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Wheelchair users file class-action lawsuit, saying Baltimore sidewalks fail to meet ADA requirements

By Lizzy Lawrence, June 16, 2021 at 4:32 pm



Curbs at the intersection of Glenmore and Bertram Avenues in northeast Baltimore are inaccessible to those with mobility disabilities. (Barbara Haddock Taylor)

Susan Goodlaxson, a 65-year-old resident of Baltimore’s Hamilton neighborhood, has been a wheelchair user for five years. She can’t wheel across the streets on her block — the sidewalk lacks curb ramps that connect it to the street.

“If the neighbors are gathering across the street, I can’t just wheel over and join them,” Goodlaxson said.

She is one of three wheelchair users who filed a class-action lawsuit against Baltimore City, alleging “widespread and ongoing” violations of federal accessibility requirements.

The suit, filed in the U.S. District Court for Maryland last week, says people with disabilities are unable to travel freely around Baltimore due to inadequately maintained curb ramps and sidewalks. The plaintiffs filed the federal suit in conjunction with the IMAGE Center of Maryland, an organization committed to helping people with disabilities live independently.

Baltimore's curb ramps and sidewalks are "dilapidated and disintegrating" and "filled with objects such as telephone poles, trash, and trees," according to the suit.

The obstacles make it difficult for people with mobility disabilities to move around and participate in city life, says the suit, which alleges the city lacks the accessible walkways necessary to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The ultimate goal of the lawsuit is to get the city to make improvements, said Rebecca Rodgers, senior staff attorney at Disability Rights Advocates, which is one of the firms handling the case.

"We're not asking for monetary damages," Rodgers said. "We're asking for a plan."

In a statement, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott acknowledged the city's accessibility problems and said he was forming a task force to address the ADA-compliance issues.

"My administration has inherited a host of longstanding challenges that we are committed to addressing with a true equity approach," Scott said. "It's long past time for leaders to commit to building a more accessible Baltimore that values our neighbors with disabilities and creates pathways for them to thrive."

A 2019 survey by the Baltimore Department of Transportation found that approximately 1.3% of the city's 37,086 curb ramps complied with the ADA. The survey noted damaged and narrow sidewalks as well, according to the lawsuit. Scott's news release referenced this report, noting that the transportation department already was working on a plan to "address outstanding ADA needs in the City," regardless of the lawsuit.

Janice Jackson, 61, and Keyonna Mayo, 37, are the other two plaintiffs named in the suit. All three have stories of plans or locations that, due to inaccessible sidewalks, are out of reach.

Mayo, who lives in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood, can't use sidewalks to reach the post office or the Light Rail. Jackson, a resident of Loch Raven, can't travel by wheelchair to go shopping. When Goodlaxson is invited to go somewhere, she said she has to first get in the car and scout out the area to see if she can make it over the sidewalk.

These are common experiences among people with mobility disabilities, Goodlaxson said. According to U.S. Census Data from 2019, an estimated 53,762 people in Baltimore City have an ambulatory disability.

"If I run into someone else in a wheelchair, we end up discussing the difficulties," Goodlaxson said. "It would be nice if the city were primarily accessible instead of primarily inaccessible for my wheelchair."

Rodgers said the plaintiffs hope the city of Baltimore will work with them to ensure all sidewalks and curb ramps are compliant. Making these changes would benefit everybody, including people without disabilities, Rodgers said.

“If you’ve got a suitcase, if you’ve got a stroller, this is a design that will benefit everyone,” Rodgers said. “Disability rights make the world a better place for everybody.”

Link to the article: <https://www.baltimoresun.com/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-md-ci-disability-class-action-lawsuit-20210616-fskw36o4xvarhbrzfbmdpnmu2e-story.html>