

§ 15.49

§ 15.49 Program accessibility; discrimination prohibited.

Except as otherwise provided in § 15.50, no qualified individual with a disability shall, because the Department's facilities are inaccessible to or unusable by individuals with a disability, be denied the benefits of, be excluded from participation in, or otherwise be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity conducted by the Department.

§ 15.50 Program accessibility; existing facilities.

(a) *General.* The Department shall operate each program or activity so that the program or activity, when viewed in its entirety, is readily accessible to and usable by individuals with a disability. This paragraph (a) does not require the Department:

(1) To make structural alterations in each of its existing facilities in order to make them accessible to and usable by individuals with a disability where other methods are effective in achieving compliance with this section; or

(2) To take any action that it can demonstrate would result in a fundamental alteration in the nature of a program or activity or in undue financial and administrative burdens. In those circumstances where Department personnel believe that the proposed action would fundamentally alter the program or activity or would result in undue financial and administrative burdens, the Department has the burden of proving that compliance with this paragraph (a) of this section would result in such alteration or burdens. The decision that compliance would result in such alteration or burdens must be made by the Secretary of Homeland Security (or his or her designee) after considering all agency resources available for use in the funding and operation of the conducted program or activity and must be accompanied by a written statement of the reasons for reaching that conclusion. If an action would result in such an alteration or such burdens, the Department shall take any other action that would not result in such an alteration or such burdens but would nevertheless ensure that individuals with a disability re-

ceive the benefits and services of the program or activity.

(b) *Methods.* The Department may comply with the requirements of this section through such means as redesign of equipment, reassignment of services to accessible buildings, assignment of aides to beneficiaries, home visits, delivery of services at alternate accessible sites, alteration of existing facilities and construction of new facilities, use of accessible rolling stock, or any other methods that result in making its programs or activities readily accessible to and usable by individuals with a disability. The Department, in making alterations to existing buildings, shall meet accessibility requirements to the extent required by the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, as amended (42 U.S.C. 4151-4157), and any regulations implementing it. In choosing among available methods for meeting the requirements of this section, the Department shall give priority to those methods that offer programs and activities to qualified individuals with a disability in the most integrated setting appropriate.

(c) *Time period for compliance.* The Department shall comply with the obligations established under this section not later than May 5, 2003, except that where structural changes in facilities are undertaken, such changes shall be made not later than March 6, 2006, but in any event as expeditiously as possible. If a component within the Department has already complied with the accessibility requirements of a regulation implementing section 504, then the provisions of this paragraph shall apply only to facilities for that agency's programs and activities that were not previously made readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities in compliance with that regulation.

(d) *Transition plan.* In the event that structural changes to facilities will be undertaken to achieve program accessibility, the Department shall develop not later than September 8, 2003, a transition plan setting forth the steps necessary to complete such changes. The Department shall provide an opportunity to interested persons, including individuals with disabilities or organizations representing individuals