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## How Do We Make Meetings and Spaces Accessible To As Many People as Possible?

Unless you have a close friend or a family member with a disability, you will not automatically plan for accessibility. We can't predict every access need, but there are accommodations that can help everyone.

### Why does this matter?

- Accessible meetings are better for everyone.
- Accessible meetings benefit English language learners
- There are legal mandates that require you to provide accommodations.
- Including people with disabilities shows that everyone's voice matters. It helps create a society where all people are valued equally.
- People with disabilities often face challenges in school. Our ideas can help improve school for everyone, not just students with disabilities.
- When students with disabilities see disabled citizens in leadership roles, it can show them that they can become leaders and stand up for themselves.

### It all starts with an RSVP

- You can't prepare for every single possible accommodation, so ask!  
Example: "If you have any specific accessibility requests, please email \_\_\_\_\_ at least one week before the meeting."
- This is not only best practice it is an important way to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act
- This also gives you time to prep for **conflicting access needs**.

**The Basics** - There are some **basic things to consider doing before your meeting**, even if nobody asks for them, because more people can come to your meeting if you do these things.

- Make sure wheelchair users can get to your meeting (not just elevator! look at door widths, space between tables and chairs, bathrooms etc.)
- Make sure the meeting room is in a quiet place, and the lights are not too bright.
- Avoid flashing lights at your meeting, since they can hurt people who have seizures.
- Ask people not to use anything with a strong smell, like cologne or perfume.
- Make a name tag for each person. It helps us remember faces or names.
- Send people the agenda and meeting materials at least one week before the meeting. This lets us get the support we need to prepare,
- Send a list of questions you might ask in the meeting. It can be hard for some people to answer questions on the spot.
- The information you write for your meeting should be in plain language to make sure everyone can understand what is going on.
- Keep the ramps and wheelchair-accessible doors to your building unlocked and unblocked.
- If your building has different routes through it, be sure that signs direct people to the accessible routes around the facility. People who use canes or crutches also need to know the easiest way to get around a place.
- Some people have limited use of their hands, wrists or arms. Be prepared to offer assistance with reaching, grasping or lifting objects, opening doors.

## **8 Features of Plain Language**

1. Shorter sentences & paragraphs
2. Uses more common words
3. Gives definitions for important, more complex terms/jargon
4. Uses examples to help readers understand ideas in a more concrete way
5. Avoids unnecessary information
6. Uses clear language
7. Uses straightforward language
8. Uses active voice instead of passive voice

### **During the meeting**

- Make sure the pace of the conversation is not too fast.
- Give a person enough time to answer. Please listen without interrupting.
- Talk directly to the person, not their companion
- Share ideas in ways besides just talking out loud. You could use: a PowerPoint, notes on a whiteboard, video, CART
- Be aware of personal space and sensory issues
- Do not try to guess what the person is saying, or cut them off
- Sometimes a big group in a meeting can be too big, so it may help to split up into small groups. Each group can talk on their own, and then the groups can come back and share what they talked about.
- Presume competence – do not make assumptions about what we can or cannot do.
- Always ask before giving assistance and let the person tell you what you may do to be helpful.
- Speak to the person directly, not the support person or companion.

- Never pretend you understand what is said when you don't! Ask the person to tell you again what was said. Repeat what you understand.
- Do not try to finish a person's sentence or cut them off. Listen until they have finished talking, even if you think you know the end or can say it faster.
- You will need to modify a "no animals" policy to allow the person to enter with their service animal.
- Be aware of a person's reach limits. Put as many items as possible within their grasp. And make sure that there is a clear path of travel to shelves and display racks.
- When talking to a person using a wheelchair, grab your own chair and sit at her level. If that's not possible, stand at a slight distance, so that she isn't straining her neck to make eye contact with you.
- Have a clipboard handy if filling in forms or providing signatures is expected.
- You might not be able to see someone's disability. There are many disabilities that are hidden within a person.
- Relax and just be you. Let common sense and friendship guide you to break down any barriers you encounter.
- Do not worry about saying or doing something "wrong" when you meet a person who has a disability. If you are unsure what to say try "hello" or "I'm glad to meet you".

**Resources adapted by Green Mountain Self-Advocates for this handout:**

Creating an Accessible Meeting Environment <https://tinyurl.com/ex5wjmrn>

Inclusive Meetings: The Autistic Self Advocacy Network <https://tinyurl.com/227tcefc>

Making Meetings and Events Accessible to People with Disabilities and Deaf People  
<https://tinyurl.com/e8nuu5hm>