

## **WESST Workshop Helps Businesses Orient to Customers With Disabilities**

*By Sandy Nelson and Taura Costidis for Finance New Mexico*

Business owners who don't consider the impact of dollars spent by people with disabilities are missing a market opportunity. Complying with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) can raise a business's costs, but the rewards of making a business accessible to members of America's largest minority community more than compensate for the investment.



More than 58 million Americans live with some type of disability, and that number is expected to grow as the last of the post-World War II baby boomers reaches 65, according to Julie Ballinger, a disability rights consultant affiliated with the Southwest ADA Center — one of 10 ADA centers nationwide. This is an untapped consumer market with over \$200 billion per year in disposable income, twice the spending power of the teen market.

WESST, a nonprofit small business development and training organization, wants to be sure that New Mexico businesses take that positive approach, which is why the organization's Roswell branch recently hosted a standing-room-only workshop in which Ballinger illustrated how businesses can approach this lucrative market. Rhonda Johnson, WESST Roswell Regional Manager, found the workshop eye-opening. "It caused each of us to think about things we haven't considered," Johnson said.

On May 11, Ballinger gives an encore presentation of "Make Money, Save Money: Access Means Business" from noon to 2 p.m. at WESST Enterprise Center, 609 Broadway Blvd NE, in Albuquerque.

Modeled after the Civil Rights Act and enacted in 1990, the ADA prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability and guarantees people with disabilities equal opportunities to work and participate in society.

Workshop organizers say businesses should see the law not as a burdensome regulation they must obey to avoid costly litigation but rather as a guideline to attracting and serving a lucrative customer market. Accessibility, they stress, isn't just about making reasonable modifications to a physical location but also about communicating with and marketing to customers with disabilities.

The aim of ADA is to get businesses to "examine your procedures and policies to make sure you are not creating a barrier for customers with disabilities," said Ballinger. It can be as simple as making architectural changes, such as widening store aisles to be more maneuverable for people in wheelchairs and adding a service-animal exception to a "no animals allowed" sign.

Or it can be less intuitive, as when a car dealer thinks to contract with a sign language interpreter (or hires someone with this skill) to facilitate communication with a hearing-impaired customer: It requires forward thinking and costs a little more, but that type of sensitivity can turn a browser into a buyer.

No small business wants to miss an opportunity to expand market share — and the market for products, services and environments that meet physical and mental challenges will only get bigger in the next decade.

The WESST workshop also aims to help businesses become less vulnerable to lawsuits, both the legitimate kind and "drive-by" actions brought by unscrupulous lawyers who search for violations just to bring suit.

For more information about the workshop, call 800-949-4232 or visit <http://www.southwestADA.org/>. Register online at [www.wesst.org](http://www.wesst.org) or by calling 505-246-6900.

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