

# UNITED SPINAL<sub>NOW</sub>

## Airbnb Accessibility Initiative

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**A**irbnb has reached out to the disability community to brainstorm and to make people with disabilities aware of Airbnb accessibility improvements and options.

Access to products made available by the “gig” economy has been a difficult struggle. Products available only part-time and owned by people without disabilities but leased temporarily to the public are rarely accessible (think of Uber vehicles).

Airbnb’s Product Manager is a wheelchair user from San Francisco. He recently described Airbnb’s new “Accessibility Collection” as part of their launch of Tomorrowland. Tomorrowland allows the user to filter Airbnb listings through an Accessibility Preferences matrix.

For example, the user can search for housing based on preferences such as wide hallway clearances, elevator access, bed height, bathroom accessibility as well as other ADA/Fair Housing standards. Airbnb lists approximately four million properties and is attempting to provide accessibility information regarding each of them for potential occupants.

Just as unusual and impressive, Airbnb’s Director of Diversity and Belonging is promoting hiring people with disabilities and partnering with disability groups (and other minorities) to meet the highest standards of inclusion and ensure a diverse workforce. Moreover, this employment initiative involving diverse groups including people with disabilities is well-known to all Airbnb employees because part of Airbnb’s new personnel practices includes awareness of the needs and rights of people with disabilities.

Airbnb intends to develop product testers and build a relationship with the disability community. For example, having only one wheelchair user test Airbnb’s products (i.e. listings) is self-defeating. United Spinal intends to organize, using its chapter members around the country, to spot-check Airbnb accessible listings and report back to Airbnb about the accuracy of the information provided by the home or apartment’s resident.

While Airbnb is part of the shared economy, like Uber and Lyft, their management has a vision of company growth that includes the disability community. The company understands that the supply of accessible housing available now is not nearly enough but wants to publicize its accessibility initiative so that people with disabilities residing in accessible apartments or homes list with Airbnb to make their residences available to others with disabilities.

The shared economy, sometimes called the “gig” economy, includes lots of temporarily available products that are shared or leased to the general public. It is difficult to make accessibility laws apply to private homes occupied by able-bodied people. Only one city in the country has such requirements (Atlanta), but those seeking to list residences would be wise to include accessibility information to increase the pool of potential occupants.

It’s been said that in cities like New York, Airbnb reduces the pool of available apartments because people who would have sold and moved retain ownership, buy a second place and use Airbnb to offset the costs of maintaining the first place. Therefore, available housing stock is reduced, demand is increased and prices go up. On the other hand, access to accessible shared services like Airbnb reduces the cost of travel for people with disabilities, increases the choice of accessible temporary residences and includes people with disabilities rather than excludes them.

Time will tell if Airbnb’s efforts will change the status quo, but their example of getting out in front of the rights movement instead of railing against it is one that should be copied by all businesses and especially those engaged in gig commerce.