

Barriers Protecting Access



What is a barrier?

Typically when you think of a barrier, most consider it to be a barrier preventing access to goods and services to persons with disabilities. For this article, a barrier is referencing a 6-inch curb, guard or other elements that prevent injury to those with disabilities.

Guards and curbs are important to prevent wheelchair users from injury by preventing their wheels from dropping off a walk. Barriers not only protect wheelchair users but also protect the blind or persons with impaired vision, from walking off an elevated area or running into a projecting element.

Curbs, when provided, as shown in the article photo above, prevent a wheelchair user from dropping off the landing edge, and direct them through the accessible route to the public way. This same curb enables a blind person to navigate the walk by tapping with their cane. For a person who has impaired vision, the curb though required, may actually be a danger. For example, someone who has impaired vision from advanced stage glaucoma includes narrowed vision and no depth perception. Due to the lack of contrast between the walk and the curb, they could trip on the curb and drop off the landing, by assuming they could walk straight instead of directing themselves along the accessible route.

Is it required to paint the curb yellow or another contrasting color? No, it is not required. However, painting a curb yellow or other contrasting color serves as an indicator of a surface or grade change, making it easier for persons with a vision impairment to detect. You will not be sued if your curb is not painted, you may be sued if individuals trip over the curb and sustain an injury. It is in the best interest of the owner to ensure access is provided, even when not required by code or statute. As an accessibility consultant, it is our responsibility to educate owners in providing access to their goods and services.



Many barriers can be used to direct persons along an accessible route. I have seen landscaping used, such as hedges, large and oversized planter boxes. Most commonly used are curbs with or without guards. Having an experienced design professional is key when preparing plans for development or site improvements. Oftentimes design professionals will work with an accessibility specialist to ensure access is provided to the most current regulations.

What is the best type of barrier? A curb with a guard may be the best type of barrier. A guard provides a distinct indication that access is redirected and prevents someone from tripping over the curb. In the photo, the curb is required, the yellow paint is not, nor is a guard. However, I would recommend placing a guard on the curb versus painting the curb a contrasting color. This provides the best protection for persons with impaired vision. Parallel curb ramps is another location that I would recommend a curb with a guard to be used. Oftentimes when exiting a courtyard or other common area that leads to a parallel curb ramp, the drop off of the curb isn't always distinguished enough for persons with impaired vision.

Overall, there are many options that can be used that provide access and protection.

Owners are best to rely on the expertise of a design professional rather than trying to figure it out on their own. Keep in mind that access designed and provided for those that need it, shall be designed to protect everyone that uses it.

Lorena Soules, CASp 833 | April 2020