

**Accommodations in Your Workplace:
Navigating Reasonable
Accommodations Under
Federal and State Law**

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I. Introduction.

The reasonable accommodation landscape for municipalities dramatically altered during the COVID-19 pandemic. An accommodation request before the pandemic, such as telework, may have been unreasonable. The question then was “why?” Now, it is “why not?”

II. The Law.

A. Federal Law

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, as Amended (the “ADA”), a reasonable accommodation is a modification or adjustment to a job, the work environment, or the way things are usually done during the hiring process. Modifications or adjustments enable a qualified individual with a disability an equal opportunity in hiring and the performance of job tasks to the same extent as an individual without a disability. The ADA requires reasonable accommodations (1) to ensure equal opportunity in the application process; (2) to enable a qualified individual with a disability to perform the essential functions of their job; and (3) to make it possible for an employee with a disability to enjoy equal benefits and privileges of employment. [42 U.S.C. § 12111(9)].

A disability means an individual with (1) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of the individual; (2) a record of such an impairment; or (3) being regarded as having such an impairment. [42 U.S.C. § 12102(1)(A-C)]. This definition is construed broadly. [42 U.S.C. § 12102(4)].

A qualified individual is one who, with or without reasonable accommodation, can perform the essential functions of the job that the individual holds or desires. [42 U.S.C. § 12111(8)]. Consideration is given to the employer’s judgment as to what functions are essential. [*Id.*] The job description is considered evidence of the essential functions.

The ADA definitions provide that “‘reasonable accommodations’ may include: (A) making facilities used by employees readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities; and (B) job restricting, part-time or modified work schedules, reassignment to a vacant position,

acquisition or modification of equipment or devices, appropriate adjustment or modifications of examinations, training materials or policies, the provision of qualified readers or interpreters, and other similar accommodations for individuals with disabilities.” [42 U.S.C. § 12111(9)].

A public employer shall not discriminate against a qualified individual on the basis of disability, which includes “not making reasonable accommodations to the known physical or mental limitations of an otherwise qualified individual with a disability who is an applicant or employee, unless such covered entity can demonstrate that the accommodation would impose an undue hardship on the operation of the business”. [42 U.S.C. § 12112(b)(5)(A)]. This also includes denying employment opportunities to an employee who is an otherwise qualified individual with a disability, if such denial is based on the need of such covered entity to make reasonable accommodation to the physical or mental impairments of the employee. [42 U.S.C. § 12112(b)(5)(B)].

Undue hardship is defined as an action requiring significant difficulty or expense, when considered in light of the following factors: (1) the nature and cost of the accommodation needed; (2) the overall financial resources of the facility or facilities involved, the number of persons employed, the effect on expenses and resources or the impact of the accommodation upon the operation of the facility; (3) the overall financial resources of the entity, the overall size of the business with respect to the number of employees, the number, type and location of the employer’s facilities; and (4) the type of operation of the employer including the composition, structure and factions, the geographic separateness, administrative or fiscal relationship. [42 U.S.C. § 12111(10)].

B. New York State Law

The New York State Human Rights Law (“NYSHRL”) prohibits an employer from refusing to hire, employ, bar or discharge from employment an individual or discriminate against an individual in compensation or in terms, conditions or privileges of employment because of disability. [N.Y. Executive Law § 296(a)]. It further defines a “discriminatory practice” to include “a refusal to make reasonable modification in policies, practices or procedures, when such modifications are necessary to afford facilities, privileges, advantages or accommodations to individuals with disabilities, unless such person can demonstrate that making such modifications would fundamentally alter the nature of such facilities, privileges, advantages or accommodations”. [Exec. Law § 296(h)(2)(c)(i)]. A County is an employer under the NYSHRL. [Exec. Law § 292(5)(b)].

A disability is defined as “(a) a physical, mental or medical impairment resulting from anatomical, physiological, genetic or neurological conditions, which prevents the exercise of a normal bodily function or is demonstrable by medically accepted clinical or laboratory diagnostic techniques or (b) a record of such an impairment; or (c) a condition regarded by others as such an impairment”. [Exec. Law § 292(21)]. A disability is limited to “disabilities which, upon the provision of reasonable accommodations, do not prevent the complainant from performing in a reasonable manner the activities involved in the job or occupation sought or held.” [*Id.*]

A reasonable accommodation “means actions taken which permit an employee, prospective employee or member with a disability, or a pregnancy-related condition, to perform in a reasonable

manner the activities involved in the job or occupation sought or held and include, but are not limited to, provision of an accessible worksite, acquisition or modification of equipment, support services for persons with impaired hearing or vision, job restructuring and modified work schedules; provided, however, that such actions do not impose an undue hardship on the business, program or enterprise of the entity from which action is requested.” [Exec. Law § 292(21-e)].

Undue burden under the NYSHRL means significant difficulty or expense. Factors to be considered include: (1) the nature and cost; (2) the overall financial resources, the number of persons employed at the site, the effect of expenses and resources, legitimate safety requirement or the impact on the site; (3) geographic separateness; and (4) overall financial resources. [Exec. Law § 296(h)(2)(c)(iii)].

The NYSHRL goes further to provide the parameters of a reasonable accommodation:

(a) Reasonable accommodation.

(1) Reasonable accommodation is defined in the Human Rights Law at section 292.21-e, as follows: The term “reasonable accommodation” means actions taken which permit an employee, prospective employee or member with a disability to perform in a reasonable manner the activities involved in the job or occupation sought or held and include, but are not limited to, provision of an accessible worksite, acquisition or modification of equipment, support services for persons with impaired hearing or vision, job restructuring and modified work schedules; provided, however, that such actions do not impose an undue hardship on the business, program or enterprise of the entity from which action is requested.

(2) Reasonable accommodations may include, but are not limited to: making existing facilities more readily accessible to individuals with disabilities; acquisition or modification of equipment; job restructuring; modified work schedules; adjustments to work schedule for treatment or recovery; reassignment to an available position; adjustment of examinations, training materials or policies; providing readers or interpreters.

(3) Reasonable accommodation does not include among other things: providing for personal care needs, such as a personal care assistant, although such a personal care assistant should be accommodated where provided by the employee at no cost to the employer; providing non-work-related aids, such as a personal hearing aid or wheelchair, which are the employee's own responsibility.

(b) Determination of reasonableness.

(1) Whether an accommodation that has been requested or is under consideration is a reasonable accommodation required by the Human Rights Law will turn on a balancing of the following factors: (i) efficacy or benefit provided by the accommodation toward removing the impediments to performance caused by the disability; (ii) convenience or reasonableness of the accommodation for the employer, including its comparative convenience as opposed to other possible accommodations; and (iii) the hardships, costs, or problems it will cause for the employer, including those that may be caused for other employees.

(2) Accommodations that pose an undue hardship on the employer will not be required. Undue hardship means significant difficulty or expense to the employer. In determining whether an accommodation would result in undue hardship, consideration will be given to any relevant factor. Relevant factors can include, but are not necessarily limited to, those set forth in the Human Rights Law, at section 296.3(b): (i) the overall size of the business, program or enterprise with respect to the number of employees, number and type of facilities, and size of budget; (ii) the type of operation which the business, program or enterprise is engaged in, including the composition and structure of the workforce; and (iii) the nature and cost of the accommodation needed, including consideration of any money available from other sources to assist the employer in paying the cost.

(c) Covered disabilities.

(1) The Human Rights Law protects from discrimination those individuals with disabilities which, with or without reasonable accommodation, do not prevent the individual from performing the duties of the job in a reasonable manner. The definition of disability in the Human Rights Law is more comprehensive than that under Federal law in that it covers many conditions that have been found to be not a disability under the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

(2) The term disability is defined in the Human Rights Law at section 292.21 to mean: (i) a physical, mental or medical impairment resulting from anatomical, physiological, genetic or neurological conditions which prevents the exercise of a normal bodily function or is demonstrable by medically accepted clinical or laboratory diagnostic techniques; (ii) a record of such an impairment; or (iii) a condition regarded by others as such an impairment. With regard to employment, the term is limited to disabilities which, upon the provision of reasonable accommodations, do not prevent the complainant from performing in a reasonable manner the activities involved in the job or occupation sought or held.

(3) Not every disability covered by the Human Rights Law will require the consideration of reasonable accommodations. Only those disabilities which actually impede, as a matter of fact, the individual in performing the job will give rise to a consideration of accommodation. This is understood to include those situations in which the job impedes the individual's recovery or ability to obtain treatment, and accommodation can make recovery or treatment possible while the individual continues to be employed.

(d) Who is entitled to a reasonable accommodation.

(1) To be entitled to the protection of the Human Rights Law, the disabled individual must have the requisite job qualifications as well as be able to satisfactorily perform in the job. (i) The disabled individual must be otherwise qualified for the job by education, skill, experience, ability, etc., to the same extent that such education, skill, experience, ability, etc., are required as bona fide job qualifications for nondisabled applicants or employees. See further, paragraph (f)(4) of this section. (ii) The disabled individual must be able, with or without accommodation, to attain reasonable performance. Reasonable performance is not perfect performance or performance unaffected by the disability, but reasonable job performance, reasonably meeting the employer's needs to achieve its business goals. See further, paragraphs (f)(1)-(3) of this section.

(2) To be entitled to a reasonable accommodation, the individual must meet the qualification and performance standards set forth in paragraph (1) of this subdivision, and must have a disability and a need for an accommodation which are known, or are made known, to the employer.

(e) Circumstances giving rise to the requirement that the employer consider reasonable accommodation, in accordance with the factors set forth in subdivision (b) of this section.

(1) Reasonable accommodation must be considered where the disability and need for accommodation are known to the employer.

(2) Reasonable accommodation must be considered when a qualified applicant or employee with a disability informs the employer of the disability (if the employer does not already know of its existence) and requests an accommodation.

(3) Reasonable accommodation must be considered when a current employee with a disability informs the employer of the disability (if the employer does not already know of its existence) and requests an accommodation, even if there has been no change in the employee's medical condition.

(f) Ability to reasonably perform the activities involved in the job or occupation; job restructuring.

(1) Ability to reasonably perform the activities involved in the job or occupation means the ability, with or without accommodation, to satisfactorily perform the essential functions of the job or occupation. See further, subparagraph (d)(1)(ii) of this section.

(2) Satisfactory performance means minimum acceptable performance of the essential functions of the job as established by the employer. The employer's judgment as to what is minimum acceptable performance will not be second-guessed, so long as standards for performance are applied equivalently to all employees in the same position. Such standards for satisfactory performance may include minimum productivity standards or quotas.

(3) Essential functions are those fundamental to the position; a function is essential if not performing that function would fundamentally change the job or occupation for which the position exists. What is an essential function is a factual question to be resolved by all relevant evidence. Evidence for determining the essential functions of a particular position would include, but would not be limited to, the following: (i) the employer's judgment as to which functions are essential, particularly where so indicated in a pre-existing written job description; (ii) how often the function is actually performed by other employees in the position; (iii) how many other employees are available to whom the function could be reallocated by job restructuring; (iv) the direct and specific consequences to the employer's business if the function is not performed by the particular disabled individual; (v) the terms of a collective bargaining agreement. (Labor organizations are also required to reasonably accommodate the disabilities of a member, pursuant to section 296.3.)

(4) When an employer fills a position with a specific purpose of acquiring special ability or expertise (for example: technical expertise, foreign language skill, physical strength in a firefighter), even if the amount of time actually spent on the job using the special ability or

expertise is small, this ability or expertise is a bona fide qualification for the job. See further, subparagraph (d)(1)(i) of this section.

(5) As is true in any area covered by the Human Rights Law, the employer may hire the applicant who is most qualified with regard to the bona fide job qualifications, and is not required to hire a disabled applicant simply because the applicant meets the minimum job qualifications if there are other more qualified applicants.

(6) The Human Rights Law does not require, as a reasonable accommodation in the form of job restructuring, the creation of a completely unique position with either qualifications or functions tailored to the disabled individual's abilities.

(7) Reasonable accommodation, in the form of job restructuring, is required if a disabled individual meets the bona fide job qualifications, and can satisfactorily perform the essential functions of the position; the duties that the disabled individual cannot perform due to the disability, and that are not essential to the position, must not be required of the disabled individual.

(g) Safety concerns; objectionable behaviors.

(1) The Human Rights Law does not require accommodation of behaviors that do not meet the employer's workplace behavior standards that are consistently applied to all similarly situated employees, even if these behaviors are caused by a disability. This would include, but not be limited to: (i) dress codes, grooming standards and time and attendance policy, though reasonable and necessary deviations must be allowed as accommodations; (ii) conduct standards, including those which prohibit aggressive or threatening behavior; (iii) discipline for theft of company property by a kleptomaniac; and (iv) discipline for intoxication or impairment on the job by an alcoholic.

(2) Reasonable accommodation is not required where the disability or the accommodation itself poses a direct threat. (i) Direct threat means a significant risk of substantial harm to the health or safety of the employee or others that cannot be eliminated or reduced by reasonable accommodation. (ii) In determining whether a direct threat exists, the employer must make an individualized assessment, based on reasonable judgment that relies on current medical knowledge or on the best available objective information, to ascertain: the nature, duration, and severity of the risk; the probability that the potential injury will actually occur; and whether reasonable accommodations, such as modification of policies, practices, or procedures, will mitigate the risk. (iii) Some jobs may have a bona fide classification as safety sensitive, such as, for example, vehicle operators or persons who work with children. Heightened consideration of direct threat is to be encouraged in bona fide safety sensitive jobs.

(h) Drug addiction and alcoholism.

(1) Alcoholism and drug addiction are diseases. However, an individual who is currently using drugs illegally (see paragraph [4] of this subdivision), is not protected in this regard by the Human Rights Law. The law does protect an individual who is a recovered/recovering alcoholic or drug addict.

(2) Adjustments to the work schedule, where needed to allow for ongoing treatment, must be allowed as an accommodation where reasonable, if the individual is still able to perform the essential functions of the job including predictable and regular attendance.

(3) The recovered/recovering alcoholic or drug addict should be expected to perform job tasks just as anyone else with similar skills, experience and background.

(4) Where the employer has knowledge of the current illegal use of drugs, the employee is not entitled by law to accommodation, and may be terminated. (i) Current illegal use of drugs means illegal use of drugs that occurred recently enough to justify a reasonable belief that a person's drug use is current or that continuing use is a real and ongoing problem. (ii) In determining whether recent use is enough to justify a reasonable belief in current use, the individual's successful participation in a program for rehabilitation or recovery since the recent use is relevant.

(5) Employers are encouraged, where the employer knows of current illegal use of drugs, or where job performance of an alcoholic or drug addict deteriorates to below acceptable standards, to utilize the practice of leave of absence and required attendance at a rehabilitation program, along with a last chance agreement requiring acceptable performance and attendance upon return. If an employee denies the problem and refuses the leave, treatment and last chance agreement, the employee may be terminated or disciplined for the documented performance problems.

(6) Drug testing.

(i) A test to determine the illegal use of drugs is not to be considered a medical test.

(ii) Nothing in these regulations is to be construed to encourage, prohibit, or authorize the conducting of drug tests for the illegal use of drugs by job applicants or employees, or the making of employment decisions based on the test results.

(iii) Nothing in these regulations is to be construed to encourage, prohibit, restrict or authorize the otherwise lawful exercise by entities subject to the jurisdiction of the United States Department of Transportation, of authority to test applicants for or employees in safety sensitive positions for the illegal use of drugs or for on-duty impairment by alcohol, or to remove persons who test positive from safety sensitive duties.

(iv) Any information regarding the medical condition or history of any applicant or employee obtained from a drug test, except information regarding illegal use of drugs, must be kept confidential, and may not be used in any way to the disadvantage of the applicant or employee.

(i) Temporary disabilities.

(1) A current employee experiencing a temporary disability is protected by the Human Rights Law where the individual will be able to satisfactorily perform the duties of the job after a reasonable accommodation in the form of a reasonable time for recovery.

(2) The Human Rights Law requires no more than de minimis accommodations for temporary disabilities in the areas of worksite accessibility, acquisition or modification of equipment, job restructuring, or support services for persons with temporarily impaired hearing or vision.

(3) The Human Rights Law may require reasonable accommodation of temporary disabilities in the areas of modified work schedules, reassignment to an available position or available light duty, or adjustments to work schedules for recovery. The employer's past practice, pre-existing policies

regarding leave time and/or light duty, specific workplace needs, the size and flexibility of the relevant workforce, and the employee's overall attendance record will be important factors in determining reasonable accommodation in this context.

(j) Rights and duties of the employer.

(1) The employer must not make pre-employment inquiries with regard to the existence of a disability or need for accommodation. The employer should provide information to applicants and new employees as to their rights with regard to reasonable accommodation of disability, and as to procedures to be followed in requesting reasonable accommodation.

(2) The employer should advise all current employees on a regular basis as to their rights with regard to reasonable accommodation of disability, and as to procedures to be followed in requesting reasonable accommodation.

(3) The employer has the duty to reasonably accommodate known disabilities, where the need for the accommodation is known.

(4) The employer has a duty to move forward to consider accommodation once the need for accommodation is known or requested. The employer has the duty to clearly request from the applicant or employee any documentation that is needed.

(5) Once an accommodation is under consideration, the employer has the right to medical or other information that is necessary to verify the existence of the disability or that is necessary for consideration of the accommodation. The employer must maintain the confidentiality of individuals' medical information.

(6) The employer has the right to select which reasonable accommodation will be provided, so long as it is effective in meeting the need.

(7) It is recommended that the employer have a written policy and procedure for reasonable accommodation of disability. A sample procedure is available from the division.

(k) Rights and duties of the employee.

(1) The employee must make the disability and need for accommodation known to the employer.

(2) An employee with a disability has a right to request an accommodation at any time, even if his/her medical condition has not changed.

(3) The employee must cooperate with the employer in the consideration and implementation of the requested reasonable accommodation.

(4) The employee must cooperate in providing medical or other information that is necessary to verify the existence of the disability or that is necessary for consideration of the accommodation. The employee has a right to have his/her medical information kept confidential.

(5) The employee has the right to refuse an accommodation despite the existence of a disability, if the employee can perform the job in a reasonable manner without the accommodation. [9 CRR-NY 466.11 Current through July 15, 2021]

III. Case Law.

A prima face failure to accommodate claim is made by demonstrating that (1) the person has a disability under the meaning of the ADA; (2) the employer had notice of the disability; (3) with reasonable accommodation, the person could perform the essential functions of the job at issue;

and (4) the employer refused to make such accommodations. [McMillan v. City of New York, 711 F.3d 120, 125-26 (2d Cir. 2013)].

The burden rests primarily on the individual or his healthcare provider to specifically identify the disability and suggest the reasonable accommodations. [Taylor v. Principal Fin. Grp., Inc., 93 F.3d 155, 165 (5th Cir. 1996)].

The employer must then engage in an interactive process with the individual. [Dillard v. City of Austin, 837 F.3d 557 (5th Cir. 2016)]. Failure to engage in good faith or stymie the process constitutes a violation. [EEOC v. Chevron Philips Chem. Co., LP, 570 F.3d 606 (5th Cir. 2009)].

Placing the employer on notice can merely constitute a general and vague letter by the individual, health care provider or their counsel. [Romanello v. Intesa Sanpaolo, S.p.A., 22 N.Y.3d 881, 883 (2013)]. The term reasonable accommodation does not even have to be mentioned. [Phillips v. City of New York, 66 A.D.3d 170, 189 n.24 (1st Dept. 2009)].

A refusal to accommodate can be both actual or constructive. [Perkins v. City of New York, 2023 U.S. App. LEXIS 1719 at *3 (2d Cir. 2023)]. An indeterminate delay has the same effect as an outright denial. [*Id.*]

A reasonable accommodation *never* involves the elimination of an essential function. [Shannon v. NYC Transit Auth., 332 F.3d 95, 100 (2d Cir. 2003)].

VI. Conclusion/Biography.

EARL T. REDDING is a partner at Roemer Wallens Gold & Mineaux LLP in Albany, New York specializing in labor and employment law. He joined the firm in 2007 following practice as an Assistant District Attorney in St. Lawrence County and a New York Assistant Attorney General in the Division of State Counsel. He received his preparatory education at Gettysburg College, earning his B.A. in 2000 and graduated from Albany Law School of Union University in 2003, where he served on the editorial board of *The Albany Law Journal of Science and Technology*. Earl practices throughout the courts of New York successfully arguing cases before the Appellate Divisions, the Court of Appeals and the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. He is a frequent conference speaker on labor and employment law areas and has been recognized as a Super Lawyer (2018) and an Albany Business Review 40 under 40 class member (2016). Earl is active in volunteering in the local community, most recently serving on the Board of miSci (the Schenectady Museum) of which he is a past president, past-President of the National Alumni Association of Albany Law and a past-alumni member of the Law School's Board of Trustees. He is a recipient of the Albany Business Week 40 Under 40. Earl lives in Niskayuna with his wife Marna and children Jack and Elizabeth Lucille ("Lulu"). He is an avid supporter of the New Orleans Saints, has completed four marathons and a Half-Ironman, and for almost 10 months of the year found working on weekends within various ice rinks throughout New York, Vermont, Connecticut and Massachusetts while cheering on his children.

