

**White House Visitor Center
Accessibility Evaluation Report and Recommendations**



National Park Service

**Harpers Ferry Center
Harpers Ferry, WV**

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Exhibit Accessibility Evaluation Conducted By:

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White House Visitor Center Accessibility Evaluation Report and Recommendations

Exhibit Areas Evaluated:

Overall Exhibit Facility
Orientation/Signage
Exhibit 1 - First Families
Exhibit 2 - Symbol and Image
Exhibit 3 - White House Architecture
Exhibit 4 - White House Interiors
Exhibit 5 - Working White House
Exhibit 6 - Ceremonies and Celebrities

These numbered exhibit areas are based on the original design layout of thematic areas. See the attached pdf file of the floor plan drawing, "WHHO VC floor plan.pdf".

Current Problems to Address:

1. INADEQUATE TYPE SIZE FOR EXHIBIT LABEL TEXT:

The attached White House Accessibility Evaluation Summary in a table format provides more detail on the individual criteria as applied to each exhibit area as they were evaluated, and many of the comments relate to the type size of the exhibit label text. The original exhibits were designed well over 15 years ago, and awareness of the need for increases in exhibit point sizes has changed greatly in the NPS since that time. As a rule of thumb, no text in an exhibit should be smaller than 24 point, and then it should only be acceptable at that size if the visitor can approach it closely, a person in a wheelchair can also read it comfortably, it is well-lit, and the contrast between background color and type color is high. In the White House Visitor Center exhibits, many of the exhibit labels are less than 24 points. Some that are at or above this size are still not accessible because of lack of adequate lighting or contrast with the background, or both (Example: the labels on the wood grain plaques.) For the most part, the original designers did a good job of keeping the text and background in combinations of a high contrast: black type on white, white type on black, black type on light gray, white type on dark blue, for example. However, many labels need to be changed to large type sizes.

Recommendation:

As backlit panels are replaced to update images with new ones reflecting the new presidential administration, this is a good time to change the type of the same panels as well. Any photo captions on these panels need to be at least 24 point. If there is not room, choices need to be made about editing the text or moving text elsewhere on the layout.

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For front-lit exhibit panels, such as the White House Architecture exhibit area, new labels could be printed from digital high pressure laminate (DHPL) which matches the original background color and applied on top of the originals. Perhaps this kind of retrofit could be a work-in-progress which could be done as funds are available. Artifact case labels which are too small could be less costly inkjet prints mounted on a conservation-approved substrate, such as cast acrylic.

The wood grain panels next to each main exhibit area are too hard to read. A new panel made of DHPL matching the background color of the other front-lit exhibits, with black text, could be sized to fit the front of these existing panels, so that the wooden beveled edged still shows and makes a decorative frame for it. We would also recommending re-evaluating the label copy of these panels to provide a more concise, easy-to-understand introductory statement to each exhibit area.

2. VISITOR ORIENTATION:

The changes to security procedures to the visitor center operations since Sept. 11, 2001 has altered traffic flow into the entrance and made the orientation area as originally envisaged unworkable. The visitor center needs to re-configure the orientation aspect of its interpretation and relocate it beyond the entrance/security screening area. The original orientation map is a layout of the visitor center room, which became out-of-date with operational alterations to the space which have happened since then. The security area, the multipurpose area enclosed with curtains adjacent to the entrance to the restrooms, the folding tables and chairs set up for a "Kid's Corner" are all later additions/changes to the facility.

Recommendation:

The visitor center needs new orientation panels to reflect current conditions. They need to be generated as digital layouts that can be updated and reproduced again with changes in the future as the need for updates arises.

People who cannot see need a tactile, raised line version of the orientation panel, perhaps along with a brief audio program. Considering the realities of trying to keep the tactile version of updated as often as the visual version, perhaps a solution would be to include less detail on the tactile version, and provide the deleted information verbally on the audio program, which might be easier to change. The tactile panels and audio program should be incorporated with the other exhibits as much as possible and would be for the use of all visitors who want to use them.

The location of the orientation panels needs to change from where they are now. They need to move further away from the security screening area, because as people exit the metal detector, they are in a small, crowded

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landing which tends to encourage people to proceed with exiting on either side instead of examining the graphic panels placed here. The placement of orientation information needs to be placed where it matches the actual visitor flow as it now exists, and it needs to catch the visitors attention as they leave the security screening at either side. The content of the orientation panels needs to be thought through again as well. As one enters the building, you see a large, cavernous, somewhat confusing space, and it might help to have some more information up-front to make sense of it all.

3. CHILDREN:

The exhibits do not provide adequate interpretation which engages children. The interpretation as originally conceived is not at a reading level appropriate for children and none of it is interactive. Though unsophisticated, the band-aid solution has been the addition by the park of a "Kid's Corners", consisting of folding tables, chairs, racks holding appropriate reading materials and large wooden puzzles. Although basic and low-tech, this appeared to be a popular area, and it shows that the need was recognized and ingenuity and resourcefulness was used to try to address this problem.

Recommendation:

Any new media added to enhance or replace the existing exhibits should fill in the lack of interpretive media that engages and is beneficial to visitors who are children. This means making the reading level more age-appropriate for children, and making the exhibits more multi-sensory, with tactile, interactive, and multi-media elements included.

4. TACTILE EXHIBITS:

There are no touchable or tactile exhibits. There is no audio description or audio tour. The constant wear and tear on the cut-out exhibit elements which are mounted on stand-offs to give the exhibits a more dimensional look results from visitors pulling on them and breaking elements off. ***This could be a symptom of the visitors' frustration with the lack of a tactile aspect to the exhibits as a whole.*** It is human nature to want to touch and explore interesting shapes with our hands, but everything as originally designed was meant only to be looked at. It goes without saying that this is contrary to the benefit of people who cannot see, and of children, who naturally learn through all of their senses.

Recommendation:

In the visual exhibits as they now exist, there are potential areas for creating tactile elements by converting what are now two-dimensional images into three-dimensional raised-line, bas-relief, or fully-dimensional cast models,

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which visitors can touch. In Exhibit 3, White House Architecture, there are architectural elevations and cutouts of the White House which could be used as the references for raised-line bas-reliefs in cast resin. There are also reproductions of sections of architectural decorative moldings in a case. If cast moldings of this type could be put on display where people can touch them, it would be a great improvement.

5. CHANGEABLE IMAGES IN EXHIBITS:

The park has to deal with certain aspects of the exhibit images which change on a regular basis due to changes in the presidential administration. Whenever these changes are made, it can have an impact on a whole exhibit layout, making it hard to maintain a cohesive design layout and adding to the cost of making the changes each time.

Recommendation:

Because of the need for more interactive exhibits, it might solve both of these problems to make some of these themes into a touch-screen interactive program rather than a static graphic display. Consequently, the images in the software can be updated rather than changing a whole exhibit panel. Examples: the exhibit of the photos of the Oval Office as it has been furnished through many presidential administrations. The interactive could include links to details about specific furniture, carpeting, drapes, etc., which were used.

Another area which can benefit from using an audiovisual approach to update its interpretation periodically is the "First Families" exhibit in Exhibit 1. A small monitor in this area that could display a simple slide show of images or video clips, with captions to identify each image or video clip and no audio. This program could be a continuous loop video slide show, updated to include each new administration by updating the content on the show, rather than re-doing the static exhibit layout each time. It is strongly recommended not to have audio here, because there is already sound spill from the adjacent "Welcome to the White House" video programs.

6. INADEQUATE LIGHTING:

The visitor center is essentially one large room with a very high ceiling, and outlets and junction boxes available for exhibit lighting fixtures are available near the walls. Most of the exhibits are located along the south wall, but some are freestanding units without their own dedicated spot lighting, internal lighting or power source. Also, some of the exhibits located along the south wall are inadequately lit either because of a problem with the original lighting design, or because the original lighting equipment is in need of replacement because it now is at the end of its operational life. There are also other exhibits, such as temporary panels and cases elsewhere in the exhibit room, which need some attention in regards to their lighting. The

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decorative chandelier fixtures hanging from the ceiling provide overall ambient lighting but are not sufficient for the more intense spot lighting needed for properly viewing exhibit text and graphics. See attached photos showing some of the poorly lit exhibit elements, including some of the freestanding exhibits, the text panels with the wood grain backgrounds, and temporary exhibits with backlit glare from the windows on the north wall.

Recommendation:

The exhibits would greatly benefit from the services of a professional lighting designer, experienced in museum exhibit lighting. The designer could:

(1) Evaluate the current situation and provide detailed recommendations.

The designer could evaluate the existing exhibit lighting fixtures, determine which fixtures need replacement, and recommend updated fixtures and lamps which would hopefully improve energy and maintenance costs at the same time as improve the lighting of the exhibits.

(2) Another service they could provide would be to improve the exhibit lighting above what now exists by coming up with proposed solutions to the dim areas which now create readability problems on some of the exhibits.

(3) An additional service which should be included in the contract is a detailed cost estimate for implementing the lighting changes, including annual costs for re-lamping the fixtures and electrical use. They could also provide information on heat load from the lights on the HVAC system if this is a factor of concern.

Harpers Ferry Center IDIQ contractors for design or fabrication work can subcontract to professional lighting designers.

In the meantime, a Harpers Ferry Center's IDIQ contractor for museum exhibit production can also provide some quick fixes to the lighting problems, as they are familiar with working with museum lighting situations. They can replace existing fixtures with those of a similar type, check for and replace broken ventilation fans which may cause fixtures to overheat, and adjust and aim fixtures. They can also serve as the prime contractor for the exhibit lighting work and subcontract out the design work. However, building electrical work is not within the scope of their contracts.