a person with a disability, Mr. Scott is passionate about his work. "I enjoy going to work everyday," he says, "because even though the people I help may not know who I am or what I do, I get to make life easier and safer for many, many people in a way that lasts a lifetime."

To learn more about Bill Scott and Abilities Unlimited, please visit www.abilitiesunlimited.com or call (602) 547-1880.

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