

## INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE SPECIAL EVENT PLANNING: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

SIMON DARCY and ROB HARRIS

University of Technology, Sydney

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People with disabilities have a right to access the full range of social activities and services available in a society. Nonetheless, the way that built and social environments are often constructed serves to restrict access of this group to a wide range of activities and hence compromise their rights as citizens. This article looks at how those engaged in the organization of events can facilitate the involvement of people with disabilities in the conferences, festivals, sporting, and other events that they conduct. The article begins by providing a brief overview of selected statistics and legislation associated with disability in Australia. It then looks at the operationalization of event disability planning in Australia through a review of complaint cases made under the *Disability Discrimination Act, 1992*. The review provides an insight into the current discriminatory practices employed by event and venue managers. The article then presents a “best practice” case study of the Sydney 2000 Olympic and Paralympic Games to show how disability and access issues were incorporated into the event planning and operations processes. The article concludes with some suggestions as to how event and venue managers can better incorporate people with disabilities into their programs.

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Disabilities      Discriminatory practices      Accessibility      Special event planning      Australia

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People with disabilities comprise a significant component of the population of any community, yet until relatively recent times they were marginalized from community participation. This article reviews this situation in the Australian context from an event management perspective. The article begins by providing a brief overview of selected statistics and legislation associated with disability in Australia. It then looks at the operationalization of event disability planning in Australia through a review of complaint cases made under

the *Disability Discrimination Act, 1992*. The review provides an insight into the current discriminatory practices employed by event and venue managers. The article then presents a “best practice” case study of the Sydney 2000 Olympic and Paralympics Games (the Games) to show how disability and access issues were incorporated into the event planning and operations processes. The article concludes with some suggestions as to how event and venue managers can better incorporate people with disabilities into their programs.

### Disability in Australia: An Overview

Disability needs to be considered as part of human diversity and not separate from it. All societies contain individuals with disabilities, with approximately 500 million people worldwide living with disability (Charlton, 1998). In the Australian context, disability as a proportion of the population has steadily increased from 15% to 19% since the national survey was first undertaken in 1988 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 1998). In 1998, an estimated 3.6 million people, or 19% of the Australian population, were classified as having a disability. There is also a significant relationship between aging and disability whereby a person is 14 times more likely to have a disability by the time they reach 65 years of age than they were as a 4 year old (ABS, 1998). Australia has an aging population (ABS, 1996) and the numbers and proportion of older people in Australia is growing dramatically (Lynch & Veal, 1996, pp. 329–332).

Of the people with a disability in Australia, approximately 500,000 use mobility aids, 280,000 are deaf or have a hearing impairment, 260,000 have mood or behavioral disabilities, 160,000 have learning disabilities, and 115,000 are blind or have a vision impairment (ABS, 1998, p. 23). In addition to those identified as having some form of disability, another 3.1 million individuals were classified as having a condition or impairment that, while currently having no significant impact on their daily lives, would likely result in some form of disability in the future (ABS, 1998). As shown in Table 1, the Australian statistics are similar to other Western nations that also share similar patterns of aging among their populations.

The New South Wales Government (1997) and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (CDFACS) (1999) have established dimensions for access based on broad categories of disability. For example, CDFACS defines physical access needs of people with vision, hearing, cognitive, mobility, and manipulative impairments. They state that each impairment group has a variety of access considerations. The NSW Government (1997) simplifies this further by relating exclusion to social participation and highlighting the dimensions of access that restrict social participation as physical, sensory, and communication. For example, those who use a wheelchair or walking aid may need a continuous pathway comprised of ramps, lifts, handrails, curb cuts, and wide doorways,

Table 1  
Comparative Estimates of Disability Rates

Country	Year of Survey	Population (Million)	Percent of Population	People With Disabilities (Million)
Australia <sup>a</sup>	1998	18.6	19.6	3.6
New Zealand <sup>a</sup>	1996	3.6	19.1	0.7
Canada <sup>a</sup>	1991	30.6	15.5	4.7
US	2000	270.3	19.5	52.7
European <sup>b</sup>				
Austria	1995	8.1	12.5	1.0
Belgium	1997	10.2	12.9	1.3
Denmark	1995	5.3	17.4	0.9
Germany	1998	82.0	17.3	14.2
Greece	1991	10.6	8.2	0.9
Spain	1999	39.1	9.9	3.9
France	1999	58.8	15.3	9.0
Finland	2000	5.1	22.9	1.2
Ireland	not avail.	3.6	10.9	0.4
Italy	1994	56.8	7.8	4.4
Luxembourg	exp. est.	0.4	16.5	0.1
Netherlands	1999	15.7	18.6	2.9
Portugal	not avail.	9.9	18.4	1.8
Sweden	1999	8.9	17.1	1.5
UK	2000	57.7	18.8	10.8
Total				232.6

Sources: Chamie (1995) cited in Wen and Fortune (1999, p. 12), Pfeiffer (2002), Takamine (2001), van Lin, Prins, and Zwinkels (2001), and population estimates from <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/wp98.html>

<sup>a</sup>Denotes definition by activity limitation (Takamine, 2001).

<sup>b</sup>Based on European Community Household Panel estimates (van Lin et al., 2001).

etc., in order to access an event and move around within an event site/venue. [Pathway is defined as: "An uninterrupted path of travel to or within a building providing access to all required facilities. For non-ambulatory people, this accessible path shall not incorporate any step, stairwell or turnstile, revolving door, escalator or other impediment which would prevent it being negotiated by people with a disability" (Standards Australia, 1998, p. 7).] Sensory access involves a different set of needs such as hearing augmentation-listening systems, tactile signs, sign language interpreters, and audio cues for lifts. Communication access involves providing information in alternative formats (Braille, large print, or plain English) to facilitate participation (Disability Council of NSW, 1994).

In recent years, human rights legislation has been introduced into many Western nations with the intent of trying (among other things) to ensure that people with disabilities are not discriminated against. At the

national level in Australia, the *Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), 1992* is the main piece of legislation that serves this purpose, but it is also supported by complementary state disability policy, environmental planning legislation, Building Codes of Australia (Australian Building Codes Board, 1996), and the referenced Australian Standards for access and mobility. The DDA also aims to promote community acceptance of the notion that people with disabilities have the fundamental rights before the law as the nondisabled. From an event or venue management perspective, planning practices need to incorporate the dimensions of access that find expression in these various pieces of legislation, codes, or standards. Should they not do so they run the risk of having a complaint filed against them with the body responsible for overseeing the application of the DDA, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) (HREOC, 2001b). In the following section examples of such complaints are examined in order to showcase common access issues in the conduct of events.

#### The Disability Discrimination Act and Events

The DDA makes it unlawful for an event organizer to discriminate against people with disabilities in the areas of access to public places, education, and the provision of goods, services, and facilities. A review of complaint cases for this article identified a number with significant implications for the events industry. The most numerous of the cases involved physical access to premises, the provision of information, and the equality of service provision. Listed are examples of such cases.

- *Arts festival access:* An event organizer had booked an inaccessible venue, namely, a hall at Adelaide University, for their arts festival. Two separate complaints were lodged, one by an exhibitor and the other by a person who wished to attend the festival. The conciliated outcome required the festival to be moved to an accessible venue and for Adelaide University to commit funds to make the hall accessible for future events.
- *Conference and ticket fees:* Two complaint cases identified that it was discriminatory to charge a second fee (conference registration or ticket purchase) to an attendant of a person with a disability attending an event if the attendant was there only to facilitate the person with a disability's involvement. Both these complaint cases were settled through a refund of the second fee charged and organizations changing their charging policy. Many organizations now have a recognized "attendant, carer, or companion" policy for people with disabilities who require the assistance of an attendant.
- *Stadium access:* A man who uses a wheelchair lodged a complaint concerning the lack of accessible seating at a newly constructed major sports venue. The outcome of the ensuing mediation involved the venue agreeing to develop a policy for seating complying with the most recent Building Code of Australia edition. This ensured that at least 1 in 200 seats would in future be wheelchair accessible; and that priority would be given to people with disabilities when booking these seats up until 1 week before an event.
- *Function room access:* A man who uses a wheelchair lodged a complaint concerning the inaccessible features of function rooms operated by a local council. He was attending a wedding and had been advised that the rooms were accessible and had a lift. Upon arrival, he found the lift to be a goods' lift, which was too narrow and did not operate easily even with staff assistance. He was subsequently unable to reach the toilet (which was on a different floor) in time, had to leave to change clothes and missed the event. The mediated outcome involved: the council agreeing to install a lift complying with standards for passenger use; the conduct of staff disability awareness training; and the payment of financial compensation to the complainant.
- *Information provision:* A blind man lodged two separate complaint cases against the Sydney Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG). He stated that he had been discriminated against by the failure to produce the official ticket book in Braille and the official Web site of the Games was not compliant with the W3C guidelines for Web site accessibility. The HREOC determined that discrimination had occurred, either on the basis of less favorable treatment or on the basis that a condition or requirement had been imposed that the complainant could not comply with and which was unreasonable. The complaints were upheld and while originally ignored by SOCOG further action was taken to the Federal Court of

Australia where an undertaking was given to provide alternative format information in the future and to compensate the individual involved.

- *Quality of viewing experience:* A man who has quadriplegia and uses a wheelchair lodged a complaint concerning the wheelchair-accessible seating in a recently constructed tennis center and aquatic center. He was of the opinion that the seats had poor lines of sight as railings at eye height made it difficult to see. The complaint was settled by the venue agreeing to both reducing the height of the main balustrades to 800 mm and to installing thin steel cables (which do not block the view) for safety (HREOC, 2002).

In 2000–2001, some 505 complaint cases were finalized involving conciliation hearings and Federal Court actions (HREOC, 2001a). Many of these cases, including those relating to events, could have been avoided through understanding the responsibilities of the DDA on providers of facilities and services. An awareness of these responsibilities would have saved people with disabilities from discriminatory practices that led to unsatisfactory experiences. Further, it would have saved providers the time and resources required to resolve such complaints.

The DDA through Disability Action Plans (DAP) has a strategic mechanism by which organizations can proactively engage with disability and access issues. The advantage to organizations developing such plans is that they can be used to refine their approaches to access planning and, should a complaint be made, act as a consideration in any mediated outcome (HREOC, 2002). To date only one event, the National Folk Festival (NFF), has gone down the path of developing a DAP (HREOC, 2002). The NFF's plan aims to "ensure that the National Folk Festival is recognised as providing accessible mainstream access, and services, to all people." In pursuing this goal it has focused its attention on improving on-site access for attendees, staff, and volunteers, and on ensuring on-site services, activities, and performances can be accessed/enjoyed by people with disabilities. In order to progress these broad objectives, the NFF states in this plan that it will:

- appoint an access coordinator;
- introduce disability liaison officers (4–6 people);
- consult with attendees with disabilities and/or their associated organizations;

- use feedback to annually update the access plan;
- provide access information on their Web site; and
- provide disability awareness training to all staff and volunteers (National Folk Festival, 2002).

It is noteworthy that the proactive stance by the NFF as regards access would appear to not be typical of events of this type. Using the New South Wales Folk Association listing of folk festivals in that state, the authors of this article undertook a review of the Web sites of those events listed (18 of the 35 festivals listed had Web sites). Only one event (Global Carnival 2000) made mention of access issues. A more extensive study would be needed to establish the extent to which such an outcome would apply to other event types; however, the authors are of the opinion that it is likely this finding would be generalizable, at least in the festivals area.

While SOCOG was cited in one of the previously mentioned complaint cases, the Games nonetheless represented the most extensive effort that has yet been made by an event in Australia to provide an inclusive experience for people with disabilities (Olympic Co-ordination Authority, 2001). SOCOG, while organizing the Games, was not, however, the main body responsible for disability and access issues. This was the responsibility of the Olympic Co-ordination Authority (OCA), a New South Wales (NSW) state government authority specifically chartered to develop the venues, operate the sites during Games, and maintain the sites for the future. An extensive review of this agency's responsibilities has been undertaken elsewhere (Darcy, 2001). OCA's approach to these issues provides significant insights into the processes involved in planning and delivering inclusive events, and it is for this reason that the final section of this article profiles this organization and its efforts at delivering an inclusive event.

### The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games

The Games occurred over 3 months and included the Olympics, Paralympics, and the Cultural Olympiad that surrounds both events. The access planning framework used for the Games by OCA is presented in Figure 1. To ensure the process outlined in this framework worked effectively, an Access Advisory Committee (AAC) was established. This committee's function was to advise the OCA on the full range of issues associated with disability and access. The AAC

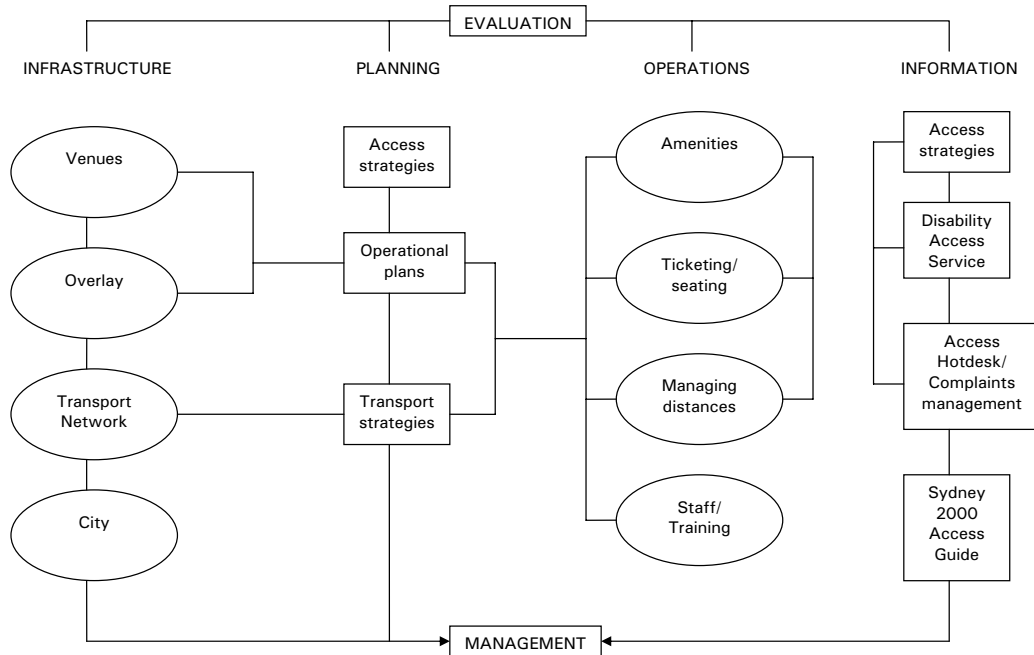


Figure 1. Accessibility planning framework for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Source: OCA (2001).

drew its members from various community organizations with expertise in the area (see Table 2), and operated within a set of self-developed operating principles, specifically:

- people with disabilities are people first;
- a person with a disability is a full and valued member of society;
- a person with a disability may work in, compete in, or visit any building or venue;
- where operational solutions are necessary, the per-

son is to be treated with dignity and their energy conserved;

- staff and volunteers must be willing and able to assist a person with access requirements when requested;
- where a person with a disability requires the use of a personal assistant, they are to remain with them at all times;
- a person with a disability will have access to the services provided to the general public, at no greater cost;

Table 2  
Membership and Affiliation of the Olympic Access Advisory Committee

Government Agencies	Peak Disability and Community Groups
Ageing and Disability Department	Acrod Limited, NSW
Department of Transport	NSW Council for Intellectual Disability
SOCOG	Self Help for the Hard of Hearing
SPOC	National Federation of Blind Citizens
Anti Discrimination Board	Consultative Committee on Ageing
Disability Council of NSW	People with Disabilities NSW Inc
Government Architect Design Directorate	National Federation of Blind Citizens

Source: OCA (2001).

- the legal rights of a person with a disability will be recognized and protected;
- services will be sensitive to, and support the diversity of, people with disabilities;
- inquiries and complaints will be taken seriously and dealt with speedily.

One of the main tasks of the AAC was to produce a set of Access Guidelines to incorporate disability and access issues for inclusion in the Games planning process from the beginning (OCA, 1996). These guidelines incorporated current access requirements stipulated in the Building Codes of Australia (Australian Building Codes Board, 1996), the referenced Australian Standards for access and mobility (Standards Australia, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1998), and the spirit and intent of the DDA. The Access Guidelines that sought to incorporate access for all dimensions of disability and in all of the roles that the Games provide for people with disabilities as athletes, performers, spectators, officials, media, volunteers, and staff. They sought to provide people with disabilities with an accessible environment that they can function in independently and with equity and dignity (OCA, 1998). As the Guidelines state:

Access is not only about buildings. A truly accessible environment is one in which a person with a disability can freely express their independence, and one in which any impediment to integration is removed. It involves "seamless" blending of numerous key components such as communication, transport, employment, education, external pathways, community awareness, housing and buildings. Special access provisions should not be necessary if the environment is built to adequately reflect the diversity and needs of the community. (OCA, 1998, p. 3)

This quote emphasizes the importance of conceptualizing access as part of the universal design process (Aslaksen, Bergh, Bringa, & Heggem, 1997; Preiser & Ostroff, 2001). Universal design regards disability as part of human diversity and central to maximizing community participation. Disability and access issues are not a "special" addition and not to incorporate these issues is economically and socially inefficient. The guidelines were issued to all professionals involved in OCA developments. OCA employed these principles in the planning, design, construction, operations, and information provision stages, together with a thorough monitoring process at each stage through the involve-

ment of the AAC. This process required that an access strategy be prepared for each venue and that an access audit be carried out. Further, these requirements were extended to include the Cultural Olympiad venues, and were interpreted as embracing any other necessary services that would be considered part of the Games "precinct" (e.g., hospitals). In the light of new developments in the access area, and of experience in the application of the original guidelines, a revised second edition was released prior to the Games in 1998 (OCA, 1998).

The access objectives and their associated strategies and/or policies that emerged from the interaction between the OCA and the ACA are summarized in Table 3.

The implementation of the strategies/policies outlined in Table 3 were evaluated at various points as the Games approached via: audits, walkthroughs, reviews of operational plans, and questionnaires completed by people with disabilities at Olympic test events (see Fig. 2) (Darcy, 2001; Darcy & Woodruff, 2000). The various evaluation processes identified a range of issues that needed to be addressed prior to the event. These included: the need for an Access "Hotdesk" to aid venues in their efforts at dealing with people with disabilities; poor signage associated with toilets and other amenities; shortcomings in staff training; design problems with accessible portable toilets; and difficulties associated with some transport drop-off points (OCA, 2001).

While the pre-Games evaluation process was successful in identifying many potential problems, some difficulties still arose during the event itself. The major problem revolved around a significant underestimation of the number of people with disabilities attending the Games. The result of this was a range of demand-related problems including a shortage of accessible buses, and of staff to provide assistance to people with disabilities. Other identified problems were associated with the ability of people to preplan their Olympic experience. This was due to the slowness of distribution of access-related information and the failure to contact ticketed spectators who had identified that they had access requirements (OCA, 2001).

The evaluation of the OCA's efforts associated with disability planning for the Games led to a range of recommendations for the ongoing development of the Disability Action Plan for events conducted at Sydney Olympic Park. These recommendations, summarized in Table 4, can also be said to provide useful insights into the general disability planning process for events.

Table 3  
Sydney 2000 Games: Access Strategies and Policies

Objective	Key Policies and/or Strategies
The capacity to plan ahead	Access Guide to the Games; SOCOG and Olympic Rail and Traffic Authority call centers; prebooked parking (Paralympics only); State Library Disability Access Service
Accessible pathway of travel from home to venue and return	Accessible transport strategy; State Rail management of assistance at stations; accessible parking at park and rides; accessible shuttles; accessible regional buses; accessible taxi drop-off point (Sydney Olympic Park); accessible parking at key railway stations (Central, Redfern, Lidcombe, Granville, Blacktown, Strathfield, and Liverpool) and in the city; accessible parking at Sydney Olympic Park (Paralympics only); audit of pedestrian routes in city
A range of accessible seating	Ticketing policy; training—call center staff; identification of access requirements and follow up; seating policy; wheelchair and companion seats in all venues; enhanced seating identified in all venues; ramps, handrails, etc. as per OCA Access Guidelines
Accessible food and drink, concessions and other amenities	Concessions and merchandising policy; some lower counter heights; accessible locations (e.g., hardstand); % of accessible toilets. Compliance monitored daily
The capacity to move around independently	Wayfinding, color contrast, size, and height; use of accessible (disability) pictograms, including where assisted access required; tactile maps for legacy; use of Braille in some venues
Live-time information	FM induction systems; PA system and hearing loop; captioning on some score boards and video screens; closed captioning for live broadcast
Assistance as needed	Spectator Services and Village staff training; wheelchair loan arrangements
Integration	Wheelchair spaces in buses; sit people together wherever possible
Affordability	Use of public transport maximized; range of ticketing prices—concessions (Paralympics); free parking (Paralympics)
Strategies to minimize distances to travel	Closer drop-off points to venues; wheelchair loan arrangements; separate pathways only to reduce distance
Accessible accommodation (for athletes)	Additional accessible bathrooms; completely accessible pathway of travel in Village; Village access strategy—5% adaptable and 30% visitable houses (in legacy), 21.4% of bed spaces are accessible for the Paralympics
No undue exposure to risk	Specifically addressed in contingency planning and VERPs; Spectator Services training; hazard tiles; handrails; daily site management compliance checklist
No undue delays	Frequency of accessible buses; “exception” gates for “mags and bags”; assistance available at train stations and at venues

Source: OCA (2001).

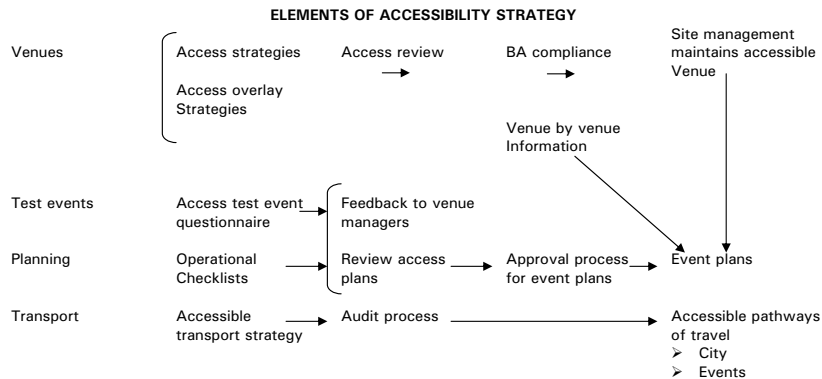


Figure 2. Summary diagram of the Olympic Co-ordination Authority’s accessibility strategy review process. Source: OCA (2001).

Table 4  
Recommendations for Ongoing Development of the OCA Disability Action Plan

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**Values**

An inclusive and nondiscriminatory approach to venue and event management that recognizes and values diversity.

**Transport**

A system of accessible bus transport that is built into regular operations with set timetables, etc.

Additional accessible buses.

A review of State Rail operations for people with disabilities to ensure that provisions of ramps, information, and other assistance is appropriate and adequate.

A system of permanent intrasite-accessible transport that can be upgraded for large events.

A parking policy that promotes accessible parking as an option to public transport use.

**Ticketing**

Call center staff and management with disability awareness training.

Maintenance of agreed percentage of accessible seating (various types).

Accurate information about seating provisions.

Carers ticketing policy.

Transparent process for managing queries and complaints.

**Planning and Operations**

Accessible operations fully integrated into event management.

Dedicated access team to coordinate access provisions, monitor outcomes, and provide information as necessary.

Access provisions and improvements built into development, maintenance, and refurbishment plans.

Disability awareness training and exposure to people with disabilities for all staff.

Access compliance checklists for venues and operations.

Employment and contracting of persons with disabilities with appropriate expertise.

**Information**

Timely and accurate information on access provisions provided to all relevant stakeholders

(e.g., ticketing, venues, potential patrons, etc.) in alternate formats.

Access information included in all mainstream publicity, media, etc.

Development and maintenance of technical and other material relevant to the various aspects of inclusive venue management.

**Equipment**

Identification, provision of necessary equipment (e.g., wheelchairs).

**Contracting**

Clear access specifications built into all contracts as essential components.

Process for assessing tenders using people with disabilities and experts in access.

Inclusion of access requirements in any transfer of responsibilities to other agencies post with the wind-up of OCA.

**Consultation**

Disability advisory group made up predominantly of people with disabilities.

**Venue and Site Development**

Access be an integral part of any proposed development.

The specific issues of venue sightlines, tactile ground surface indicators, wayfinding, public art information, and intrasite transport be addressed as a priority.

**Seating**

A capacity to decrease and/or increase the number of the number of wheelchair and companion seats to reflect the needs of particular populations, while at the same time ensuring that the venue is promoted as fully accessible.

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Source: OCA (2001).

**Conclusion**

Disability considerations appear not to be uppermost in the minds of Australian event managers at present. This situation may well change over time as the DDA, a still relatively new piece of legislation, becomes more

broadly understood by the event industry. Formal complaints concerning events and venues are being made to HREOC and identify a range of discriminatory practices. Event organizers should take the opportunity to reduce the possibility of such actions by understanding their responsibilities under the DDA and taking action



to be inclusive. OCA has established a Web site providing access guidance for event and venue managers based on the experience of the Games (OCA, 2002). Strategically, event managers who run events on an annual basis should develop and lodge a DAP. DAPs, however, need to be well conceived if they are to be effective, and, to this end, a great many insights can be drawn from the Games case study. This event sought input directly from people with disabilities and peak organizations, integrated disability planning into the overall event planning process, and evaluated their efforts to make recommendations for future events. OCA explicitly acknowledged that building access into events is about seeking to be inclusive of the whole community. Further, this case highlights to event organizers that inclusive planning both maximizes community participation and, from an instrumental perspective, return on the resources invested.

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