

ABOVE

By Jefferey Spivey

AND *BEYOND*

When it comes to locker-room accessibility, ADA compliance is just the start

In recent years, locker-room designs have evolved to enable better accessibility. But that wasn't always the case.

"Over the last 30-plus years, it's become pretty code-descriptive on what we have to provide in a facility," says Tom Betti, Sports Studio Director at JLG Architects. Technically speaking, a firm could satisfy the minimum requirements and label a project ADA-compliant. When it comes to accessibility, however, the goal is much bigger than executing a to-do list.

"It might be great to have the code-required toilet stall, but if you're in a wheelchair, and it's a pain in the butt to navigate to that stall," says Adam Barnett, Principal Architect at JLG's Sports Studio, "well, you're not really being accessible and inclusive, right?"

BIGGER AMBITIONS

Barnett says designing a great locker room requires considering the "downstream effects" that minimum compliance can cause. It starts with entry into a facility from the parking lot.

Betti says, "You want to locate those parking stalls that serve people with special needs so they have easy access into the building, where they're not crossing easy driving lanes." Parking-lot designs may also include zero-level curbs across the front of a building for seamless entry, regardless of patrons' abilities.

Inside, the location of the locker room is crucial—a decision that can be overlooked if accessibility isn't discussed until the overall facility design is complete. Among the factors to think about are the various areas a locker room may serve. Can patrons navigate to amenities like pools, gyms, or racquetball courts easily?





installed at different heights, spread throughout the locker room and not tucked away in a rear alcove. Lockers may be painted a lighter color but have darker handles, making them easier to use for patrons with vision impairments.

Do wider hallways lead to and from the locker rooms?

Then, within a well-placed and accessible locker room, the focus should shift to providing the best possible patron experience. This often requires going above and beyond code specifications.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Every facility demands unique elements to meet the specific needs of the surrounding community, but several features are used consistently across projects.

Automatic doors are commonly installed at facility entrances. Betti says these are especially helpful for patrons hauling bulky gear for sports like sled hockey. Wider doors are useful, too.

“By ADA requirements, you only need 32 inches clear on that door width,” Betti says. “We’re always going to do 36, more times than likely a 44-inch-wide door, because it’s just easier to come and go and get people in and out.”

Barnett notes it’s also important to think about the placement of doors or openings built within the locker room. “Is it just openings, and you’re still getting private sightlines and that sort of thing, but making it easier for anybody to navigate, whether it’s someone who might be wheelchair-bound or [on] crutches?” he says.

The same attention to detail should be applied to all amenities within the space.

“It’s more than just a locker. It’s more than just a sink or toilet,” says Randy Lieberg, Studio Specialist in JLG’s Sports Studio. “All of these spaces are considered so that someone who is either permanently or temporarily disabled—in whatever manner that might be—that the type of spaces that we’re creating are not just accommodating by the bare minimum, but that they’re truly usable.”

This type of space might include benches or lockers

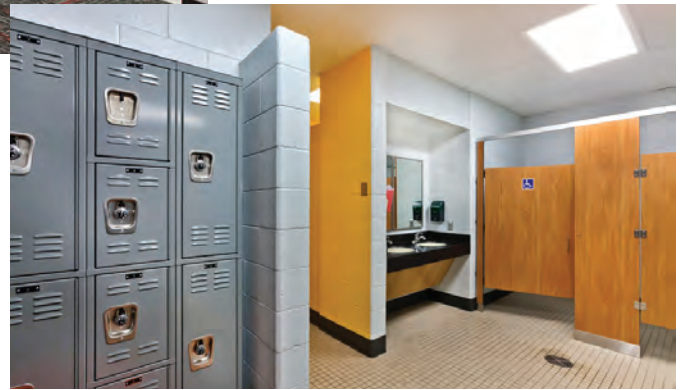
Showers are another key area to revamp for better usability.

Betti says individual shower stalls have become the norm, as opposed to larger showers that accommodate from four to 12 people. As with the placement of lockers and benches, accessible shower stalls should be placed with all other stalls “right off the main access point into the shower area.”

The core differences in accessible shower stalls are grab bars, drop-down seats, and flexible shower heads. Betti adds that facilities often take extra steps to avoid younger patrons misusing or destroying the specialized shower heads. The Sports Studio gets creative to remedy this issue, designing features like quick-release functionality, so the heads can be removed when not in use, then clicked in place for patrons who request them.



Additional shower-accessibility best practices include using small-format tile with more grout lines. Barnett says this is safer for all users, not only those with mobility issues. All shower hooks can be installed at lower heights (for



instance, 48 inches) instead of only one or two. Thermal guards are also impactful for users who don't have feeling in their arms or legs. Betti says the guards are placed over the piping. Then the firm sets temperature limits for hot water to prevent patrons from burning themselves while washing.

Other aspects to consider are lower sink and mirror heights, smaller, private changing rooms, and modular bench styles. Barnett says there should be adequate clearances throughout the entire space, not only in a designated area, and movable furniture can also improve flexibility.

He says, "The traditional locker room in the '90s is long rows with a fixed bench in the middle and two feet on either side of it. So, what can we do to get away from that?"

rooms with features indicative of design trends from the '90s or earlier times. Obvious aesthetic updates may be needed, but Barnett says ADA compliance is always part of the design phase.

"You're going to recommend [to] your client that it's in the best nature of the project for them to address those things," he says.

Lieberg adds that upgrading only to meet requirements doesn't work, though some clients approach projects in this manner. "We don't take it by the letter of the code and the regulation. We have to integrate that and make it work."

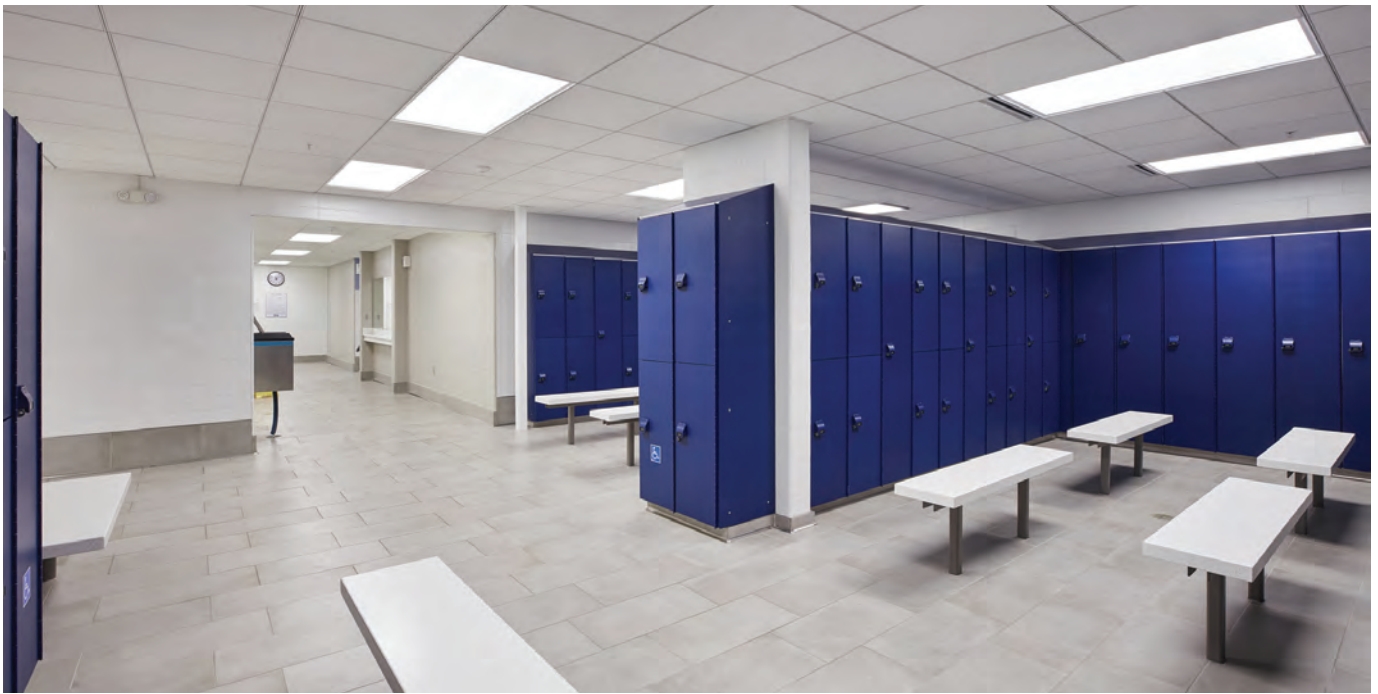
In practice, this looks different for every community.

On one current project, Betti says the team is adding an adult changing room with a changing table that meets a loading requirement of at least 300 pounds. A past project in downtown Minneapolis required specific lighting because excessive flickering affected patrons with certain neurological disorders. And, in another, the welcome desk featured one lower desk with a special-height chair so facility staff could sit at eye level with wheelchair-bound members.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

JLG's Sports Studio works on both new facilities and renovation projects. That means the team encounters locker





Sometimes, these features can be added to an existing structure. At other times, it's more beneficial to start over. But whatever approach, there's great value in the resulting facility.

"It's finding that balance and making it a more welcoming place," Betti says. "That's how we always try to approach these projects."

Though these are design considerations a client may specify or JLG might bring to a client's attention, community members may also advocate for accessibility upgrades. Regarding an outdoor aquatic project, Barnett says, "We had a very vocal mother who said, 'I have a child with special needs, and we can't use the existing pools because it's so difficult for me to support my child, get them changed, and do the sorts of things that everybody needs to use the pool.' That's really impactful when you're hearing it directly from the community members."

However, whether a community, an architecture firm, or a municipality has sparked the change, everyone involved stands to benefit. And when so many people are positively affected, the impacts reverberate.

"We're good stewards of the client's money; [we] created a better environment and took care of all of the accessibility issues," Betti says.

To achieve the best results, Barnett stresses that facility owners should seek help early in the process. Get an architect or specialist to walk the current facility and identify potential issues. Then, create a plan that's appropriately budgeted to support everyone in a community to avoid value-engineering in later phases.

He says, "It's the awareness of what you have, and then planning for what you'll need to do it right." **PRB+**

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