

"Court access for disabled cheered"

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When Arizona Supreme Court Justice Michael D. Ryan was first appointed to the bench in 1985, he was one of two Maricopa County Superior Court judges in wheelchairs. The court had to call in carpenters to make accommodations so that he could even get to the bench in his courtroom.

On Tuesday, the 15th anniversary of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act, Ryan was at the state Capitol to introduce a comprehensive evaluation of how Arizona courthouses measure up to the landmark 1990 civil rights legislation.

Much has changed in the past 15 years.

"The shape of American cities is different today than before the ADA," Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard told a crowd that gathered to commemorate the anniversary of the law, which prohibits discrimination in employment, transportation and other public accommodations against persons with disabilities.

Many of those in attendance were in wheelchairs. Some had guide dogs. All of the speakers' remarks were translated in sign language for the hearing impaired.

Phoenix attorney James Reed, Ryan's co-chair on the committee that traveled across Arizona to visit state, county, municipal, federal and tribal court facilities, called the Arizona Courthouse Accessibility Survey "a celebration of accommodation."

The committee found successful approaches to accessibility in every courthouse. Examples include a viewing spot in the Glendale Justice Court gallery set up for a person in a wheelchair and a fully accessible courtroom with ramps in the Coconino County Superior Court.

Not surprisingly, the state's older courthouses in rural counties, many of them built at statehood, presented more "challenges" than facilities built after the ADA was signed into law in 1990 by President George H.W. Bush.

The survey took nearly two years to complete and was sponsored by the State Bar of Arizona, which regulates attorneys in the state. More than 30 volunteers broke into teams of three and four to evaluate 39 courts.

They were interested in seeing how courts with limited budgets coped with accessibility for judges, attorneys, witnesses or jurors with disabilities.

"We tried to emphasize the best," said Tempe attorney Ed Myers, one of the evaluators.

The Arizona Courthouse Accessibility Survey is available online at <http://www.azbar.org>.