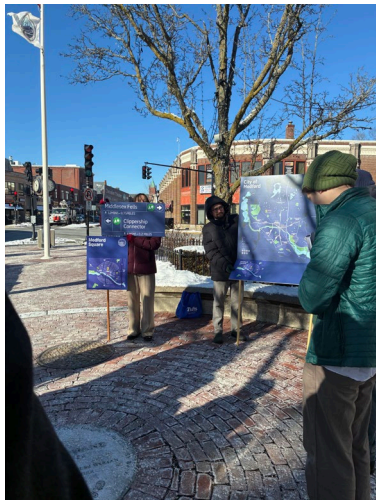




City of Medford

Wayfinding User/Expert Review Report Visit January 20th 2026

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Introduction

The City of Medford engaged the Institute for Human Centered Design (IHCD) to participate in a review of an emerging wayfinding initiative focused on a system of signs. IHCD's primary research method is a variation of contextual inquiry research in which people with personal experience of a functional limitation come together in-situ to assess an aspect of the environment to consider what works, what fails and what might work better. It is a subjective assessment through the lens of individual lived experience. IHCD tests only people at the edges of the spectrum of ability and age and has found in dozens of projects in multiple sectors across the nation and the world that solutions that work for people with limitations work better for everyone.

The Institute for Human Centered Design (IHCD) is an international design and education non-profit organization committed to advancing the role of excellent design in expanding opportunity and enhancing experience for all people across the spectrum of ability, age and culture. IHCD was founded in Boston in 1978 as Adaptive Environments. IHCD's headquarters remain in Boston, although many of the team work remotely in other parts of the U.S. and abroad. IHCD meets its mission through an unusual combination of consulting, interdisciplinary design services, education, education, research and technical assistance. We are deep content experts in both accessibility and Inclusive Design where we were global pioneers since the mid-1990s. IHCD's portfolios of clients across the US include: higher education, municipalities and state agencies, museums, outdoor recreation, healthcare, multi-family housing, urban design, corporate workspace.

In this User/Expert review, everyone was a resident of Medford, many for a lifetime, with the exception of one low-vision participant from Melrose invited by IHCD to join the locals to ensure low vision was adequately represented.

The review took place on January 20th, 2025 on a bitter cold morning when it was 6 degrees and windy. Frances Nwajei, Medford's Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and ADA Coordinator, recruited members of the Medford Disability Commission and of the Medford Senior Center and welcomed everyone to City Hall that morning. Frances also took responsibility for a remarkable lunch for participants at the end of the debrief in City Hall.

The Senior Center provided a large van and their driver to transport the group, supplemented with private cars for staff. The driver stayed with the group, allowing people to return to the van to escape the cold.

City of Medford staff included Frances who coordinated the session and invited Medford User/Experts. In addition, the Medford team included: [Amanda](#) Centrella, Open Space Planner, [Nicholas](#) Karinge, Disability Specialist, [Kayla Myros](#), Economic Development Planner and Jack, a City Planning Intern from Tufts.

Six (6) IHCD staff participated: Andrew MacKenzie, Ariella Hattenbach, Shannon Haley, Gianna Ruiz, Kailyn Mills and Valerie Fletcher.

There were a total of nine (9) User/Experts. Three members of the Disability Commission: Joseph Casey, John Shayeb and Anthony Andreottola. Nicholas Karinge, City of Medford Disability Specialist also served as a User/Expert. IHCD added one additional low-vision User/Expert, David D’Arcangelo, a resident of Melrose and former Director of the Mass. Office on Disability.

Three members of the Senior Center participated: Theo, Marvin, Beth and Grace. Grace is staff at the Council of Aging so participated as a “secondary” User/Expert.

In keeping with IHCD’s policy of providing a stipend to User/Experts for sharing their personal experience and time, each participant was paid \$85 in cash.

IHCD works from the World Health Organization’s (WHO) “contextual” definition of disability. It is the global gold standard for understanding disability today. It focuses on the intersection of the individual with one or more functional limitations interacting with the environment. WHO considers the environment holistically to include the physical, information, communication, attitudinal, and policy environments. Functional limitation is more or less disabling based on the environment. It’s a powerful invitation to invite design solutions to minimize limitations.

Though identification of impediments to equitable experience are a priority, IHCD also seeks to identify those elements or practices that can be *facilitators* to positive experience, participation and satisfaction. Identifying existing or potential facilitators in the environment are a key to Inclusive Design. IHCD and our clients find that what works for people at the edges works better for everyone.

Method – Contextual Inquiry Research via Engagement of User/Experts

IHCD is committed to direct engagement of people across the spectrum of ability, age and culture as a vital source of data about where design works and where it falls short. The method is contextual inquiry, a form of user experience research that is a balance between traditional interviewing and ethnographic observation. Through one-on-one close engagement and documentation, the process captures what was said and observed through notes and photos.

In this Medford wayfinding review, it was invaluable to have full-size mockups of a selection of the current wayfinding designs. But they are not yet installed. They were carried to the two locations by City staff. Photo documentation was limited due to the ad-hoc nature of the context and to the challenges of the weather.

Though there was a contextual inquiry component to this project, the group also convened at City Hall following the site visits for an extended de-brief and dialogue with all participants.

The IHCD User/Expert* Lab has recruited over 400 people in the Greater Boston area to participate in evaluations of physical and digital environments through contextual inquiry research. We partner with the Smithsonian Institutions in Washington and there are over 100 User/Experts working there.

* A **User/Expert** is a person who has developed expertise by means of their lived experience in dealing with the challenges of the environment due to a physical, sensory or cognitive functional limitation. The environment is understood broadly to include the physical, information, communication, policy and attitudinal/social environments.

A **primary User/Expert** personally lives with one or more functional limitations.

A **secondary User/Expert** is a parent, partner, friend or care provider with extensive experience of one or more people with lived experience of functional limitation(s).

Responses to the Guiding Questions

The group visited two locations: Medford Square and Haines Square. Most of the time was allocated to Medford Square. The responses include the field visits and the debrief and dialogue following in City Hall.

Placement of the Wayfinding Installations:

- Easy to spot? Would it be easy to notice at night?
 - The signage seems viable in the daytime but likely not very visible at night. Is there any way that integrated lighting could be used?
 - Assuming that the signs are double-sided since people would approach from all sides?
- Can you see and read the text? If not, why not?
 - Older and low-vision UEs asked for maximum font size and weight for them to read it.
 - Several people noted concerns for whether wheelchair users would be able to read the big sign due to height.

Color:

- Does the system stand out clearly on the street as a distinct kind of information?
 - Agreement that the distinctive dark blue does stand in daylight but concerns if it would be visible at night.

- Does the contrast within the signs work for you – color of background in relation to text or icons?
 - Several UEs noted a preference for brighter white for fonts and arrows. There were mixed responses to icons without colored circles.
 - Several UEs noted that some icons in circles had insufficient contrast.

Font:

- Are the fonts clear and readable?
 - Most UEs wanted the fonts larger and most advocated for the thickest of the fonts on the samples but UEs affirmed the choice of the simple sans-serif fonts. The only letters of the font available were on the printed sample signs so potential issues with individual letters could not be assessed.
- Are they the right size?
 - Common wish for fonts to be as large as possible.
- What works better for you? All capital letters or first letter only capitalized (“letter case”)
 - Consensus of a preference for letter case.

Hierarchy:

- Is it clear what information is most important?
 - Medford Square is loaded with local business signs competing with one another for attention. They are very close together and very distracting. The wayfinding system signs are challenged to attract attention. But most agreed that a distinctive look and color system, maximum contrast and boldest possible fonts help to counter the visual confusion.

Icons:

- The new wayfinding system uses a set of “icons” or short-hand symbols to communicate. Do you know what they mean?
 - Majority of U/Es suggested two additional icons useful for locals and visitors: public toilets and the MBTA buses and trains.

- Are any icons unclear?
 - Concerns were expressed for clarity of the walking man and park icons.
 - Some UEs found that the institution icon looks like a car.
 - U/Es noted that there is no obvious attention to accessibility in the sample signs such as use of the International Symbol of Accessibility (ISA) to indicate accessible routes or destinations. This could also be a means to identify and promote accessible businesses and public buildings.

Arrows:

- Do the arrows feel helpful?
 - Yes - broad affirmation of using arrows but wanted them thicker and in bright white
- Do you think that it would be helpful to have more of them?
 - Not more on a single sign but might be valuable adding a sequence of arrows on the street, even on the pavement [people with low vision and many older people tend to look down] to key destinations (e.g., Chevalier Theatre).

Maps:

- Can you read the map and know where you are and where you want to go?
 - Most U/Es found the maps interesting and attractive but with limited utility for walkers – suggested it might serve cyclists better.
 - One U/E, a lifelong resident, made a lot of suggestions for places to add but his interest was in maximizing the great story of historic Medford and not so much in wayfinding.
 - Large map was Interesting as contextual information about the relationship of places to one another and to water but not so useful for finding your way.
- Would a “You Are Here” indication be helpful to you on the map?
 - Yes, a clear preference.
- Can you *read* the map ‘key’ on the lower left?
 - Most UEs could not read the lower left key – low placement and small symbols but one older UE found it helpful and easy to follow.

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- A couple of User/Experts suggested that the small and large map should be switched since the more expansive map is for the larger geographic area of Medford. The more local map should be the larger one for practical wayfinding information.
 - Would you want to have the points of the compass (North, South, East, West) included?
 - Only two UEs advocated for cardinal points: one recently moved from California and one legally blind who uses a tactile compass.

Tilt Table Portion of Wayside:

- Does this make it easier to read the map?
 - People with sight and mobility limitations liked the opportunity to pause at the tilt table and it was easier for them to read the map and pause.
- Is the height of the angled surface comfortable for you?
 - Yes, common agreement.
- Would tactile information be helpful on the tilt table?
 - Several people asked what would be on the right side of the tilt table and a few asked about potential tactile information but suggested that tactile is always more effective if there is accompanying audio description (this would be an environment in which audio could be available without using a jack – not needed in that environment).

[NOTE: National Braille Press in Boston is now creating extremely durable tactile maps.]

Distance and Walking Times:

- On some signs, walking and cycling times and distances are included. Tell us what you think about that information. Will you use it?
 - UEs studied this idea of walking and distance. There were discussions of the relevance of distance times given the wide range of travel speed. Outcome was ambiguous. Most preferred just the distance information but a few felt strongly that estimated time was more useful to them.

Summary in Response to Findings

We applaud Medford for prioritizing wayfinding as a means of welcoming people to the City. Given the dense city-scape in Medford Square, there is a particular challenge to providing a sense of confidence not only to find a known destination but to explore more of what Medford has to offer.

Wayfinding as a System

The metal signage designs were the only aspect of the wayfinding plan that was reviewed. To be maximally effective, it would be ideal if there were additional elements including wayfinding information that replicates this system but also adds to it with additional information. QR codes can be used on the website and replicated on signage. It can be offered as an accessible, inexpensive method for sharing a great deal of information that can be downloaded to a smart device.

It should be noted that all of the User/Experts who participated in this review, including older people and people at all levels of vision limitation, are technologically savvy. Any system that doesn't build on the readily available information they already use risks failing.

Secondary Squares

Given the more limited assumption of signage that would be in the secondary areas and the slim time in the Haines Square location, it was only clear that a wayfinding system would need to be tied to some larger system to be effective. Might there be a QR code that would identify local businesses that are accessible and that have committed to welcome new people? Obviously, it would require a significant campaign to pull that off.

Parallel Campaign to Engage Local Businesses

One User/Expert is a former elected official and has held multiple state agency positions. He suggested a wayfinding + accessibility campaign that would engage local businesses not only to make their businesses accessible – and promote it - but also to commit to a level of welcome to customers to share information about Medford and all it has to offer.

Pedestrians, Cyclists and Drivers

Medford is complicated. A wayfinding system needs to anticipate the very different needs of pedestrians, cyclists and drivers. This signage system can be a boon to pedestrians and cyclists but has no evident value for drivers. Adding QR codes that bring people to additional detail, including destination addresses, will amplify its value and use for pedestrians and cyclists.

Attracting the Casino Audience 4.5 Miles Away at Encore

The most daunting reality of the aspiration is that the overwhelming majority (94.3%) of casino goers drive either their own cars or take a shared ride vehicle (<https://massgaming.com/wp-content/uploads/SEIGMA-Encore-Boston-Harbor-First-Three-and-a-Half-Years-of-Operation-Economic-Impacts-Report-Report.pdf>). To entice people to explore what Medford has to offer will likely require a focus on parking, and, likely, free parking, that is a daunting challenge. The founding commitment at Encore has been to make it easy to go without having to drive and to reduce the risk of exacerbating local traffic burden. There are shuttles to a number of proximate MBTA destinations and communities but some have been discontinued due to low use.

Wayfinding as Inclusive Design

For decades, wayfinding has been a prominent element in Inclusive (Universal) Design worldwide. Inclusive Design is a framework for the design of places, things, information, communication and policy that anticipates the widest range of people operating in the widest range of situations without special or separate design and facilitates equitable experience. Inclusive Design is responsive to human diversity across the spectrum of ability, age, culture and economic status.

Wayfinding delivers not only a practical information tool but an invaluable sense of control in an ever more demanding world. It can be a community builder if you can create a sense of ownership not only in your public buildings but also in the whole spectrum of what the ADA calls ‘places of public accommodation,’ private businesses and non-profits. Medford retains its commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Joining the City’s wayfinding goals to accessibility and Inclusive Design has precedent and may be a timely opportunity.