



CLARK COUNTY
WASHINGTON

PUBLIC HEALTH



COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES

interacting with a person with a disability

Appropriate interactions and messaging when speaking or associating with a person with a disability

- Be yourself.
- Focus on the person's capabilities. Don't be so focused on a person's disability that you don't see the person.
- Talk to the person with a disability — or with the person's caregivers, when appropriate — about how you can include the person in individual or group activities and what he or she is comfortable with.
- Be patient.
- Be considerate of the person's feelings when talking to others. Would you want what you are about to say being said about you?
- Don't make assumptions about people or their disabilities.
 - Don't assume you know what someone wants, what she/he feels, or what is best for her/him.
 - If you have a question about what to do, how to do it, what language or terminology to use, or what assistance to offer, ask her/him. That person should be your first and best resource.





Focus on the person's capabilities. Don't be so focused on a person's disability that you don't see the person.

- Remember that people with disabilities have different preferences. Just because one person with a disability prefers something one way doesn't mean that another person with the same disability also prefers it that way.
- Ask before you help. In some cases a person with a disability might seem to be struggling, yet she/he is fine and would prefer to complete the task on her own. Follow the person's cues and ask if you are not sure what to do. Don't be offended if someone declines your offer of assistance.
- Talk directly to the individual, not to the interpreter, attendant, or friend. You don't need to ignore the others entirely; just make sure to focus your interaction with the individual. When a person who is deaf has an interpreter, they will look at the interpreter as you are talking. It might take a little extra effort to remember to face the person rather than the interpreter.
- If you will be speaking for some time with a person in a wheelchair, sit down so that you are at eye level with her so she doesn't have to strain her neck to look up at you.
- Speak normally. Some people have a tendency to talk louder and slower to people with disabilities; don't. Don't assume that because a person has one disability, that he also has a cognitive disability or is hard of hearing. For example, a person with cerebral palsy might use a wheelchair, have uncontrolled upper body movements, have difficulty speaking, and yet have very good hearing, cognitive abilities, and intelligence.

- Use "people-first" language when referring to people with disabilities. People-first language means put the person first and the disability second. For example, say "a man who is blind" rather than "a blind man," and "a woman who uses a wheelchair" instead of "a wheelchair-bound woman." Use people-first language when speaking with people with disabilities, and when speaking and writing about people with disabilities. If you aren't sure how to address them, ask.
- Be aware of personal space. Some people who use a mobility aid, such as a wheelchair, walker, or cane, see these aids as part of their personal space. Don't touch, move, or lean on mobility aids. This is also important for safety.



Never pet or call to a service animal when the animal is in a harness.

Fear is one of the main reasons why we are reluctant to interact with people with disabilities.



- When talking with a person who is blind or has a visual impairment, always identify yourself at the beginning of the conversation and remember to inform the person when you are ending the conversation, changing location, or leaving the area. Never hold the person's arm while walking; let him/her hold your arm. This will allow him/her to walk slightly behind you and get a sense of what to expect from the motion of your body. Ask if the person would like verbal cues as to what is ahead when you approach steps, curbs, or other barriers.
- Never pet or call to a service animal when the animal is in a harness. The harness tells the animal that it is time to work and its attention needs to be focused on its master. When the animal is at rest or out of harness, you may ask the owner for permission to pet it.
- When talking with an adult with a cognitive or psychiatric disability, use age-appropriate language and mannerisms. Also, do not assume that because a person may not speak, that they are unable to understand or hear you.
- When talking with a person with a psychiatric disability, make eye contact and be aware of your body language. Be patient and understanding, and speak normally. Mental illness does not mean an inability to hear or understand language. It also does not mean that someone will behave inappropriately.

- When speaking with a person who is deaf or has a hearing loss, always look directly at the person. Keep your mouth and face free of hands or shadows. Do not speak with exaggerated slowness or with exaggerated facial expressions. Do not assume a person with a hearing impairment has an intellectual disability. As is proper telephone etiquette with all persons, speak clearly and distinctly when leaving voice mail messages. Also, do not shout; an increase in volume may actually make it more difficult for the person to understand you.
- If you are speaking with a person with impaired speech, listen carefully and repeat what you've heard. Don't pretend to understand if you don't, and don't give up and say, "Never mind, it wasn't important." That tells the person you're talking to that you don't value his input enough to continue the conversation. Also allow more time for a conversation with a person with a speech impairment; do not rush him or try to finish his sentences. Do not assume a person with a speech impairment has an intellectual disability.
- Fear is one of the main reasons why we are reluctant to interact with people with disabilities. Do not let fear of making a mistake, fear of saying the wrong thing, or fear of the unknown make you reluctant to interact with people with disabilities. The greatest mistake we can make is to exclude people with disabilities because of those fears. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it, apologize, and move on.



Remember that people with disabilities have different preferences.

Appropriate language

INSTEAD OF:	USE:
The handicapped	Persons with disabilities or disabled woman/man (Ask!)
The disabled	Persons with disabilities or disabled woman/man (Ask!)
Wheelchair bound or confined to a wheelchair	Uses a wheelchair or wheelchair user
Birth defect	Congenital disability
Crippled	Has a disability
Mongoloid	Person with Down syndrome
Mental, crazy, psycho, insane, nut case	Person with mental illness
Deaf mute	Person who is deaf or a person who does not speak
Normal, healthy, whole	Non-disabled

Location considerations

ENTRY

- Is the location near public transport?
- Does it have clear and accessible pick-up and drop-off areas?
- Is the parking wheelchair accessible and the building accessible for people with mobility difficulties? Are there steps only or steps and a ramp at the front entrance?
- Does the building have easy to operate doors?

ELEVATORS

- Do they have sufficient space for independent access by a wheelchair user?
- Are the elevator buttons large with tactile identifiers and also at a suitable level for a person in a wheelchair?
- Does the elevator have handrails and audible signals when the doors are opening, closing or arriving at a particular floor?



ROOMS

- Is there adequate space to allow independent access by a wheelchair user?
- Is the furniture at a height which allows a wheelchair to fit underneath?
- Can the seating be arranged to assist those with hearing or visual impairments?
- If there are stairs or steps, do they have handrails and clearly marked edges?
- Are the floor coverings non-slip?

BATHROOMS

- Are they accessible and easy to locate? (Preferably on the same floor as the meeting.)
- Is the door easy to open with wheelchair accessible cubicles, grab rails at appropriate heights beside and at the rear of the toilet, and wheelchair accessible washbasins?

OTHER FACILITIES

- Is the signage clear (large, non-reflective) and set at appropriate heights?
- Are there both auditory and visual fire alarms?
- Is a hearing loop installed in the meeting room(s)?
- Are the videos used in presentations captioned and positioned so that all participants can see them?



Myths

MYTH	FACT
An individual's disability is usually observable.	While some individuals' disabilities are observable and identifiable, many are not obvious. For example, the disabilities of individuals who have diabetes, dyslexia, or autism may not be visually apparent.
With the loss of one of the senses such as sight or hearing, the other senses automatically compensate and become sharper.	The body's senses do not automatically become sharper, but the individual can learn to become more aware of the information being received through other senses.
People with disabilities are heroic because they demonstrate bravery and courage by trying to overcome their disability.	People with disabilities generally do not view themselves as heroes; though some persons with disabilities, such as returning military veterans, may be considered heroes.
Most people with disabilities would be better off living in institutions where their needs can be met.	Federal law supports full inclusion so that people with disabilities have the right to live, learn, work, and participate in the community, utilizing assistive devices and support services if needed.
People with mental illness are potentially violent or incapable of participating in the community, and people without disabilities should be protected from them.	The vast majority of people who are violent do not have mental illness and most people who have mental illness are not violent.



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Sources

https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/guide-interacting-with-people-who-have-disabilities_09-26-13.pdf

<https://odr.dc.gov/book/guide-accessible-meetings-and-conferences/site-accessibility-considerations-individuals>

For other formats, contact the Clark County ADA Office

Voice: 360.397.2322 / Relay: 711 or 800.833.6388 / Fax: 360.397.6165 / Email: ADA@clark.wa.gov