“Accessibility” is the key to opening doors to persons with disabilities, under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). ADA was signed into law in July 1990, with the goal of providing equal employment opportunities and accommodations to persons with disabilities.

One component of ADA, Title III, calls for sweeping changes designed to provide dramatically increased accessibility to public accommodations and commercial facilities. From widening entrance doorways to lowering drinking fountains, the impact of Title III provisions will begin to immediately alter, and improve, how commercial properties are used by everyone.

In existing buildings, the law requires that architectural and communications barriers be removed to the extent that removal is “readily achievable,” i.e. can be done easily and without much expense. This requirement becomes effective January 26, 1992. Barrier removal may include, but is not limited to: installing a ramp where there are only stairs; widening doors that are not wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs; making the necessary changes to inaccessible bathrooms; lowering drinking fountains so they can be reached by persons in wheelchairs; adding raised markings to elevator control buttons; creating designated accessible parking spaces; and replacing doorknobs with levers.

ADA will affect all new construction and restorations in commercial buildings after January 26, 1993.

Here’s how you can learn about ADA’s requirements.

ADA is also intended to provide greater access when buildings are altered, renovated or remodeled. While alterations are not required by the law, when they are done after January 26, 1992, altered areas must be made accessible “to the maximum extent feasible.” A clear path of travel must be made accessible. The rules are not intended to affect existing lease arrangements between landlord and tenants. Generally, the tenant will be responsible for bringing its own premises into compliance with ADA, while the landlord is responsible for common areas of the building.

The most stringent accessibility standards apply to new construction—those facilities built for first occupancy after January 26, 1993. These must be designed and built so they are “fully usable to and accessible by” persons with disabilities.

The Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA) International has developed the ADA Compliance Guidebook: A Checklist for Your Building. It is available through AWCI for $50 (member) or $100 (nonmember) plus shipping. It provides the most comprehensive and accurate guidance to building professionals who need to understand and comply with the new requirements. For more information, call (703) 684-2924.