Recognition of the Electromagnetic Sensitivity as a Disability Under the ADA

Recognition of the Electromagnetic Sensitivity as a Disability Under the ADA

The Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (Access Board) is the Federal agency devoted to the accessibility for people with disabilities. The Access Board is responsible for developing and maintaining accessibility guidelines to ensure that newly constructed and altered buildings and facilities covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Architectural Barriers Act are accessible to and usable by people with disabilities. In November 1999, the Access Board issued a proposed rule to revise and update its accessibility guidelines. During the public comment period on the proposed rule, the Access Board received approximately 600 comments from individuals with multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS) and electromagnetic sensitivities (EMS).

The Board has taken the commentary very seriously and acted upon it. As stated in the Background for its Final Rule Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities; Recreation Facilities that was published in September 2002:

“The Board recognizes that multiple chemical sensitivities and electromagnetic sensitivities may be considered disabilities under the ADA if they so severely impair the neurological, respiratory or other functions of an individual

that it substantially limits one or more of the individual's major life activities. The Board plans to closely examine the needs of this population, and undertake activities that address accessibility issues for these individuals".

Following its recognition of electro sensitivity and its declaration of commitment to attend to the needs of the electromagnetic sensitive, the Access Board contracted the National Institute of Building Sciences (NIBS) to examine how to accommodate the needs of the electro sensitive in federally funded buildings. In 2005 the NIBS issued a report.

The link for the report: http://web.archive.org/web/20060714175343/ieq.nibs.org/ieq_project.pdf

From Report (page 11):

Electromagnetic Fields

For people who are electromagnetically sensitive, the presence of cell phones and towers, portable telephones, computers, fluorescent lighting, unshielded transformers and wiring, battery re-chargers, wireless devices, security and scanning equipment, microwave ovens, electric ranges and numerous other electrical appliances can make a building inaccessible.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) notes that scientific studies have raised questions about the possible health effects of EMF's. NIOSH recommends

the following measures for those wanting to reduce EMF exposure – informing workers and employers about possible hazards of magnetic fields, increasing workers' distance from EMF sources, using low-EMF designs wherever possible (e.g., for layout of office power supplies), and reducing EMF exposure times (11).