

Special Needs and Disabilities Ministry Guide to Accessible Event Planning



Overview

This document contains guidelines for creating events accessible to participants with a variety of disabilities. It was adapted with permission from a guide created by the Penn State University Access Club. It covers a variety of considerations for advertising and hosting both in-person and virtual events. Please note that these suggestions should be considered a starting point for accessibility rather than an end-all be-all; humans are a diverse bunch, so their needs are as well. The end of the document includes some resources that could assist further exploration of how to make your events accessible to as many people as possible.

A note about language

This document uses both person-first language (i.e. “person with disability”) and identity-first language (i.e. “disabled person”). This is because depending on the disability in question, preferences vary. When a specific disability community has reached a consensus (e.g. the majority of autistic people prefer identity-first language), I’ve deferred to their preferences when discussing them. When dealing with individuals, however, it’s best practice to defer to their personal preferences.

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Rule #1:

Respect people with disabilities. Do not be patronizing. Disabled people should not be treated as children if they are not children. Differing ability does not make someone a hero or an inspiration. Do not accuse someone of lying or faking if they don't "look" disabled. Plenty of disabilities have no visible indicators, and accommodation requests should be assumed to be made in good faith. Finally, do not define someone by their disability or draw unnecessary attention to it. People are people first.

Advertising the Event:

Access begins before the event does. Open communication and transparency are essential for people with a range of disabilities to determine whether or not an event is accessible to them. Furthermore, it's important to make the actual advertisements accessible as well.

Communication and Transparency

Use accommodation request forms for events

Links and QR codes to the form should be on event posters or in related emails, preferably both. In case the form is inaccessible to people with certain disabilities, it is ideal to provide multiple ways for participants to reach out, i.e. email AND phone AND an event page contact. Be sure to monitor all of them for requests. If for any reason you are unable to honor an accommodation request, let the affected participants know as soon as possible.

Be transparent about known inaccessibility

For example, if an event will feature loud noises, strobe lights, incense, or other potential sensory hazards, inform participants beforehand. This also applies to concerns such as the availability of closed captions for video screenings, or whether food-based events will have allergy-friendly options. All event fliers should have accessibility information included.

Advertisement Design Considerations

Use plain language, or include plain-language versions of information as appropriate

This will ensure that those with learning or intellectual disabilities, as well as non-native English or Spanish speakers, will understand the information presented with minimal effort. Note that this is NOT the same as dumbing down the information.

Use easily readable text.

Cursive and other fancy texts can be hard to read for people with dyslexia or other learning disabilities. Provide key information in clear serif or sans serif text or in Open Dyslexic font. Avoid putting key information on busy parts of the flier (e.g. over top of a picture). In general, break text into smaller, easily digestible sections.

Note that readability also includes using sufficiently large text, as small font sizes may make information inaccessible to people with visual impairments.

Use colorblind-accessible color schemes.

While red-green colorblindness is the most common form, it is advisable to test any color scheme in a colorblindness simulator. Alternately, stick to premade colorblind-accessible palettes. Resources are available in the Supplemental Information section.

Online Supporting Materials and Virtual Events

Virtual events have become increasingly common, and can be a powerful tool for inclusion. Therefore, it's especially important to plan for disabled participants by making sure events and materials incorporate accessible design.

Audiovisual Considerations

Caption videos

When videos are played at an event, closed captions should be on. On posted videos, like recruitment videos, closed captions should be available. For Zoom, live captions must be turned on both in your Zoom account and in the meeting itself (it is called "live transcript"). Viewers may need to turn on the live transcript from their end too, so make sure to put instructions in the chat at the beginning of the meeting (do not just provide verbal instructions as people with hearing disabilities may not be able to access them).

Note that for repeating events (e.g. performances), if viewers cannot choose to turn off captions, it may be advisable to have a mix of captioned and non-captioned events (clearly advertised ahead of time). Some people may not be able to process both captions and visual information easily (e.g. some forms of ADHD).

Include alt text and image descriptions on websites

Otherwise, blind or visually impaired people who use screen readers may miss important information. Resources are available in the Supplemental Information section.

Avoid strobe lights or flashing lights

This can cause seizures for some people or negatively impact others with sensory issues.

If flashing lights are an unavoidable part of the performance, clearly warn the audience beforehand that the lights will be used and give them time to leave. If it's a static link, make sure the warnings are available both on the page hosting the link and within the video itself. If flashing lights are used in a performance that will repeat, like a play, consider having accessible showings without the flashing lights.

Also, never hold an event with flashing lights where someone might stumble onto the event without warning (e.g. an outdoor event in a public area)

For presentations, use large text

Make sure it's large enough that visually impaired audience members can read it.

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While red-green colorblindness is the most common form, it is advisable to test any color scheme in a colorblindness simulator. Alternately, stick to premade colorblind-safe palettes. Resources are available in the Supplemental Information section.

Have an ASL interpreter

This way, everyone can know what is going on and fully participate. Note that having an ASL interpreter does NOT remove the need for captions, as many d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing people do not know sign language.

Audience participation

Enable the chat feature in Zoom

This will assist non-speaking attendees to participate in discussions or ask questions. Make sure somebody is looking at and responding to the chat during the event.

Similarly, if audience participation is invited, do not force participants to mute themselves as long as they are not disrupting the conversation. This will lower the burden on people with disabilities such as speech delays or speech processing delays.

It is never okay to “jokingly” question why there is minimal verbal participation from the audience.

Respect communication diversity

There are many forms of Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC), including: sign language, text-to-voice, letterboards/spelling, pencil & notepad, and symbolic communication (e.g. picture exchange). However an attendee communicates, cooperate with them to ensure understanding on both sides.

Note that use of AAC does NOT necessarily indicate an intellectual disability, hearing impairment, or deafness. Assume competence, but honor any requested accommodations.

Do not judge nonparticipation

Events that are open to audience participation (e.g. karaoke, open mics, dancing, etc.) or speakers who ask for some audience action (e.g. stand up and stretch) can be inaccessible. If someone in the audience is unwilling or unable to participate, do not pressure them.

Do NOT randomly call on non-volunteers to participate.

In-Person Events

Whether you're planning for seven or seven hundred attendees, it's important to be prepared for disabled attendees.

Health and Safety

Have an emergency plan that includes people with disabilities

Know how to safely evacuate people in wheelchairs, deaf people, etc., along with their service animals, in case of an emergency. Practice this plan so event hosts can implement it quickly in case of emergency. ALWAYS assume there will be disabled attendees, even if they have not requested accommodations ahead of time.

Make sure there are easy exits

Whether it's for an emergency or a bathroom break, guests need to be able to leave. During dark shows, for instance, ensure exits are clearly lit. If an event takes over an entire building, ensure there is quiet space in that building that event-goers can access if needed.

Reduce infectious disease transmission

Many disabled people, including immunocompromised people, are especially vulnerable to infection. Providing and encouraging the use of proper protective equipment can make it possible for them to safely attend in-person events.

In general:

Provide livestreams and recordings of your event; virtual options can keep people from missing out whether they're at-risk or currently contagious. Speaking of the latter, make sure your event isn't set up to incentivize people to come even if they're sick (e.g. perfect attendance prizes or penalizing absences from classes and mandatory trainings). Similarly, lead by example by staying home if you're feeling unwell or have a known exposure to someone in their contagious phase; better to be overly cautious than risk the lives and wellbeing of all the other attendees.

For respiratory infections:

One powerful tool to reduce respiratory infections is to require and provide face masks if you're hosting an indoor event or an outdoor event where people will be in close proximity. This is doubly true when community infection levels are elevated (e.g. because of flu season, RSV, or the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic). The best masks for this are KN95s, N95s, or respirators, but cloth or surgical masks are preferable to none. For recurring events like church services, if it's

not feasible to consistently require masks, the next-best practice is to designate a subset of events as mask-required (since viruses such as COVID can remain in the air for several hours, it's usually logistically simplest to set aside the first event of the day).

For events with mask policies in place: DON'T force or encourage your attendees to unmask in the course of the event. If the event includes food, ensure there are sufficiently spaced outdoor dining areas (or well-ventilated separate rooms sufficient for all attendees). It's also advisable to provide takehome containers for attendees who don't want to risk unmasking in public.

Risk of infection can also be reduced by improving air quality via ventilation and air filtration (e.g. HVAC filters; see the EPA guidelines in the "Additional Resources" section).

For infections spread by contact with people or surfaces:

Before and after the event, disinfect shared surfaces (e.g. tabletops, railings, door handles, etc.) Provide hand sanitizer dispensers and to ensure easy access to handwashing stations (e.g. accessible bathrooms). During outbreaks of diseases that can be spread by contact with people or surfaces, it could also be beneficial to provide disposable gloves for attendees.

Plan for service animals

People with a variety of disabilities rely on service animals (usually dogs). Therefore, depending on the nature and scope of the event, you may need to make sure the animal can have its basic needs met (e.g. food, water, tolerable temperature conditions, a place to relieve itself). If another attendee is allergic to the animal in question, take steps to ensure both attendees can safely participate in the event rather than forcing one to leave. Do not harass the service animal or its owner, or allow other participants to do so. Common forms of harassment include, but are not limited to:

- Approaching or touching (e.g. petting) the service animal without permission
- Photographing the service animal or its owner without permission
- Demanding the participant prove they're really disabled and need the service animal
- Accusing the animal of being a pest or nuisance, up to and including lying about things the animal has done or is doing
- Forcibly removing the service animal from its owner

If the event includes food or drinks, be mindful of allergies and dietary restrictions

This means having ingredient lists available for everything served, and warning labels for anything containing common allergens. Also beware of cross-contamination, particularly in self-serve settings: ensure all dishes have individual serving utensils and are spaced out. If possible,

do not place allergen-containing dishes next to dishes that do not contain an allergen. Keep food packaged whenever possible to avoid cross-contamination.

In general, have food options that do not contain any common allergens. It's best if these options are also vegetarian or vegan.

If someone self-reports an allergy in advance of the event, communicate with them to ensure you can serve them safely. If you can't, let them know so they can plan accordingly.

If asked, NEVER tell someone that a food is safe without double-checking. If you're serving the food and don't know, ask someone who does know, even if it creates a delay. If no one can find the information, tell the participant that so they can make an informed decision.

Make sure you allow people with allergies to read the ingredients. Don't force the participant to disclose their allergies to "check" if food is safe. Let them check for themselves if they'd prefer.

If the event includes drinks, provide plastic drinking straws

Several disabilities make plastic straws necessary. Despite certain claims on the internet, drinking straws represent a paltry fraction of plastic pollution and thus are of minor concern environmentally. Having drinking straws available only upon request adds a barrier to access, and therefore is not best practice.

Site Accessibility

Make information desks obvious and approachable

Use big fonts, limit background noise, and give specific and helpful directions. Those staffing the information desks should know how to give wheelchair accessible directions.

It is also helpful to have accessibility signs outside the event warning of noise, strobe lights, etc. and include wheelchair accessible directions. These signs should be written in large clear font with nothing on the sign except the accessibility information.

For indoor events, ensure the building is accessible with plenty of accessible parking and bathroom options

See the ADA Facilities Checklist in Supplemental Information for more details on how to determine these are accessible.

Keep handrails clear of obstructions

While it can be tempting to hang decorations from railings, it will make navigation unsafe for anyone whose disabilities affect their balance and mobility.

Wheelchair Accessibility

For indoor events:

Ensure the building is wheelchair accessible in practice, not just on paper. This requires walking through the buildings and ensuring there are ramps to the rooms your event is in, checking whether there are wheelchair-accessible bathroom stalls, and making sure you're not setting up barriers (e.g. to keep people in line) that would force event entrants to turn sharp corners. It's also better to host events in buildings where at least one main entrance is wheelchair accessible and wheelchair users don't have to enter through a side entrance. For more information, refer to the ADA Facilities Checklist in Supplemental Information.

For events with an audience:

Ensure that any wheelchair accessible seating has an unobstructed view of the stage/presenters. Also ensure that it is not isolated (i.e. wheelchair users are forced to sit alone, without aides or friends they came with)

For outdoor events:

While events hosted on lawns or in the grass are good for space, this is not wheelchair accessible. Seating on grass is often not accessible, especially when it's on a hill. When an event is hosted on a lawn, ensure a guest who uses a wheelchair can still fully participate by ensuring there is wheelchair accessible seating

When hosting outdoor events at night, clearly mark disturbances in the ground (like rocks) that are easy to trip over or would interfere with wheelchair users.

NEVER attempt to remove someone from their wheelchair, or to separate them from their mobility aid

Aside from blatantly undermining your guest's autonomy, doing so could injure them or damage/break their wheelchair or mobility aid. Both of these, under the wrong circumstances, can lead to death. SO DON'T DO IT.

Some wheelchair users are partially or fully ambulatory. This does not justify forcing them to forgo their wheelchair in order to attend.

If you find yourself in a situation where someone has been separated from their wheelchair or mobility aid, treat these objects with as much respect and care as if someone's legs

had been magically separated from their body and given to you for safekeeping. In short: don't break or destroy them, and make sure they're returned to their owner as soon as possible.

Similarly, don't attempt to operate someone's wheelchair for them. Just don't. Especially if you didn't even ask if they need help, let alone what kind they need.

Do not block wheelchair ramps

People with mobility devices already have limited pathways. Avoid blocking doors and hallways for similar reasons.

Audiovisual and Sensory Considerations

Use an ALS system

Assistive listening systems can help those who are hard of hearing or use hearing aids. Post signs informing guests of their availability.

Have an ASL interpreter

Remember, the use of ALS and captions doesn't negate the need for an ASL interpreter, and vice versa.

For presentations, use large text

Make sure it's large enough that visually impaired audience members can read it even from the back of the room or area.

Avoid strobe lights or flashing lights

This can cause seizures for some people or negatively impact others with sensory issues.

If flashing lights are an unavoidable part of the performance, clearly warn the audience beforehand that the lights will be used and give them time to leave. If flashing lights are used in a performance that will repeat, like a play, consider having accessible showings without the flashing lights. If it's outdoors, make sure that it isn't in an area where someone could stumble across the performance without warning.

Avoid noise spillover

When hosting loud outside events, be aware that the noise will spread throughout campus and can be damaging to people with sensory disabilities. Aim to host loud events in indoor or

out-of-the-way locations, or at least make sure you warn viewers of the noise. Never host loud events in residential areas, particularly at nighttime. For events where noise is unavoidable (i.e. concerts), it may be advisable to provide earplug dispensers.

Ensure proper ventilation and minimize the use of airborne irritants

Irritants can include smoke, scents and perfumes, or incense. These substances may cause distress (e.g. for those with sensory sensitivities) or may trigger underlying medical conditions (e.g. asthma). If the event takes place in an enclosed space, when advertising the event request that participants refrain from using perfume or other scents in excess. It can also be helpful to use portable HVAC filters to improve air quality throughout the event (see EPA guidelines in the Supplemental Information section).

Audience Participation and Interaction

Virtually stream the event

For a variety of reasons, large in-person events may be inherently unsafe or inaccessible to a variety of disabled people. Providing a virtual attendance option can both provide them alternate ways to participate and also reduce the total number of people attending in-person. This works best if there is someone monitoring the stream for questions or technical malfunctions. Note that an online stream is not an acceptable substitute for ensuring the in-person event is accessible.

Respect communication diversity

There are many forms of Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC), including: sign language, text-to-voice, letter boards/spelling, pencil & notepad, and symbolic communication (e.g. picture exchange). However an attendee communicates, cooperate with them to ensure understanding on both sides. Note that use of AAC does NOT necessarily indicate an intellectual disability, hearing impairment, or deafness. Assume competence, but honor any requested accommodations.

Wear name tags

Some people may be unable to differentiate between event staff and event goers. If event staff are in uniform and there is a reason why event goers would need to tell staff apart, it is crucial to wear name tags or other identifiers because some people with prosopagnosia and some sight disabilities can't use facial recognition or rely on environmental cues to tell who is who. In

events where attendees interact with each other (like career networking events), provide and encourage or require use of name tags.

If someone messes up your name, correct them politely. If someone forgets your name even if you've met or spent time together before, it may be due to recognition or memory disabilities instead of lack of effort.

Note: this is not to be confused with treating names belonging to ethnic and racial minorities as inherently "more difficult," "strange," or "foreign." Disability is never an excuse for racism.

If attendees have name tags, consider including a space for communication or socialization preferences. E.g. "can be approached and will initiate conversation unprompted" vs. "do not approach but will initiate conversation", etc. Note that these options should be self-assigned (meaning the person with the name tag chooses their socialization preferences). NEVER force someone with a disability to wear a unique name tag unless there is an immediate threat to their health and safety otherwise.

Do not judge nonparticipation

Events that are open to audience participation (e.g. karaoke, open mics, dancing, etc.) or speakers who ask for some audience action (e.g. stand up and stretch) can be inaccessible. If someone in the audience is unwilling or unable to participate, do not pressure them. Do NOT randomly call on people or call on non-volunteers to participate.

Supplemental Information

- **First Aid.** <https://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/first-aid/first-aid-training>
- **Mental Health First Aid.** <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/>. The training can provide members of your organization the knowledge and skills to intervene in the event of a mental health crisis.
- **Coblis — Color Blindness Simulator.** <https://www.color-blindness.com/coblis-color-blindness-simulator/>
- **Coloring for Colorblindness** <https://davidmathlogic.com/colorblind/#%23D81B60-%231E88E5-%23FFC107-%23004D40>. Provides colorblind-friendly palettes and demonstrates how they appear to people with different forms of colorblindness.
- **Write good Alt Text to describe images.** <https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/describe-content-images>. A Harvard website that discusses writing alt text and includes links to related resources.
- **Top 10 Principles for Plain Language.** <https://www.archives.gov/open/plain-writing/10-principles.html>.
- **Managing closed captioning and live transcription.** <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/207279736>. A Zoom support page discussing prerequisites for and limitations of closed captioning and live transcription, as well as how to enable both options.
- **EPA guidelines on selecting HVAC filters.** Though the focus is on COVID-19, the advice is applicable to a variety of viruses and airborne contaminants. <https://www.epa.gov/coronavirus/air-cleaners-hvac-filters-and-coronavirus-covid-19>
- **ADA Checklist.** ADA = the Americans with Disabilities Act. <https://www.adachecklist.org/>