

A coalition of disabled people sued Mayor Willie Brown and the city and county of San Francisco in federal court yesterday, alleging the city has failed to comply with federal law and make all county buildings and services accessible to the disabled.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires local governments to implement plans for making buildings and services accessible to people with mental and physical disabilities.

But San Francisco is lagging five years behind in even drafting a coherent plan, according to the lawsuit. It was filed by the Oakland public interest law office Disability Rights Advocates on behalf of 11 plaintiffs and a loose coalition calling itself the ADA Task Force.

"Technically, we're seeking damages, but it's no secret that what we are really after is compliance," said lead attorney Sid Wolinsky.

Walter Park, a plaintiff with AIDS, said because the city doesn't have a formal plan in place, many disabled San Franciscans do not have federally mandated access to needed services.

Park alleged several examples:

-- Deaf people have complained that they cannot get through to 911 on the TDD system set up for hearing-impaired callers because dispatchers are not trained to use the system.

-- A computer program designed to help blind people use the Main Library's card catalog is not working.

-- Elevators at Municipal Railway stations are frequently out of order, and people in wheelchairs have to travel several stops out of their way to find one that will carry them to street level.

"San Francisco has not yet produced a single, coherent approach to how it is going to address these issues," Park said at a press conference in front of City Hall.

But Paul Imperiale, citywide disability coordinator for the mayor's office, said the lawsuit is misguided and the plaintiffs, poorly informed.

"The city has had a transition plan since 1992," Imperiale said. "I think their perception is off. The only thing we haven't done is bring the plan before the Board of Supervisors."

He said Park and the other plaintiffs had not seen the completed draft, which will be presented to the Board of Supervisors in August.

Imperiale, who was also the city's point man on disability affairs under Frank Jordan's administration, said Brown has made accessibility a priority, having set aside \$18 million to be spent on compliance from fiscal years 1998 through 2001.

Imperiale has used a wheelchair most of his life. "I used to have to crawl onto city buses and into city buildings," he said. "What our job is here is to comply with federal mandates. We have to figure out how to use too few dollars to give the best coverage to the most people."

He drew a distinction between individual concerns and the city's compliance with the federal mandate.

"These are two very different things," Imperiale said. "Muni elevators are constantly being worked on. The federal law concerns programs overall -- Can people access your services overall? The answer is a resounding yes."