

THE WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY OF BLOEMFONTEIN'S GUEST HOUSES AND HOTELS

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Abstract

Wheelchair friendliness is an issue that needs to be taken very serious. Awareness should be created so that the owners of the accommodation establishments have a complete knowledge about wheelchair friendliness. The population of the study covered 16 guest houses and 16 hotels in Bloemfontein and only 11 agreed to participate. Other guest house owners were not interested in the participation. Among those guest houses that participated, only few had wheelchair facilities. It showed that there is a lot of ignorance concerning the topic because other guest house owners thought they were wheelchair friendly, just because there is no step at the entrance. A checklist was compiled from literature and administered at each establishment.

Keywords: Wheel chair, accessibility, traveling

1. INTRODUCTION

Being in a wheelchair does not mean one has no interests in travelling. People who use wheelchairs also have dreams to travel and see the world, but if there is a shortage of facilities, it means their access is limited. They can only reach few tourist destinations and only live to wonder how it would feel to explore those other destinations that are not accessible. Even internationally, insufficient facilities for wheelchairs is a major issue and few guesthouses have adapted to rooms with roll-in showers and wheelchair ramps (Promotur, 2011:Online).

Furthermore, guest houses without facilities for wheelchairs cannot employ those people who use wheelchairs. People who use wheelchairs must not feel like they are being discriminated. Therefore, having the facilities that accommodate wheelchair accessibility is very important. Moreover, guest houses are also used for small events such as year-end functions, baby showers, as a result, they must also cater for people who use wheelchairs. According to Tassiopoulos (2005:141) a number of essential features for every facility of the venue need to be at the top of list when there is an event to be held at a guest house. For example, reserved parking spaces immediately outside the entrance, provision of ramps instead of stairs, appropriately designed toilets to allow access for wheelchairs, availability of wheelchairs for the elderly.

It is important for all guest houses to make their facilities accessible to their guests including those who use wheelchairs. It makes a good business sense to spend some time assessing facilities from the visitor's point of view, so as to minimise their inconvenience and provide an enjoyable experience for all (Youell, 1999:210).

2. REQUIREMENTS FOR WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY

According to the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa (TGCSA) (2011:Online), for a guest house to be wheelchair friendly it should meet certain requirements, therefore, a checklist was developed to ascertain the extent to which three star, four star guest houses and hotels in Bloemfontein are wheelchair friendly. This includes the parking area, entrance, reception desk, lifts, dining area, bedrooms and bathrooms.

Parking area: There should be a space reserved for wheelchairs in the parking area. The signage should also be clear in order to avoid confusion. Wheelchair bound people who travel by car need to be able to park and have sufficient space to enter and leave their vehicle. There should also be space that allows them to move to the back of their vehicle and then travel in a wheelchair to the main entrance.

The design of the parking bay should also allow for the safe transfer from the bay to the access route to the entrance without putting an effort, barriers to wheelchairs or hazards that could cause tripping (Irish Wheelchair Association, 2009:Online).

Entrance: The front door should be at least 100 cm wide to accommodate wheelchairs with a 90 degree open position. Also important are the handrails on both sides of the ramp at the height of 85cm to 95cm. There should also be a lift if the reception is above or below the entrance level (TGCSA, 2011:Online). The main entrance design should give accessible entry to all people including wheelchair users.

The entrance to a building should be easy to locate, safe and convenient to use. Entrance foyers and lobbies should be designed and constructed in such a way that there is sufficient space to enable all people, including a wheelchair user and a person assisting the wheelchair user, to move clear of one door before using the next door. In addition, there should be a sufficient space allowance for a person to pass in the opposite direction (Irish Wheelchair Association, 2009:Online).

Reception desk: There should be a desk of a suitable height in order to accommodate wheelchair bound people of at least 80cm. The counter should be easily accessible for wheelchair users and allow a space of at least 70 cm deep under the counter (Rollon Travel, 2008:Online).

Lifts: If there is any lift at the guest house, the doors should be wide enough for the wheelchairs - at least 90cm. The controls inside and outside the lift should be at a height of 90cm to 120cm. In the case of more than one floor there should be a lift to enable wheelchair bound guests to move between floors.

According to (Rollon Travel, 2008:Online) a lift should be spacious and have a clear circulation space to turn a wheelchair of at least 110cm deep.

Doors should be easy to open and not heavy. Where lift is required as per by-laws, a provision of at least one lift shall be made for a wheelchair user with the following cage dimensions: clear internal depth at 110cm, clear internal width at 200cm and external door width at 90cm. The lift lobby should be at least 180cm x 180cm (Disability India Organisation, 2011:Online).

Dining area: There should be tables of lower height that suits the wheelchair bound guests. The tables should be at the height of 76cm. If the guests dish up for themselves, both food and refreshments station should be at a height of 80cm. Space should be provided for wheelchair users at tables and to and from tables. (Disability India Organisation, 2011:Online).

Bedrooms: Bedroom doors should be wide enough for the wheelchairs to pass through, at least at the width of 75cm to 90cm and the height of the door handle should be 120cm. The windows should be at a height of 80cm from the floor. The opening width of the door should be at least no less than 80cm. Both windows and the door should be easy to open. The height of switches should be at least 80cm to 120cm.

The height of the bed should be at the height of 45cm to 50cm in order to suit wheelchair users. There should be enough room for a wheelchair to turn around in the room. Mirrors should be at the height of 40cm above the floor. The height of the closet handle should be at the height of not above 120cm. There should also be adjustable hanging rods and shelves (TGCSA, 2011:Online).

Bathrooms: One of the most important rooms that needs to be wheelchair friendly is the bathroom. A stool or permanent seat within a shower is also necessary. To ensure this, TGCSA (2011:Online) recommends that there should be large bathtubs and showers with plenty of grab bars. There should also be multiple-height shower heads for wheelchair users. The toilet should be at the height of 48cm to 50cm. The mirror should be 5cm above the edge of the basin. The towel rail should be at the height of between 90cm to 100cm and the toilet pan between 48cm to 50cm.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

With the above as background, the extent to which three star, four star and hotels in Bloemfontein were wheelchair friendly was ascertained.

4. METHODOLOGY

As indicated before, the study was undertaken amongst Bloemfontein three star, four star guest houses and hotels.

After the completion of the checklist a letter was drafted explaining the aims of the intended data gathering action. After consent was obtained from various guest houses, the researcher used the checklist to ascertain the extent to which each guest house meets the requirements. Descriptive analysis was used. A descriptive data describes the characteristics of the specific group (Jobert, Bam & Cronje, 2008: 15). Both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied.

The checklist was based on literature and it was used to ascertain whether the guest houses comply with the requirements. Appointments were set telephonically before visiting the guesthouses. Eleven establishments were visited, of which five were hotels and six were guest houses. The checklist was based on the following aspects: parking, entrance, reception desk, lifts, dining area, bedrooms, bathrooms (attached in Annexure A). The researcher used a tape measure to find out whether those guest houses comply with TGCSA's requirements. Eleven guest houses participated in the study.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The following section displays the results of the checklist administered by the researcher. Figure 1 relates the responses of the parking area, front door and lifts.

Figure 1: Responses relating to the parking area, front door and lifts

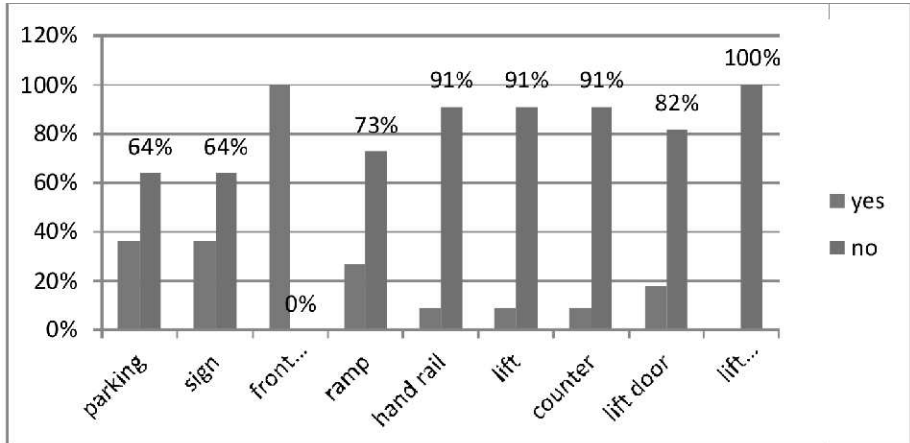


Figure 1 shows the degree of wheelchair friendliness in the entrance section in three star, four star and hotels in Bloemfontein. The results show that only 36 per cent of the guest houses had a parking space reserved for wheelchairs and 64 per cent did not have the space as well as wheelchair sign. All guest houses met the requirements based on the size of the front door.

Only 27 per cent had a ramp and 9 per cent had a hand rail. 9 per cent had a lift while 91 per cent either book ground floor rooms for wheelchair patrons or they did not have several floors. The lift controls were not accessible to wheelchair users. Only 9 per cent had an accessible front desk and 91 per cent of the front desks were not accessible.

Figure 2 displays the results of bedroom facilities of the guest houses and hotels obtained from the checklist.

Figure 2 Responses relating to bedroom facilities

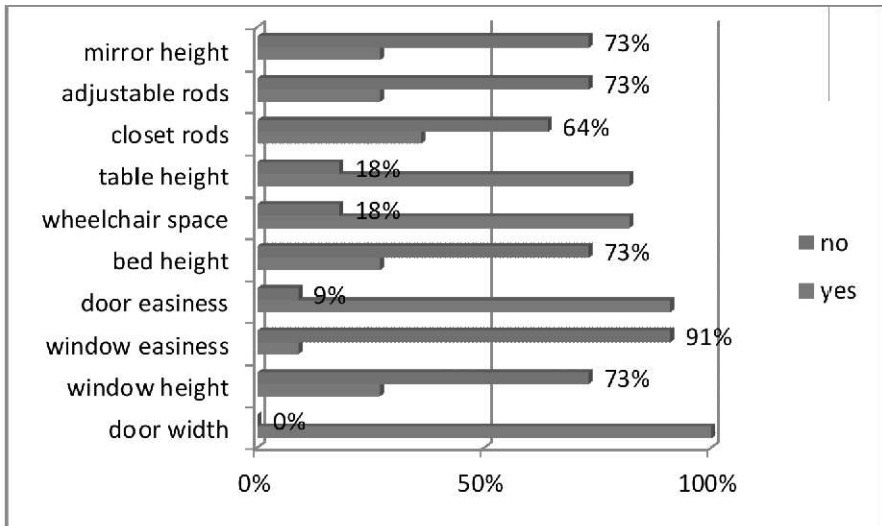


Figure 2 shows the results of the bedroom facilities of respondents. All bedrooms had doors that were wide enough for a wheelchair and 91 per cent were easy to open, while 9 per cent were not. Only 27 per cent had windows at an accessible height and 73 per cent had high windows. 9 per cent had windows that were easy to open and 91 per cent were not easy to open. 27 per cent had the bed height that met the requirements, while 73 per cent did not.

82 per cent had enough space for a wheelchair to move around while 18 per cent did not. 82 per cent had work stations of suitable height for wheelchair users. 36 per cent had closet rods that were lowered, while 64 per cent did not have lowered rods and 27 per cent had adjustable closet rods. 27 per cent had mirrors that were accessible.

Table 3 shows the results of bathroom facilities of the guest houses from the checklist.

Table 3 Responses relating to bathroom facilities

| Facilities | Yes | No |
|-------------------|------------|-----------|
| Grab bars | 36% | 64% |
| Shower heads | 27% | 73% |
| Toilet height | 100% | 0% |
| Hand wash basin | 18% | 82% |
| Mirror height | 9% | 91% |
| Towel rail | 55% | 45% |

Table 3 shows that most guest houses were not in possession of bathroom facilities that met the requirements for wheelchair accessibility. 36 per cent of the bathrooms had bathtubs that had plenty of grab bars and 64 per cent did not. Only 27 per cent of the showers had multiple-height shower heads and 73 per cent had only one.

All the toilets had a suitable height for wheelchair users. 18 per cent of the bathrooms had hand wash basins that were closer to the toilet pan and 82 per cent did not. Only 9 per cent of the bathrooms had a mirror at about 5cm just above the hand wash basin and 91 per cent did not meet the requirement. At least 55 per cent had towel rails of a suitable height for wheelchair users.

6. CONCLUSIONS

It is apparent that most guest house owners in Bloemfontein are not aware of wheelchair friendliness. Most guest houses owners have little knowledge on what facilities should be available in order for the wheelchair users to obtain a complete access. Most of them think if the entrance is flat, it is enough to be wheelchair friendly and some of the owners make it clear that they do not cater for wheelchair bound individuals.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Annexure A

CHECKLIST FOR WHEELCHAIR FRIENDLINESS AT THREE STAR, FOUR STAR GUEST HOUSES AND HOTELS IN BLOEMFONTEIN.

| | Yes 1 | No 2 |
|---|----------|---------|
| 1.Parking | | |
| Is there a space reserved for wheelchairs? | | |
| Is there wheelchair sign at the reserved space? | | |
| 2.Entrance | | |
| Is the front door at least 76cm wide with 90 degree open position? | | |
| Is there a wheelchair ramp? | | |
| Is there a handrail? | | |
| Is there a lift if the reception is above or below entrance level? | | |
| 3.Reception desk | | |
| Is the counter not higher than 80cm? | | |
| 4.Lifts (if any) | | |
| Is the lift door wide enough for a wheelchair? | | |
| Is the height of lift controls between 90 to 120cm? | | |
| 5.Dining area | | |
| Are there tables that are at least 76cm high? | | |
| Is the self service food station at a height of at least 80cm? | | |
| Is the refreshments station at a height of 80cm? | | |
| 7.Bedrooms | | |
| Is the width of the doors between 75cm and 90cm? | | |
| Are the windows at least 80cm from floor? | | |
| Are the windows easy to open? | | |
| Is the door easy to open? | | |
| Is the height of the bed at least between 45cm and 50cm | | |
| Is there room of at least 120cm a for wheelchair to turn around in the bedroom? | | |
| Is the room between beds (i.e in the case of sharing rooms) enough to accommodate a wheelchair? | | |
| Is the height of the table in the room accessible for wheelchair users? | | |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Are there closet rod lowered for wheelchair bound people? | | |
| Are there adjustable hanging closet rods and shelves? | | |
| Is the height of mirror at least 40cm above the ground? | | |
| 8.Bathrooms | | |
| Are there large bathtubs and showers with plenty of grab bars? | | |
| Are there multiple-height shower heads for wheelchair users? | | |
| Is the toilet height at least between 48cm and 50cm? | | |
| Is the handwash basin located not more than 30cm from the toilet pan seat? | | |
| Is the mirror at 5cm height above the edge of basin? | | |
| Is the height of the towel rail at least between 90cm and 100cm? | | |