Massachusetts Office on Disability
FY24 Annual Report

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Massachusetts Office on Disability

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About MOD

The Massachusetts Office on Disability (MOD) was created in 1981 under Chapter 6, Section 185 of the Massachusetts General Laws to "bring about full and equal participation in all aspects of life by all persons with disabilities in the Commonwealth."

Through Executive Order 592, MOD is established as the Executive Branch's designated Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Rehabilitation Act Coordinator responsible for advising, overseeing, and coordinating compliance with state and federal laws protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.

MOD fulfills its mission by providing information, guidance, and training on disability-related civil rights and architectural access.

In short, MOD helps people understand their rights and obligations under disability laws and how they apply to different situations so they can better assert their rights and comply with the law.

Letter from the Executive Director

Dear MOD community:

There is a complex world of local, state, and federal laws and regulations that define and intersect with disability rights. It is often difficult for the public to discern which laws apply to their situation, how they apply, and how they can assert their rights or comply with their obligations. That's where MOD comes in.

MOD responds to over 300 inquiries a month from individuals with disabilities, caregivers, housing providers, employers, businesses, accessibility professionals, and more. Each day, our expert staff provide comprehensive, accurate, and up-to-date information about what these laws mean for real people in real-world situations. In FY24, we also provided over 90 free and accessible trainings and added six new disability rights topic pages to our website, allowing us to reach an even wider audience.

In addition to new initiatives, MOD continued to expand and improve on old favorites. Our Reasonable Accommodations and Modifications in Housing workshop, first launched in FY23, was held again in FY24 for an audience of over 100 people. We saw many of you at our Disability Connections event in April, where we recognized the named plaintiffs in the Daniels-Finegold Settlement Agreement for their vital contributions to sweeping accessibility improvements at the MBTA. It was inspiring to hear from these fierce advocates and to celebrate them alongside the tight-knit Massachusetts disability community.

Whether you are a tenant with a disability wondering how to request a reasonable accommodation to equally enjoy your housing, a municipal ADA Coordinator wading through municipal accessibility legal requirements, or a state employee seeking guidance on making your agency's website more accessible, MOD is here to help you.

It is an honor to do this work. The more we can inform individuals of their legal rights and obligations, the closer we get to building a Commonwealth that is inclusive and accessible to all. Thank you for being a part of that mission.

Mary Mahon McCauley

Executive Director

Massachusetts Office on Disability

The MOD team

Executive Director
Mary Mahon McCauley

Executive Assistant
William Noonan

Administration and Finance
Michael Dumont, Assistant Director for Administration and Finance

Assistive Technology Support
Rob Dias, Assistive Technology Information Specialist

Communications and Training
Lilia Melikechi, Communications and Training Manager

Community Services Unit (CSU)
Jeffrey Dougan, Assistant Director for Community Services

Evan George, ADA Municipal Grant Compliance Coordinator

Aimee Ott, Emergency Preparedness Program Coordinator

Disability Rights Unit (DRU)
Naomi Goldberg, Assistant Director for Disability Rights Unit and Director of Client Assistance Program (CAP)

Susanne Agerbak, Information Specialist

Camille Karabaich, Information Specialist

Sarah Wiles, CAP Advocate

Jeanne Perrin, CAP Advocate

General Counsel
Julia O'Leary, General Counsel

Disability rights guidance for the general public

One-on-one consultations

"I want to thank you so very much. I have my [service] dog, she is fantastic, and it's all due to your kind [guidance]…she's helped me a great deal, as you have as well."

– MOD Caller seeking consultation on how to ask for a reasonable accommodation to allow their service dog in their rental unit

MOD's expert staff respond to over 300 inquiries each month from individuals with disabilities, municipal officials, ADA Coordinators at the local and state level, business owners, housing providers, and more.

In these individual consultations, MOD staff listen thoroughly to a constituent's explanation of the barrier they are facing. We then provide detailed information and guidance to help the constituent understand their legal rights and obligations and how they apply. In some cases, this involves working with a constituent to draft a letter requesting a reasonable accommodation to continue living in their home or working at their job.

As a result of these consultations, hundreds of Massachusetts residents with disabilities can more easily and equitably live, work, and enjoy their communities alongside their neighbors.

In FY24, the most frequent call topics were legal rights, obligations, and recourse options for resolving issues around:

- Permitting assistance animals in various settings,
- Reasonable accommodations and modifications in housing,
- Reasonable accommodations in employment, and
- Equally accessing municipal government services.

Online disability rights guidance

In FY24, MOD continued to update and expand mass.gov/MOD/DisabilityRights, a plain language online resource for members of the public to find comprehensive information about their disability-related legal rights. The page links to disability rights topic pages covering housing, employment, public places, and more.

Each topic page includes information about related laws, tips for troubleshooting an issue, recourse options, and how MOD can help. The page template, topic areas, and examples used were developed in response to the public's needs.

This year, two new topic areas were added to the disability rights page:

- Disability rights in government programs and services
- Disability rights in public accommodations

The disability rights topic pages receive thousands of views per month. By providing this "self-serve" resource, MOD makes critical disability rights information more accessible to the public, reaches a wider audience, and optimizes staff time.

In addition, these new informational pages were added to MOD's website:

- Find the ADA Coordinator for a state agency
- Disability rights in transportation
- Protection of people with disabilities from abuse, neglect, and hate
- Reasonable accommodation process for state Executive Branch employees

MOD also collaborated with the Massachusetts Trial Court to publish Massachusetts law about disability rights, newly added to their website.

Architectural access

MOD's Community Services Unit (CSU) supports individual members of the public and municipal accessibility through information, guidance, site visits, and networking opportunities. The CSU responds to over 170 monthly unique inquiries on architectural accessibility, local Commissions on Disability (CODs), Title II and III of the ADA, accessibility in state and local government programs, and other disability rights topics. Additionally, MOD conducts architectural accessibility site visits across the Commonwealth to assess concerns in the built environment.

In FY24, MOD provided:

- Eight site visits to assist CODs and municipalities in understanding access obligations within the built environment, and
- Technical assistance to several cities and towns, including:
    - A walkthrough of a new municipal building in Western Massachusetts to ensure it met architectural access obligations at the request of the COD,
    - Collaboration with a state agency and their vendors to ensure a Municipal ADA Grant Improvement Program grant recipient's projects were accessible, and
    - Guidance to a convenience store on the South Shore to assist them with understanding how their renovation may impact accessibility under both state and federal obligations.

Community Access Monitor (CAM) training

These were unbelievable classes. You tend to keep it moving while keeping it interesting and very informative.

– CAM Training Attendee

MOD's Community Access Monitor (CAM) training program trains community members to survey buildings for accessibility and advocate for compliance with various access rules and regulations.

The complete CAM program includes a two-day Beginner CAM Training and a one-day Advanced CAM Training. The program covers structural accessibility, equal policies and practices, accessible communication, and advocacy techniques for partnering with organizations and individuals to be successful in making communities more accessible to people with disabilities.

In FY24, MOD provided:

- Four 2-day Community Access Monitor trainings that trained over 144 people, and
- Six 1-day Advanced Community Access Monitor trainings that trained over 146 people.

We are currently developing a new CAM Site Visit training to expand CAM training opportunities.

Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB)

MOD's Executive Director is a Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) member. The Board meets every other week to adjudicate variance requests, complaints, and advisories. MOD also provides expert insight and technical knowledge as a member of the MAAB Subcommittee on Regulations, which meets monthly to discuss proposed changes to the MAAB for future revisions, chaired by the Assistant Director of the CSU.

Quarterly Tea with MOD: Serving Customers with Disabilities

"Great presentation once again. I always appreciate the trainings and how well they are done. I learn something each time I join one."

– Quarterly Tea Attendee

Each quarter, MOD hosts a "Quarterly Tea with MOD." Quarterly Tea topics are chosen based on timely and widely applicable concerns in the disability community, as determined by our consultations with constituents. Quarterly Teas allow members of the public to interface directly with MOD's expert staff and have their questions answered live.

In May 2024, MOD hosted Quarterly Tea with MOD: Serving Customers with Disabilities. The Tea gave local entities that interact with the public (for example: state and local government, businesses, and other service-providers) a basic overview of the disability-related obligations that exist when serving the public.

Over 100 people attended the Tea. A recording is available on MOD's YouTube channel so it can be viewed on-demand.

Client Assistance Program (CAP)

MOD houses the Commonwealth's Client Assistance Program (CAP).

CAP is a federally funded program that provides information, advocacy, training, and outreach related to vocational rehabilitation (VR) and independent living (IL) services. CAP is a valuable resource for applicants and consumers of the Commonwealth's VR and IL services who may be facing barriers related to their services.

In FY24, CAP hosted several workshops, trainings, and presentations to inform VR and IL applicants, consumers, and service providers of their rights and obligations related to these services.

These included four sets of CAP's popular three-part, interactive Disability in Employment online workshop series, which walks participants through resolving real-life examples of disability-related barriers in employment. The series includes:

- Deciding to Disclose: Advantages and disadvantages of disclosing your disability at different stages of the employment process
- Reasonable Accommodations in Employment: Steps people with disabilities should take to identify their essential job functions, supports they may need to fulfill them, and how to request a reasonable accommodation at work
- Disability Discrimination in Employment: How to identify and address disability discrimination in the workplace

CAP also provided customized trainings for service providers, including Center for Independent Living staff, nonprofit advocacy organizations, and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC).

Emergency preparedness for people with disabilities

"Our Administration remains dedicated to ensuring all policies and practices center on our deeply held values of equity, inclusion, and accessibility. I commend MEMA and MOD for their leadership in advancing strategies that lift the needs of our disability community and reduce disparate impacts too often felt by our most vulnerable residents. This innovative partnership represents our continued commitment to making every aspect of our work equitable and accessible for all."

– Governor Maura Healey

In FY24, MOD signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) to formalize a partnership to strengthen access and equity throughout state and local emergency management. The joint effort elevates the unique needs of individuals with disabilities and medical conditions during each phase of emergency management, including planning, preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation.

MOD also fostered existing and new partnerships with the State 911 Commission and the Department of Public Health (DPH). These partnerships will create new initiatives to promote emergency preparedness on a community-wide scale.

In FY24, MOD's Personal Emergency Preparedness Program brought together seniors, people with disabilities, local emergency planners, and first responders to provide information and tools for preparing for different emergency situations. These trainings ensure people with disabilities have the assistance and appropriate resources needed in times of emergency.

During FY24, the program held a total of 28 meetings throughout the Commonwealth. These meetings were attended by over 800 people with disabilities, over 30 first responders, and more than 100 guests. As a result of these meetings, the program was able to distribute more than 570 emergency go-kits to attendees. In addition, the program surpassed its initial goal of holding 30% of its trainings in historically marginalized communities by achieving 35% overall.

Expanding access at the local level

Municipal ADA Improvement Grant

> ***"With this grant and others…we will be able to bring more resources to our city and therefore have a more inclusive society with better opportunities."***
>
> ***– Mayor Brian DePeña, City of Lawrence***

MOD's Municipal ADA Improvement Grant Program for FY24 awarded the most ever funding in the grant's history. The full awarded amount was $3,932,321.07 and this was spread across 62 different grants helping to improve access for people with disabilities in 57 municipalities.

These funds will lead to the creation of 25 Self Evaluation and Transition Plans and 37 projects. Grant recipients included the City of Lawrence, who used the funds to make major renovations to their city hall to ensure that all people feel welcome and can reach the services they need. The Town of Blackstone removed barriers of access to their playgrounds and Roosevelt Park, so that all children in Blackstone can enjoy their summer.

In consultation with the Executive Office of Administration and Finance, MOD decided to move up the grant application process for FY25. Moving the grant application period from the early Fall to the late Spring will give awarded communities additional time to complete their projects and Self-Evaluation and Transition Plans.

Municipal ADA Coordinator Peer Resource Group

MOD is committed to ensuring every individual with a disability in the Commonwealth has equitable access to municipal programs and services, regardless of where they live.

In FY24, MOD launched a new Municipal ADA Coordinator Peer Resource Group. Municipal ADA Coordinators serve the critical role of ensuring municipal compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and ensuring equitable access to municipal programs, services, and facilities for residents with disabilities.

The Peer Resource Group meets regularly for training, networking, and open office hours. This crucial professional development equips municipal ADA Coordinators with the knowledge and resources they need to fulfill their compliance role and keeps MOD informed about accessibility issues at the local level.

Commissions on Disability

Municipal Commissions on Disability (CODs) advise municipal governments on the disability community's needs in their city or town. They inform municipal officials about accessibility concerns and best practices for inclusion of people with disabilities in municipal programs, services, and facilities.

MOD is the lead technical advisor to CODs and provides them with information, guidance, and training on how to get started, understand their role and responsibilities, and reach their goals.

In FY24, MOD supported CODs by providing:

- Two half-day Statewide COD Meetings that brought together over 45 Commissions, and
- Ten individual COD meetings to offer support and assistance to members.

Additionally, MOD launched a new Commissions on Disability page that includes:

- How and when members of the public should contact their local COD,
- Step-by-step instructions on how to start a new COD,
- Tips to help CODs reach their goals,
- Important laws for CODs to know, and
- A new, easy online process for CODs to update their contact information so the COD listing for the Commonwealth can remain up-to-date.

The new page provides answers to frequently asked questions in an accessible, widely available format. MOD plans to expand the page in FY25 with new resources and expanded information so that all community advocates have the information they need to start, run, or successfully interact with local CODs.

Executive Branch ADA Compliance

Digital accessibility

Digital Accessibility and Equity Governance Board

Governor Healey established the Digital Accessibility and Equity Governance Board in early FY24 to promote digital accessibility in the Commonwealth. As a member of the Board, MOD provides subject matter expertise on legal obligations and best practices related to digital accessibility.

Guidance and training

In April 2024, the Department of Justice published a final rule giving government entities 2-3 years, depending on size, to bring their digital offerings into compliance with WCAG 2.1, level AA conformance standards. MOD quickly issued guidance and resources to state and municipal government entities to help them understand their obligations under the new rule.

MOD also provided digital accessibility training to ADA Coordinators and presented to the New England School Public Relations Association (NESPRA) to provide further explanation on the new rule and tips on complying.

Digital accessibility consulting

In FY24, MOD provided free digital accessibility consulting to 25 unique state agencies and entities on 45 unique projects. These agencies included the Human Resources Division (HRD), Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), Department of Revenue (DOR), Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Executive Office of Technology Services and Security (EOTSS).

MOD routinely works with HRD to improve the accessibility of Mass Perform and Mass Achieve e-learnings and was a member of the strategic sourcing team for My Path to select an accessibility vendor.

Support for Executive Branch employees with disabilities

MOD is the ADA coordinating agency for the Commonwealth. In FY24, we partnered with HRD to improve online resources and information for state Executive Branch employees with disabilities. MOD's new reasonable accommodation process for state Executive Branch employees page provides plain language information on employee rights, how to request a reasonable accommodation, and what to do once the request is approved or denied.

Guidance and training for Executive Branch agencies

Executive Branch ADA Coordinators serve a vital role in ensuring ADA compliance and fair treatment for state employees and Massachusetts residents and visitors with disabilities enjoying state government programs, services, and buildings. MOD trains and guides ADA Coordinators to help them succeed in their role.

This year, MOD modernized the introductory training process so it is available on-demand via Mass Achieve for new ADA Coordinators. In addition, MOD provided the following trainings exclusively for Executive Branch ADA Coordinators:

- How to use Service Now platform for reasonable accommodation requests
- Navigating Indefinite Reasonable Accommodation Requests
- Intersection of the ADA and Other Laws (FMLA, PFML, and Worker's Compensation)

MOD also periodically trains Executive Branch managers. Management trainings are provided as needed to address systemic issues surrounding Executive Branch compliance.

Boards, councils, and commissions

- Department of Public Health Disability Council
- Digital Accessibility and Equity Governance Board
- Massachusetts Architectural Access Board
- Massachusetts Attorney General's Office Disability Advisory Group
- Massachusetts Commission for the Blind Statewide Rehabilitation Council
- Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council
- Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission Statewide Rehabilitation Council
- Massachusetts Statewide Independent Living Council
- MassHealth Disability Advisory Group
- MassMatch Advisory Council
- National Association of Governors' Committees on People with Disabilities
- Special Commission on State Institutions
- State 911 Commission
- State Disability Agencies Collaborative (National)
- State Mental Health Planning Council

Budget

Category	**Amount**
State Appropriated Funds	$1,096,312
Federal Grant: Client Assistance Program	$228,485
Trust Fund: ADA Access and Training	$25,000
Capital Fund: Municipal ADA Improvement Grant	$4,000,000
Total	**$5,349,797**