



The Harkin Institute



For Immediate Release

Tom and Ruth Harkin Center Achieves Gold Rating for Accessibility from Rick Hansen Foundation

Second Building in the U.S. to Earn Prestigious Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certified Gold

April 24, 2025 - Traditional territory of the xʷməθkʷəy 'əṃ (Musqueam) First Nation / Richmond, BC —The Tom and Ruth Harkin Center, home of The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement at Drake University in Des Moines Iowa, has achieved Gold Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification™, becoming the second building, following La Guardia Airport's Terminal B in the United States to achieve this honour. The announcement made at the 2025 Accessibility Professional Network Conference in Vancouver, B.C., underscores the importance of inclusive environments and sets a new benchmark in Universal Design in the U.S.

Over 1.3 billion people globally identify as having a disability — and that number continues to grow as our population ages. The achievement is the latest outcome of a growing partnership between The Harkin Institute and the Rick Hansen Foundation (RHF). The two organizations recently signed a commitment to work together in the U.S., with a shared goal of a society in which people with disabilities can participate fully. The collaboration will break down barriers in the places people live, work, learn, and play.

Named after Senator Tom Harkin, author of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Tom and Ruth Harkin Centre is a living extension of his commitment to equity, access, and human dignity. The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement at Drake University is a nonpartisan public policy institute dedicated to research, learning, and outreach. It focuses on issues such as labour and employment, people with disabilities, retirement security, and wellness and nutrition, aiming to improve lives and engage citizens in policymaking.

“When The Harkin Institute outgrew its original space and we began thinking about creating our own building, I said we could do so under one condition: that it be one of, if not the most, accessible building in the country,” added Senator Tom Harkin (retired). “The Tom and Ruth Harkin Center achieving Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certified Gold is proof of our commitment to that goal. We are proud to be one of the first buildings in the country to reach this level of accessibility.”

“From day one, accessibility was intentionally embedded into the design of the Harkin Center — not bolted on as an afterthought,” said Kevin Ng, Director of Technical and Program Content at the Rick Hansen Foundation. “This certification is more than a label — it’s a recognition of the Center’s leadership in pushing the boundaries of Universal Design and setting a powerful example of what meaningful access can look like.”

The Harkin Center’s RHFAC Gold rating — earned with a score of 83.6% — demonstrates a high level of commitment to accessibility and is a powerful symbol of what’s possible when access is treated as a guiding principle of efficient, elegant, and great design from the start. Every element of the building was shaped in collaboration with people with disabilities. The design process involved resolving real-world tensions — like balancing the needs of Deaf and blind users — through co-creation, not compromise.

The building’s signature feature is a central, sweeping interior ramp, described as the building’s “connective tissue”. Many users choose the ramp over the stairs as the pathway of choice. Additional features include:

- Natural light in every room (except bathrooms), aiding psychological comfort and low-vision navigation.
- Transparent interior walls for visual communication.
- Multipurpose spaces with adjustable lighting, flexible furniture, and acoustic control.

“As we approach the 35th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, I am reminded of how far we’ve come, as well as how far we have yet to go in reaching true accessibility,” said Daniel Van Sant, Director of Disability Policy at The Harkin Institute. “A building roadmap like RHFAC that is not compliance-based, but actually measures usability and meaningful accessibility, can help lead the next stage of creating spaces where all are welcome.”

The Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification™ (RHFAC) program is the world’s leading inclusive building rating system, providing organizations with training and a framework to measure and improve meaningful accessibility for people with varying disabilities. Trusted by national and international leaders in sustainability and building performance such as BOMA BEST, GRESB, and LEED, the program embeds a human-centric mindset and a culture of continuous improvement. This results in spaces that don’t just meet code minimums — but reflect a commitment to independence, safety and dignity for all. Over 2,200 sites have been rated, and over 3,800 individuals have been trained through the program to-date.

For more information on the RHFAC program, visit: www.RickHansen.com/RHFAC

For more information about The Harkin Institute, visit:
<https://harkininstitute.drake.edu/tom-and-ruth-harkin-center/>

About the Rick Hansen Foundation

The Rick Hansen Foundation (RHF) was established in 1988, following the completion of Rick Hansen's Man In Motion World Tour. For over 35 years, RHF has worked to raise awareness, change attitudes, and remove barriers for people with disabilities. Visit www.RickHansen.com to learn more.

About The Harkin Institute

The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement is a nonpartisan policy research institution focused on the four main policy areas that shaped Senator Tom Harkin's career: labor and employment, people with disabilities, retirement security, and wellness and nutrition. The Harkin Institute exists to inform citizens, inspire creative cooperation, and catalyze change on issues of social justice, fairness, and opportunity.

[Photos are available here.](#) To arrange an interview, please email:

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