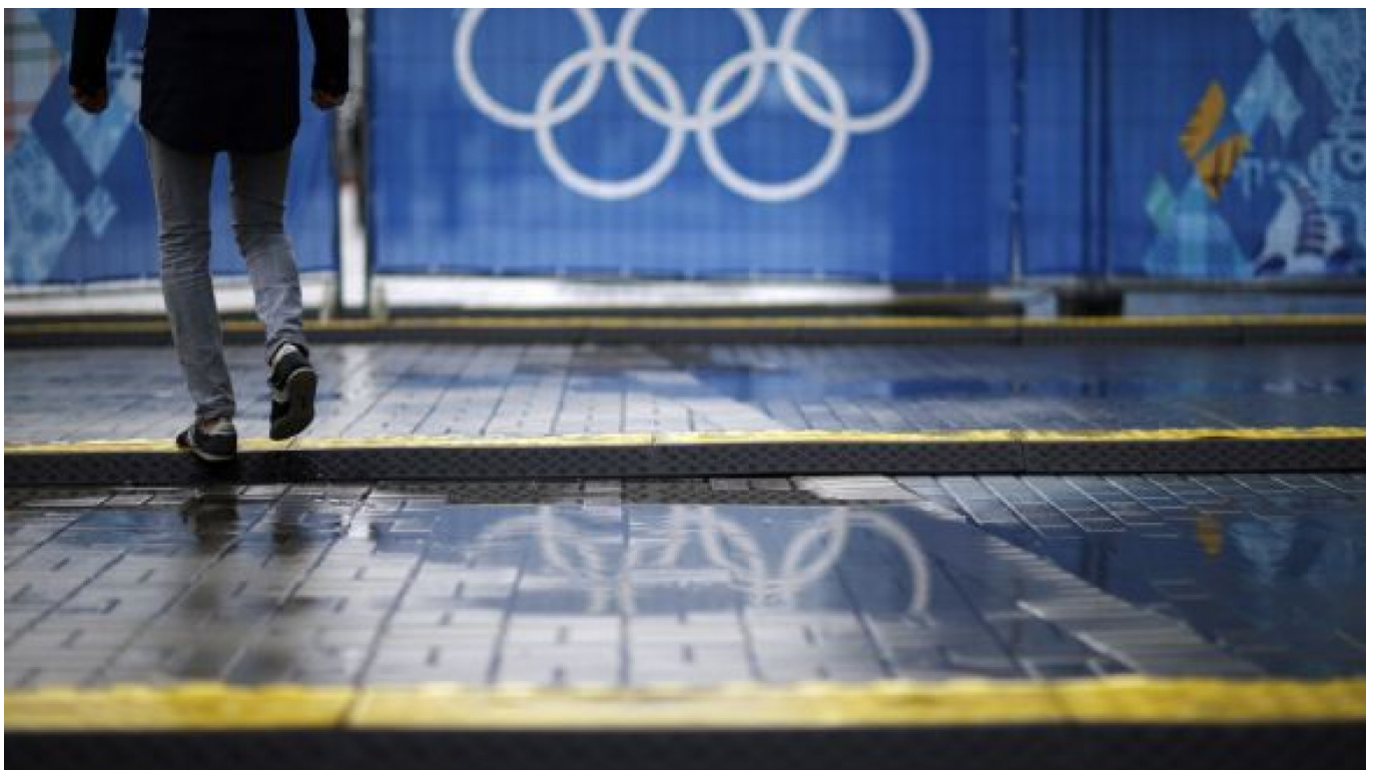


Disability Access at Sochi Games Needs Upgrade

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Cable protectors, which cause problems for people in wheelchairs, lying across a walkway at the Olympic Park. **David Goldman**

SOCHI — After \$51 billion, it should be easy to get around at the Olympics — for everyone.

Organizers have repeatedly touted accessibility for people with disabilities as one of the chief lasting benefits of hosting the Winter Games in Sochi. But with less than three weeks until the Paralympics, infrastructure around the Olympic Park and its venues are not entirely barrier-free.

Wheelchair access ramps at Laura Cross-Country Ski & Biathlon Center are not easily visible, while stairs for walking access are steep and icy. Door frames raised from the floor are all over the venues, including doorways leading into lower seating areas and wheelchair seating at Bolshoi Ice Dome.

Wheelchair lifts at some of the hotels being used for the Games only work on one side of the stairs — and instructions are provided only in English. One trailer with two restrooms for people with disabilities outside the Iceberg Skating Palace doubles as a storage closet, filled with janitorial supplies and a large trash can.

As the world saw when the Olympics opened Feb. 7, not everything is finished or polished — there are certainly hurdles for people with disabilities.

Nearly 1,500 athletes are coming to the Paralympics right after the Olympics. It is a much smaller scale than the games happening now, but in a country that's never hosted the Paralympics before. Despite preparations for years, issues remain for an infrastructure that will not be fully tested until athletes from the 43 countries and their supporters arrive. The Paralympics, starting March 7, include 72 events in five sports over 10 days.

Ahead of that, people strolling around Olympic Park with wheelchairs, walking sticks, crutches or other aids have been difficult to find during the Sochi Games. Walkways are often blocked by cable protectors that create awkward bumps five or six inches off the ground. In many places, ramps are simple sheets of thin plywood, not always flush with the ground and almost always added on to the structures they connect rather than being built in during initial construction.

Arly Velasquez, an alpine ski Paralympian for Mexico and analyst for Claro Sports, said buses are accessible to those in wheelchairs but drivers frequently do not know how to use the lifts, forcing him to either demonstrate himself or wait for another bus. And when he arrived at his hotel one night, the wheelchair lift leading to his room wasn't working, so he had to improvise by strapping himself to his chair with a belt, he said.

"I just put my computer on the top of the stairs," he said, "and I just climbed with the hands."

"Right Direction"

Craig Spence, spokesman for the International Paralympics Committee, said the problems "are totally relevant but hopefully they'll be ironed out before the Paralympics start."

All venues for the games and infrastructure have been built in accordance with an IPC accessibility guide, he said. The issues themselves, Spence said, are a sign of how far Russia has come since winning the games seven years ago.

"That the lift is there in the first place ... is a step in the right direction," Spence said.

A smooth run is key to long-term plans for the games to encourage more access for people with disabilities throughout Russia. The last time the nation hosted the Olympics in 1980, it refused to stage the Paralympics, saying the country did not have people with disabilities.

Yevgeny Bukharov, head of the Paralympic Integration Department for the Sochi 2014 Organizing Committee, said he is confident that the venues and the athletes' villages are fully accessible for athletes, spectators and families. Organizers plan to transition from the current Games to the Paralympics by adding more seating capacity, transportation and pathways for people with disabilities, he said.

Organizers produced a 104-page handbook detailing the accessibility features throughout Olympic and Paralympic venues, including the biathlon center, plus hotels and key transit hubs. And staff is planned at each venue to handle complaints on access issues and find problems that need fixing. In some areas, like ski venues, more personnel are planned in places where accessible infrastructure wasn't practical, Bukharov said.

Organizers have been trying to work with developers, construction companies and fire officials, among others, to prioritize accessibility issues while meeting their needs. Raised door frames, for example, are required in some areas by fire officials so air cannot get under the door, he said.



David Goldman / AP

A worker carrying paper towels out of a wheelchair-accessible restroom.

Bukharov said bus drivers for the games were hired relatively last-minute for the games but will train more for the Paralympics on using lifts on buses.

"I hope that these Games will be very convenient for people with disabilities, particularly for athletes, because everything was built to create a good atmosphere to support them to achieve that [high] level in competition," Bukharov said.

Russian officials have made an effort in recent years to make transport and public buildings accessible to people with disabilities. Some metro stations have lifts or ramps for people in wheelchairs but the application is scattered. Public buses are built low to the ground, but often have no lifts and are therefore not accessible to people with disabilities traveling without assistance.

As recently as September, a Human Rights Watch report said the more than 13 million people

with disabilities in Russia have significant barriers in trying to go about daily life. As a result, they rarely leave home.

Disability rights researcher Andrea Mazzarino, who wrote the report, said people in Russia generally want to help those with disabilities but often suggest personal help rather than infrastructure changes that would allow people with impediments to get around on their own. "It sort of reflects this idea that it's not important and it is not expedient to allow people to use public services independently."

Biggest Test

The IPC did an audit of the Sochi venues in January, Spence said, and it plans to assess the situation on the ground at the venues when staff begin to arrive Friday, suggesting changes as needed. "We are not expecting too many surprises," Spence said.

But he acknowledged that the biggest test of any infrastructure comes when people using it arrive. And, he said, guests shouldn't have the same expectations outside of Olympic Park, despite the strides Russia has made.

"Outside the venues, there will be some issues," he said. "You cannot change an entire city in the seven years that you go from winning the Games to hosting the Games."

Hundreds of buses with disability access used around Olympic venues, for example, are expected to be put to use around the country after the Games end, Spence said.

But Mazzarino said Russians have not seen improvements so far. "Residents outside the tourist zone have not benefited significantly," she said.

Officials for several national Paralympic organizations declined comment, saying they would get impressions of Sochi on site when they arrived. Tiina Kivisaari, secretary general of Finland's Paralympic Committee, said the country's staff and athletes did not notice any serious problems during visits over the last year, but almost everything was under construction.

"From our Olympic team, we have heard that there's been some problems, e.g. with elevators, but we still trust and hope that villages, venues, etc., will be accessible when [the] Paralympic Games start," she said in an e-mail.

Things visually look accessible in Sochi, but are not as practical as they seem, Velasquez said. Velasquez said he has been able to make things work, navigating ramps that lead to dead ends or stairs and doing wheelies to get over cable protectors.

"I can do that but, not all of the wheelchair users can do it," Velasquez said. "I can do it because I am an athlete and also because this chair is very good, but not all of the people will have this kind of wheelchair."

Athletes, he said, want to be independent.

"More than anything, you are just looking to do things by yourself," Velasquez said. "You do not strive to be depending on someone else because it just takes time and just takes someone

to be there."

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73