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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

IN REPLY  
REFER TO:

HUMAN RESOURCES  
DIVISION

B-182030

OCTOBER 1, 1979

The Honorable Arabella Martinez  
Chairperson, Architectural and Transportation  
Barriers Compliance Board

DLG 02914

Dear Chairperson:

Subject: [Actions Needed by the Compliance Board to  
Make Buildings Accessible to the Handicapped]  
(FPCD-79-87)

We are currently reviewing operations at the Archi-  
tectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board and  
several executive agencies to determine what has been done  
to make buildings constructed or leased with Federal funds  
accessible to the physically handicapped. This work is a  
followup to our report "Further Action Needed to Make All  
Public Buildings Accessible to the Physically Handicapped"  
(FPCD-75-166, July 15, 1975).

A major problem highlighted in our 1975 report was a  
lack of specific standards to be followed in making build-  
ings accessible to the handicapped. Those standards in use  
were issued by the American National Standards Institute  
in 1961 and reaffirmed by the Institute in 1971. However,  
the standards are generally considered incomplete and there  
is no uniform agreement among agencies as to the minimum  
acceptable building standards. The standards do not specify  
what facilities are to be covered or the extent to which  
building specifications must be followed. They also lack  
specificity in certain important areas, as shown by the  
examples below, and result in varying interpretation.

DLG 02915

--Doors shall be operated by a single effort. (Amount  
of pressure to be applied not specified.)

--Spaces that are accessible and approximate to the  
facility should be set aside and identified for use  
by individuals with physical disabilities. (Number  
of spaces and distance from building not specified.)



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--An appropriate number of toilet rooms, water fountains, and public telephones should be made accessible to and usable by the physically disabled. (Number of facilities not specified.)

In response to our 1975 report, the Board stated that it had awarded a contract in April 1975 consistent with its intent and expectations in making buildings accessible, functional, and safe for mentally and physically handicapped individuals. This contract was with the National Academy of Sciences, Building Research Advisory Board to provide the necessary services to help the Federal Government coordinate efforts to develop effective criteria for design, construction, and alteration of Federally owned and leased buildings and facilities to make them accessible, functional, and safe for mentally and physically handicapped individuals. Although the contract was completed in April 1976 at a cost of \$146,000, it was not successful in developing effective design criteria and the Board did not issue any criteria to agencies to overcome the problem of lack of definitive building standards. DLG 02916

With the passage of Public Law 94-541 in October 1976, the Architectural and Transportation Barriers Act of 1968 was amended to require the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of Defense, General Services Administration, and the Postal Service to establish building accessibility standards. Although these agencies have established standards which they are using in building design and construction, they do not comprise a definitive nationwide standard.

The Congress took additional action in 1978 to speed up the standards development process by amending the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. This action directed the Board to establish the minimum guidelines and requirements for agencies to use in establishing standards. Although an additional year has passed since the Rehabilitation Act was amended, minimum guidelines and requirements still have not been established. Instead, the Board has recently entered into another agreement, this time with the National Bureau of Standards, to develop the guidelines and requirements. This agreement will be carried out in three phases: the first phase will be completed in October 1979; the second phase will be completed 18 months later; and the third phase will be a continuing effort concerned with (1) revising and updating through research, demonstration, and public participation the accessibility guidelines and (2) promoting the guidelines' adoption nationwide. AGC 00126

This action does not assure that agencies will be promptly provided guidelines and requirements sufficient for them to formalize their standards. Considering the past experiences in attempting to reach agreement and issue uniform standards, we are concerned as to whether this present effort will achieve the legislative requirements.

We base this concern on the fact that over 4 years have passed since we highlighted the problem of lack of specific standards for making buildings accessible to the physically handicapped. We recognize that the Compliance Board and others have attempted to deal with this matter; however, to date, progress has been limited and we see no assurance of success in the near future. The Congress, in 1978, directed the Compliance Board to provide agencies with guidelines and requirements for developing standards and it is only reasonable that this should be done promptly and as a matter of highest priority. Agencies need the uniform guidelines now if they are expected to fulfill their more immediate responsibilities of providing and maintaining barrier free buildings. We believe the uniform guidelines could be issued at the end of phase I in the fall of this year if the Board, agencies, and States combined and directed their efforts to using information they already know and developed.

Therefore, we recommend that the Compliance Board act immediately to publish uniform guidelines and requirements for developing building standards at the conclusion of phase I of your present agreement with the National Bureau of Standards.

We are aware that the Compliance Board is presently hampered in satisfying the intent of the various legislative requirements placed on it for assuring that buildings are accessible to the physically handicapped. Credit is due to those Board and agency personnel who are working diligently under these conditions on the legislative requirements. The lack of necessary Board members to constitute a quorum for deciding on issues, the impact on the Board's operations because of its administrative location, and the timeliness in the Board getting its annual reports to the Congress approved are being reviewed in our continuing effort.

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As you know, section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of a Federal agency to submit a written statement on actions taken on our recommendations to the House Committee on Government Operations and


the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs not later than 60 days after the date of the report and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

We are sending copies of this report to the Director, Office of Management and Budget; the Chairmen, House Committee on Public Works and Transportation, Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, House Subcommittee on Select Education, and Senate Subcommittee on the Handicapped; the Chairmen, House and Senate Committees on Appropriations, House Committee on Government Operations, and Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs; Administrator, General Services Administration; the Secretaries of Defense, Health, Education, and Welfare, and Housing and Urban Development; and the Postmaster General.

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AGC 00020  
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AGC 00003

Sincerely yours,

  
Gregory J. Ahart  
Director