

# INCREASING ACCESS TO PUBLIC MEETINGS AND EVENTS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



## Introduction

This tip sheet contains general guidelines for increasing access to local government events and meetings. Please note that since people with disabilities are, as a group, extremely varied, this sheet will not cover every single access need. Increasing accessibility takes work, but being thoughtful and deliberate about doing so will allow a jurisdiction to effectively include this important, yet often overlooked, segment of the population.

As of 2014, an estimated 20% of Americans are living with permanent disabilities that limit one or more of their major

life activities.<sup>2</sup> The sheer variety of barriers to access may prevent many people with disabilities from contributing to public life or civic engagement, but there are steps that jurisdictions can take to ensure more equitable access to public meetings and events. Thoughtfully utilizing the civic input, feedback and leadership of people with disabilities<sup>3</sup> - and strengthening jurisdiction relations to local and state disability groups - will contribute to community vibrancy.

Terms like disability can mean different things to different people. Someone who uses a prosthetic limb may identify as having a disability, while another person with a similar impairment may not. Not every disability is static or unchanging. While someone may not self-identify as being a person with a disability, they might still have access needs and/or face significant barriers when it comes to civic participation.

### Disability Defined

The World Health Organization (WHO) specifies that disability is “an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity, limitations, and participation restrictions. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed in 1990, remains the foundation legal framework for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the United States.”<sup>1</sup>

### Non-Apparent or “Invisible” Disabilities

Increasingly, people with chronic illness, chronic pain, chronic fatigue conditions, and mental health conditions are starting to self-identify as having disabilities; while some of these people may not “look” like they have disabilities, many of them still have access needs or barriers to civic participation.

## Statement on Event/Meeting Announcements

Since a jurisdiction or group does not know how many people with disabilities will be attending an event - and needs time to put various accommodations in place - an accessibility statement should be included on all publicity materials (posters, flyers, emails and web postings). Along with this statement, when possible,

designate an accessibility contact person whom participants with disabilities can contact (via phone, TTY device, and email) to arrange accommodations before the event. Below is a sample accommodation/accessibility statement:

“If you have a disability and require a reasonable accommodation to fully participate in this event, please contact [name] before [event date] via email [email address] or telephone [number] or TTY [number] to discuss your accessibility needs.”

## Accommodations and Timing

A jurisdiction must also decide what constitutes a reasonable amount of time to address accessibility requests. One survey of California city governments has indicated that most jurisdictions require between 24 and 72 hours' notice from people with disabilities regarding their reasonable accommodation request - with some jurisdictions being able to provide printed materials, extra seating, and other reasonable accommodations until the morning of the event.<sup>4</sup>

## Service Animals

If a person arrives with a service animal, ensure that there is enough space beside the handler's seat (or seats) for the animal to sit or rest during the event. Please note, it is illegal to demand to see “proof” of the handler's need for a service animal. You should also avoid separating a service animal from its handler at any time, as this is also illegal. It is also helpful to provide clearly marked outside toileting space for service animals.<sup>5</sup>

## Cane, Scooter, Walker and Wheelchair Access

Ensure that the event or meeting space is fully accessible before booking the location.<sup>6</sup> Local and city government buildings that were built post-ADA - that is, they conform to the “accessible design” architectural standards and were built after January 1992 - will have accessible restroom stalls.<sup>7</sup>

Pre-event, consider which seat spaces will be designated specifically for scooter, power chair and wheelchair users. Some people may want to sit in their chair or scooter, and some may want to use one of the provided chairs at the event. It is helpful to provide seats with back support for these users.

The ADA specifies that a universally accessible path to event seating and common areas must be at least 36 inches wide for interior spaces and 44 inches wide for exterior spaces. Further, there must be areas throughout the room where wheelchair users have turning space (at least a 60-inch in diameter circle).<sup>8</sup>

Protruding objects in the meeting space and indoor areas should be measured to ensure that they do not constitute a stumbling or tripping hazard. Objects that are wall-mounted must have bottom edges between 27 and 80 inches above the floor, and cannot protrude into accessible walking routes any more than four inches.<sup>9</sup>

Seating and space for personal assistants (PAs) should be provided. Ensure that paths to both restrooms and building exits are clearly marked.

## Chronic Illness

Designate and follow through on regularly scheduled break times, especially for multi-hour or day-long events. In general, it is a good idea to have an “open door” policy so that people who need to exit the event for breaks or to leave can do so when they need to.

If possible, avoid using fluorescent lighting, as it can trigger migraines. Should its usage be unavoidable, post signs that warn attendees that this sort of lighting will be in use. If feasible, designate an area where fluorescent lights are *not* in use, so that attendees can take breaks.<sup>10</sup>

Allow other ways for people with chronic health conditions to be present for the event; setting up a phone-in line or video-conferencing session are both good options.

### Why Provide Phone-in or Video Conferencing Access?

For people whose disabilities or chronic condition(s) feature fluctuating energy levels, pain, and/or fatigue, attending public events or lengthy meetings can be difficult, and may even impact their health adversely. Phone-in lines or video conferencing sessions can allow people with these impairments to attend meetings, events or public forums remotely.

## Food Sensitivities

Be aware of common allergens such as peanuts, tree nuts, fish/shellfish and gluten. If serving refreshments, have ingredient lists and/or nutritional information on display if possible.

## Effective Communication

All meeting, event or conference materials (electronic or print) should be available upon request in an alternative format. Materials distributed at a public meeting are subject to the requirement that communication be equally effective for persons with disabilities.<sup>11</sup> Alternative formats may include raised print, large print, Braille, audiocassette or computer disks. Large print is generally considered to be 18 point font. The type of format necessary to ensure effective communication will vary with the individual's needs and the length and complexity of the communication involved. The public entity should provide an opportunity for individuals with disabilities to request the alternative format of their choice. A charge for these documents in alternative formats to individuals with disabilities is prohibited.<sup>12</sup>

If images are used in presentations or roundtables, ask the presenter(s) to provide short verbal descriptions of the images during the presentation. These descriptions do not need to be lengthy; a basic one or two-sentence description of each image will be sufficient.

If a person is attending your meeting or event with his or her interpreter, be sure that both people are seated where they can clearly view the speaker(s) and presentation(s). This is important since an interpreter's job is to clearly convey information using sign language to hard of hearing or deaf individuals, and the interpreter must be able to see the speaker(s) in order to translate.

Ensure that the sound equipment produces sound that is clear, adjustable by volume, and as free of static as possible. This will help people who are hard-of-hearing (HOH) or who use hearing aids to hear more clearly. Hold meetings or events in a room that is well-insulated from outside sound and has good acoustics.

If you need to hire an outside interpreter for your event or meeting, you may not charge the person needing the accommodations for the interpreter's services.

If requested, hire a CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation) captioner to caption your meeting, presentation series or event in real time. CART captioners are certified in transcribing a variety of real-time events, and many captioning businesses offer cost-effective remote or on-site captioning services to city and local jurisdictions. The meeting should be captioned when it is going to be broadcast or later posted over the internet.<sup>13</sup>

Sans serif fonts ([fonts that do not have the small projecting features](#) called "serifs" at the end of strokes) should be used in overheads, PowerPoint presentations and printed materials, as this type of font tends to be easier to read.<sup>14</sup>

## Meeting Duration

As noted previously in the chronic illness section, it is important to designate and follow through on regularly scheduled break times, especially for multi-hour or day-long events. If a participant or participants must leave early or take multiple breaks, avoid publicly calling attention to or demanding to know why they are doing so.

### The Limits of This Information

Although the Institute endeavors to help local officials understand technical and legal concepts that apply to their public service, these materials are not technical or legal advice. Officials are encouraged to consult technical experts, attorneys and/or relevant regulatory authorities for up-to-date information and advice on specific situations.

## More Resources

- General information on local and state government building accessibility standards from the [U.S. Access Board](#)
- California Building Code Title 24
- The [Americans With Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#)
- The [ADA Best Practices Tool Kit for State and Local Governments](#)
- The California Department of Rehabilitation's (DOR) [Disability Access Info website](#) has a variety of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), tutorials, and guides that cover disability issues, best practices for accessibility and more.
- [Meeting on a Level Playing Field](#)
- [Principles of Creating Accessible Documents Training and Resources](#)
- [Creating Accessible Word Documents](#)
- [For an example of a local agency's Accessible Public Event Checklist see Santa Rosa's](#)

**The Institute gratefully acknowledges the following individual who reviewed this document and offered their comments prior to publication:**

- Joe Krack, CA Department of Rehabilitation
- Vienalyn Tankiamco, CA Department of Rehabilitation

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See the ADA website for the full text: <http://www.ada.gov/>

<sup>2</sup> This figure is from the Centers For Disease Control's "Disability Tip Sheet" available at [www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/documents/Disability%20tip%20sheet%20\\_PHPa\\_1.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/documents/Disability%20tip%20sheet%20_PHPa_1.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> For more on the term "people with disabilities" and its correct usage, see the Texas Council on Development Disabilities' page "People First Language - [tcdd.texas.gov/resources/people-first-language/](http://tcdd.texas.gov/resources/people-first-language/). Further resources on language are available from DOR's Disability Access Info Language Guide - [dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/How-2-Use-Language.html](http://dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/How-2-Use-Language.html)

<sup>4</sup> Bonner, C. "ADA Accommodations: How Far in Advance Must Requests Be Made?" Personal communication, accessed July 18, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> More information on service animals can be found on the Department of Justice's guide to the 2010 Revised ADA Requirements for Service Animals, available at [www.ada.gov/serice\\_animals\\_2014.htm](http://www.ada.gov/serice_animals_2014.htm)

<sup>6</sup> See the California Department of Rehabilitation's Disability Access Info page on how to foster an accessible public forum environment, "Planning Accessible Public Meetings – [www.dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/Planning-Accessible-Public-Meetings.html](http://www.dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/Planning-Accessible-Public-Meetings.html)

<sup>7</sup> For more on post-ADA buildings, see the ADA Best Practices for State and Local Governments. Available at [www.ada.gov/pccatoolkit/chap1toolkit.htm](http://www.ada.gov/pccatoolkit/chap1toolkit.htm); see also the 1991 Standards for Accessible Design, available at [www.ada.gov/1991ADASTandards\\_index.htm](http://www.ada.gov/1991ADASTandards_index.htm).

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Access Board website also features helpful illustrated guides on universally accessible paths and wheelchair turning space. Available at [www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/buildings-and-sites/about-the-ada-standards/guide-to-the-ada-standards/chapter-3-clear-floor-or-ground-space-and-turning-space](http://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/buildings-and-sites/about-the-ada-standards/guide-to-the-ada-standards/chapter-3-clear-floor-or-ground-space-and-turning-space).

<sup>9</sup> See the U.S. Access Board's Protruding Objects – [www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/buildings-and-sites/about-the-ada-standards/guide-to-the-ada-standards/chapter-3-protruding-objects](http://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/buildings-and-sites/about-the-ada-standards/guide-to-the-ada-standards/chapter-3-protruding-objects)

<sup>10</sup> See AskJAN's "Accommodation and Compliance" series on migraine headaches - [askjan.org/media/Migraine.html](http://askjan.org/media/Migraine.html)

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, ADA, Title II Technical Assistance Manual §7.1000

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/Planning-Accessible-Public-Meetings.html>. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the expressed choice of the individual with a disability must be given primary consideration unless the public entity can demonstrate that another effective means of communication exists (U.S. Department of Justice, ADA, Title II Technical Assistance Manual §7.1100). And ADA Best Practices, Chapter 3, General Effective Communication Requirements Under Title II of the ADA – [www.ada.gov/pccatoolkit/chap3toolkit.htm](http://www.ada.gov/pccatoolkit/chap3toolkit.htm)

<sup>13</sup> Further information on captioning services and interpretation can be found in Disability Access Info's comprehensive guide, "Interpreting, Captioning, and Other Services For the Deaf and Hard of Hearing" - [dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/Interpreting-Captioning-Services.html](http://dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/Interpreting-Captioning-Services.html). For more on CART captioning – [www.deafness.about.com/cs/cart/a/cart.htm](http://www.deafness.about.com/cs/cart/a/cart.htm)

<sup>14</sup> See the California Department of Rehabilitation's resources on [creating accessible documents](http://www.dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/How-do-I-Construct-Accessible-Documents.html) – [www.dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/How-do-I-Construct-Accessible-Documents.html](http://www.dor.ca.gov/DisabilityAccessInfo/How-do-I-Construct-Accessible-Documents.html)