

My name is Sarah Launderville and I'm the executive director of the Vermont Center for Independent Living. VCIL is a disability rights organization of people with disabilities working together for dignity, independence and civil rights. Thank you for contacting me to come and talk about the definition of Universal Design.

I want to first share my gratitude for the committee looking into what universal design is and create space for this dialogue. It's an important thing to do because at its core designing programs, services and structures that work for everyone is a place we should all be striving for. When the Americans with Disabilities Act passed in 1990 it was groundbreaking legislation but meant to be a base not the ceiling. What has played out over those thirty-six years has been resistance and not much growth from that base. That translates into a lot less opportunity overall for people with disabilities and that's why I have so much gratitude for this conversation today.

I wasn't fully sure what your hopes are for this definition of universal design or your experience with the term, so I thought I'd focus a little bit on the principles of universal design, and how the concept is different than the accessibility related law regarding design and happy to answer specific questions regarding the work you're doing regarding Universal Design.

When we speak about universal design we're talking about a framework built on design principles that were developed by the late Ron Mace. Ron contracted polio when he was eight years old and used a wheelchair after that. In 1966 he earned his architecture degree. He was instrumental in developing the first codes around access in North Carolina, and instrumental in helping develop the Fair Housing Amendment Act of 1973. He founded Barrier Free Environments in 1973 and helped with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990.

In 1985 he coined and defined universal design (UD) as
"the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."
<https://universaldesign.org/definition>

This definition is still broadly used as it goes beyond a code and beyond who specifically the design might be meant for.

It's important to understand the distinction between these principles and the accessibility laws we currently have. My lens of work is ensuring that people with disabilities have access to spaces, buildings, activities, programs and I can say without a doubt that the majority of our spaces in Vermont are not accessible for people with disabilities and that is leaving them out. So when developing policy it's important to understand that we're not always addressing minimum accessibility codes in our state. And, when we've tried to expand policy regarding minimum standards in the state before or ask for resources specific to tax credits for expanding that accessibility all have been met with great resistance.

Universal Design is a proactive approach that anticipates human diversity from the start regardless of age, disability, sensory experience, comprehension levels, language, and circumstance. It moves beyond minimum compliance and toward environments that work well for everyone.

The Vermont Department of Public Safety which also oversees the Vermont Access Board, has a lot of information on design standards in Vermont and you can take a look at a list of information on their website:

<https://firesafety.vermont.gov/buildingcode/ada>

There you will find the VT Access Rules of 2012, VT Access Standards Statute, and Fair Housing Act Design manual and a wealth of additional information regarding design laws related to accessibility.

It's important to understand the standards to some extent prior to implementation and why you might choose embedding universal design principals into the law and the cross over effects to the accessibility laws.

Valerie Fletcher is the Executive Director of the [Institute for Human Centered Design \(IHCD\)](#) and is an internationally recognized expert on Universal Design. IHCD is *committed to advancing the role of design in expanding opportunity and enhancing experience for people of all ages, abilities and cultures through excellence in design.*

For over thirty years, VCIL has worked in partnership with the New England ADA Technical Assistance Center which is housed within the Institute for Human Centered Design. We are the technical assistance affiliate in Vermont and work to provide technical assistance to the community on the ADA.

They use the following language regarding the principles of UD which is commonly accepted internationally.

1. ***Equitable Use:*** *The design does not disadvantage or stigmatize any group of users.*

This might include something like the entrance works for everyone including people using mobility devices, delivery drivers, people who walk, and have automatic doors. Instead of a separate entrance out back for people who use wheelchairs. Or captions and audio descriptions are in every video and have the option to be turned on or off with ease because some users will need them and some users won't want them.

2. ***Flexibility in Use:*** *The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.*

Might include when materials are presented it's done with print, digital, audio and large print options. Or, doors have multiple ways of opening them like a foot plate, lever handles and an automatic option.

3. *Simple, Intuitive Use:* *Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.*

Might include signage that is easy to understand with pictures, information in plain language with instructions and visual aids.

4. *Perceptible Information:* *The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.*

Might include alarms that are flashing, vibrating and make sounds or elevators with tactile, Braille and visual cues.

5. *Tolerance for Error:* *The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.*

The undo button on computer software, auto shut off on the crockpot, web forms that save as you go

6. *Low Physical Effort:* *The design can be used efficiently and comfortably, and with a minimum of fatigue.*

Touchless, sensor operated trash cans, sinks, soap dispensers. Ramps with less slopes (remember the minimum ramp is a 1:12 and is still a hard incline)

7. *Size and Space for Approach & Use:* *Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use, regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility.*

Wide doorways, hallways, public seating. Clear floor space under sinks.

While the seven principles of Universal Design offer a strong conceptual framework, it is difficult to translate these principles into specific, concrete design decisions without additional guidance. The principles describe what good design should achieve, but they do not prescribe how to achieve it in a particular building, program, or system and that could create several challenges.

- People only know what they know so they might make a decision that effects someone else's lived experience very differently. For example, I once had a contractor proudly show an extra wide ramp he created, but in the end didn't work well for the family because the person using it regularly needed to hold onto both handrails while pulling themselves up the slope. But for other people that wider design would have been ideal.
- A group might focus on one subset of the population and leave out others for example, Town meeting day in Vermont in some towns is all done from the floor and a bunch of types of people can't make it to the date/time because they have to work, or because of their disability or chronic illness can't be in a crowd of people or don't have childcare options. The meetings are fast passed and use specific language often technical and hard to understand. The meetings require residents to do things without much instruction like pick up a sticker and wear it, speak at a specific location where there may or may not be a microphone. Vote on the spot with not a lot of time to process and think about the potential vote. That's a place where Universal Design principals could be implemented by bringing together people with lots of different types of backgrounds to work on a solution through designing spaces, programs and either changing the law to evolve with that practice. The key though is that the solution needs to really work for everyone including the people who don't have access to a cell phone,

computer, internet or transportation to the polls. It takes great intention, hard work and commitment to one another.

As I said in the beginning of my testimony, I'm not sure what the committee is trying to do with a definition of universal design and I'm happy to answer questions based on my experience.

Respectfully submitted,
Sarah Launderville
Executive Director
Vermont Center for Independent Living