
PLANNING ACCESSIBLE MEETINGS AND EVENTS A TOOLKIT



AMERICAN **BAR** ASSOCIATION

Commission on
Disability Rights



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Overview

Planning meetings and events that are fully accessible for persons with disabilities might seem overwhelming, but with proper planning can become second nature. An effective approach begins with learning more about disabilities and the barriers that limit or preclude participation by persons with disabilities.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in five people in the United States has a disability that impacts a major part of their life. At some point during their lifetime, most everyone is likely to experience having a disability or know someone who has one, whether due to aging, chronic disease, illness, injury, etc. Every reasonable effort must be made to ensure that no person with any type of disability is prevented or discouraged from attending—and from fully and equally participating in—any part of the meeting or event. Planners should reach out to persons with various types of disabilities, disability organizations, independent living centers, and the ADA National Network Centers for guidance and assistance.

Note that some individuals may not disclose their disability-related needs. Accordingly, meeting and event planners should be proactive in addressing potential barriers to participation by incorporating principles of universal design; that is, designing the meeting or event so that it can be accessed, understood, and used by as many people as possible. The goal is to make the meeting or event as inclusive as you can.

Planners must work with attendees and presenters interactively so that the most appropriate accommodations can be provided. It is helpful to have a general understanding of the various types of disabilities, including mobility, sensory, cognitive, learning, neurological, developmental, and psychiatric. However, although individuals may have the same disability, some accommodations may work for one person but not for another. Accommodations must be based on the particular individual's needs.

Some accommodations may be unreasonable, meaning that they pose an undue hardship or change the fundamental nature of the service being provided. However, most barriers to participation can be removed without incurring great expense, imposing an administrative burden, compromising the nature of the activity, or raising health and safety concerns.

This toolkit is intended to assist entities in planning meetings and events that are accessible to persons with disabilities. It provides recommendations and checklists for all phases of a meeting or an event, from choosing the venue to materials, websites and mobile apps, presentations, meals and social functions, staff and volunteer training, and communication and etiquette. Note, however, that it is impossible to anticipate every barrier that might limit or preclude participation by an individual. Moreover, because new ideas for improving accessibility and new technologies continue to emerge, this toolkit should be viewed as a living document that is meant to evolve.

Choosing a Venue

Before booking any meeting or event, plan an on-site visit to the venue to determine whether barriers to accessibility exist. Merely asking representatives from the venue whether it is accessible is not sufficient. Plan the visit far enough in advance so as to find an accessible venue without the time pressures created by an impending meeting or event. Of course, an on-site visit should take place in cooperation with representatives from the particular venue.

Planners should evaluate the accessibility of the venue itself, as well as the surrounding area. Ask whether the venue has participated in an audit to determine its compliance with the accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Also inquire as to whether venue staff have been trained in disability awareness and etiquette. In addition, check whether the venue is located in close proximity to airports, rail stations, taxi or shuttle services, paratransit services for persons with disabilities, and public transportation routes. Are there accessible hotels, restaurants, shops, theaters, and tourist attractions nearby?

Prior to the on-site visit, prepare a checklist of specific accessibility items. For assistance, get in touch with persons with various types of disabilities; even better, ask them to accompany you on the visit, as they can be helpful in identifying barriers. Seek guidance from your region's ADA National Network Center (<http://adata.org/contact-us>), disability organizations, Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities in cities including Chicago, Houston, and New York, and governmental agencies such as the U.S. Department of Justice, that have expertise in barrier-free access.

We have prepared some sample checklists for the exterior and interior features of the venue, as well as the meeting/event rooms. In general, we do not provide exact measurements (e.g., height, width, requisite number, etc.); these can be found in the Department of Justice's regulations implementing Title III of the ADA, 28 C.F.R. pt. 36, at http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/titleIII_2010/titleIII_2010_regulations.htm. Note that some items, such as ramps, temporary Braille and tactile signs, detectable warning devices, and additional parking spaces, may need to temporarily be added to make the venue fully accessible.

Exterior Features Checklist

General

- Close proximity of venue from airport, train and bus stations, paratransit services, and public transportation
- Close proximity of venue to accessible hotels, restaurants, theatres, shops, and other attractions
- Barrier-free/step-free paths of travel
- Slip-resistant, level surfaces
- Tactile ground surface indicators that signal stairs and ramps for people who are blind or have visual impairments
- Stairs with continuous handrails on both sides; no open risers (space between steps)
- Ramps for inaccessible areas, with handrails on both sides if the rise is greater than 6 inches, and level landings
- Curb ramps/cuts for persons who use mobility aids or devices
- Crosswalks with visual and audible signals
- Toileting, watering, and walking areas for service animals

Entrance

- Barrier and step-free, clearly marked (Braille and tactile signage), well-lit, slip-resistant accessible main entrance at street level so that all individuals can use this entrance
- Direct access from the main entrance to the lobby, main floor, and elevators
- Clearly marked (Braille and tactile signage), covered drop-off and pick-up points adjacent to the main entrance, with curb cuts
- Alternative accessible entrances used during same hours as main entrance
- Signs (Braille and tactile) indicating location of accessible entrances
- Entrance connected by an accessible route to public transportation stops, accessible parking and passenger loading zones, and public streets or sidewalks
- Other entrances that are at street level or accessible by ramps or lifts

Doors

- Main entrance/exit doorways that are wide enough (32 inches with the door open 90 degrees) to accommodate mobility devices and aids
- Easy-to-open (automatic/push button door openers, lever handles), operable with one hand, within reach for mobility device users, lightweight (no more than 5 pounds) doors; no revolving doors
- Glass doors with contrasting door frames, stickers, or bright signs

Parking/Transit

- Accessible, clearly marked (symbol of accessibility) parking spaces (at least 1 handicap space for every 25 total spaces) located on the shortest accessible route of travel from adjacent parking to an accessible entrance
- Accessible transit services (private and public)
- Available paratransit services

Interior Features Checklist

General

- Well-lit areas; adjustable lighting
- Even, stable, regular, slip-resistant, non-sloped paths of travel
- Sufficiently wide (64 inches for two-way traffic), barrier-free hallways and corridors to allow everyone to move about freely
- Securely attached edges of carpets or mats
- Clearly marked (Braille and tactile signage) accessible exits
- Clearly marked (Braille and tactile signage) accessible restrooms located on an accessible route
- Video screens with closed-captioning
- Registration/concierge at a height accessible by mobility device users that allows for a frontal approach and provides adequate knee clearance
- Emergency procedures for persons with disabilities (audio and visual alarms in halls and sleeping rooms)
- Venue free of strong smells (perfume, cleaning agents, etc.), loud noises, and flashing/bright lights
- Designated quiet rooms with no talking, no noise, low light, and no flashing lights, images, or objects
- Designated rooms with plenty of space to allow people to talk, shout, clap, make noises, jump around, and do whatever they need for stimulation

Doors/Elevators

- Easy-to-open, lightweight (no more than 5 pounds) doors with lever handles that are easy to grasp with one hand or automatic/push button openers
- Wide (32 inches with the door open 90 degrees) doorways for mobility devices to enter/exit
- Clearly marked (Braille and tactile signage) elevators along an accessible route
- Elevator doors that reopen automatically when obstructed by an object or person
- Elevator interiors adequately illuminated and wide enough for wheelchairs/scooters/mobility devices to enter, maneuver within reach of controls, and exit
- Elevator call buttons with visual and audible signals, reachable by mobility device users
- Elevator control buttons that are designated by Braille and tactile characters or symbols and are reachable by wheelchair/scooter/mobility device users
- Elevator voice and visual display two-way emergency communication

Amenities

- Accessible sleeping rooms (check on number available) with roll-in showers
- Accessible fitness center, including restrooms and showers
- Accessible restaurants (including ability to provide for dietary restrictions and large print/Braille menus), bars/lounges, and shopping

Meeting/Event Rooms Checklist

General

- Barrier-free, slip-resistant path to rooms
- Proper air circulation with temperature controls
- Rooms large enough to allow all persons to move about freely
- Clearly marked (Braille and tactile signage) accessible restrooms located on an accessible route in close proximity to rooms
- Elevators in close proximity to rooms and along an accessible route
- Accessible exhibit areas
- Easy-to-open, lightweight doors (no more than 5 pounds) with lever handles or automatic/push-button openers
- Doors wide enough (32 inches with door open 90 degrees) for mobility devices to enter/exit and maneuver
- Doors propped open at start and end of each session, with attendants or automatic mechanism to open the doors during session
- Multiple sets of power outlets for laptops and other electronics
- Well-secured, covered cables, wires, cords, and microphones placed outside of paths of travel
- Tables for materials and food/beverage at a height (28 to 34 inches) reachable by mobility device users and in an accessible location
- Quiet rooms in close proximity to rooms, cell-phone free space
- Rooms with plenty of space to allow people to talk, shout, clap, make noises, jump around, and do whatever they need for stimulation
- Space for service animals

Visual

- Signs (with Braille and tactile characters, sans serif or simple serif large type fonts, sentence case, and good contrast) that direct attendees to all rooms
- Mounted signs designating permanent rooms and spaces with tactile characters that contrast with their backgrounds and Braille
- Well-lit rooms and adjacent areas

Auditory

- Good acoustics and a functioning auxiliary sound system
- Public address (PA) system
- Location of all audio/visual equipment in an area that does not block paths of travel
- Assistive listening devices, hearing or induction loops, and Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) for attendees who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing
- Prominent, well-lit, visible space for interpreters to stand (e.g., raised platform with a dark, solid color background)
- Clear lines of sight to interpreters and real-time CART

Seating

- Barrier-free seating aisles that are wide enough (36 inches) to accommodate mobility devices
- Seating rows that are wide enough for attendees to walk through
- Accessible, integrated seating throughout the row
- Preferred seating for persons with visual and hearing impairments in the front rows
- Reserved seating near the exits for attendees who are sensitive to crowds and need to take breaks
- Adequate number of spaces for mobility devices dispersed to allow location choices and viewing angles equivalent to other seating, with clear lines of sight
- Seats for companions accompanying persons with disabilities
- Space on side of or under seats for service animals

Materials

Promotional and Registration Materials

Alternative Formats

Promotional and registration materials are fundamental for communicating about the accessibility of your meeting or event. Most importantly, offer all of these materials in alternative formats that are accessible to persons with disabilities, such as Braille, large print, and electronic files. Printed and digital text should be in sans serif fonts, such as Helvetica, Verdana, or Arial. Include a statement in your registration materials that lets attendees know that alternative formats are available upon request. Here is a sample statement: “The materials are available in alternative formats upon request. Please contact [name, email address, telephone number (including TTY)] by [deadline date].” Or, “The materials are available in alternative formats. Please check the format you need:

- Braille
- Large Print: Font Size ____
- Audio
- Digital File: Format ____
- Other”

Accessibility Statement

Stating in these materials that your meeting or event is accessible is essential to attracting persons with disabilities. Here is a sample statement: “We aim to host events that enable individuals of all abilities to participate fully and equally.” Consider including images of persons with various disabilities, as well as universal access symbols (available at <http://www.aarts.net.au/resources/universal-access-symbols>). Consider using “people-first” language in your materials: a “person with a disability,” rather than a “disabled person.” Remember, the person, not their disability, is the focus. To further reach attendees with disabilities, identify and contact those organizations that advance the rights of, or are led by, persons with disabilities.

Registration

Provide a range of registering options: online, telephone (voice and text), and email. Make sure your registration forms are accessible for persons using assistive technologies such as screen readers, text readers, screen magnification software, speech input software, and alternative input devices for individuals unable to use a mouse or keyboard (e.g., head pointers, motion or eye tracking, single switch entry devices). Include explicit labeling for all form fields, as well as for other user inputs like drop-down menus and “submit” or “buy” buttons.

Accommodations & Accessibility

Be sure to include in your promotional and registration materials a statement that invites persons with disabilities to request accommodations, as well as a deadline that gives you enough time to respond to the requests and provide the accommodations. Doing so provides a wonderful opportunity to establish a relationship with attendees and make them feel welcome and included. Asking questions beforehand about accommodations allows planners to identify attendees’ needs, find local service providers, make all of the arrangements in advance, budget for these accommodations, and minimize any last minute “surprises.” Of course, always be prepared for accommodation requests made a few days before, or the day of, the meeting or event.

Here is a sample statement: “We welcome people with disabilities. For questions about accessibility or to request an accommodation, please attach your requirements to this form or contact [name] at [voice and/or TTY phone numbers]; [fax]; or [e-mail]. Requests should be made at least [specific time period] prior to the event.” You may want to have one contact person for accessibility and another for accommodations. For registration materials, planners may want to include a more specific statement, such as “I will need the following accommodations: interpreters (ASL, Oral, Voice, Signed Voice, Other [blank space]); intervenors (trained in sign language that involves touching client’s hand in a two-hand, manual alphabet or finger spelling); Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART); assistive listening devices; hearing or induction loops; captioned videos; sighted guide; Braille; large print; notetakers; readers; digital files; audio; computer disk [format]; audio CD; scent-free environment; wheelchair access; accessible transportation; orientation to the facility; dietary restrictions (e.g., vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, dairy-free, sugar-free); and other [blank space].” Ask whether attendees have any food allergies (e.g., milk, soy, egg, wheat, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish) or chemical sensitivities. To accommodate attendees with multiple chemical sensitivities, you can request that all attendees refrain from wearing perfumes and use fragrance-free, unscented personal care products. Here is a sample statement: “To be respectful of persons with allergies and environmental sensitivities, we request that all attendees refrain from wearing fragrances and use scent-free toiletries.”

Offer a range of accommodation options, since not all individuals with the same disability use the same accommodations. What works for one person may not work for another. Always give primary consideration to the option preferred by the person with a disability, unless doing so is unduly burdensome. Listening is key to determining each person’s unique needs.

Some persons with disabilities may bring their personal care attendants or service animals to the meeting or event. On the registration form, ask about these issues. Here are sample statements: “A personal care attendant will be accompanying me: Yes No.” Provide a service space in seating areas for service animals, as well as break and relief areas. It is recommended that you not charge personal care attendants the full registration fee, but rather that a food/drink-only fee be added to the attendee’s registration. Note that you must accept service animals regardless of whether or not they are registered with your event. Service animals can only be removed if they pose a danger to others, or if the individual cannot control them.

Designate staff to handle all accommodation and accessibility issues and list them with their contact information (phone/text, email) in all materials. Ensure that they are trained and educated on the expected duties. They must respond to accommodation and accessibility requests promptly. Note that it may take several communications to work out the details. In addition, the contact persons should notify the venue of those accommodations needed and accessibility issues that are within its control. In turn, the venue should notify these persons of any accommodation and accessibility requests it receives.

Promotional and Registration Materials Checklist

- Provide alternative registration options (online, telephone, text, email)
- Include a statement that meeting/event is accessible
- Include a request for accommodations statement
- Inquire about personal care attendants and service animals
- Designate staff to handle accommodation and accessibility requests
- Ensure that your website and mobile apps are accessible
- Include an accessibility link for meeting/event on your website in a prominent place
- Identify any barriers that cannot be eliminated and ways they have been mitigated
- Offer materials in alternative formats (e.g., Braille, large font, electronic)
- Ensure that fonts used are sans serif

Meeting/Event Materials

Planners must ensure that all attendees have equal access to the meeting materials provided, whether in print or digitally, so they can fully participate. Accordingly, it is essential to offer all materials in alternative formats. Doing so will not only expand the pool of potential attendees, but also demonstrate your commitment to accessibility. When setting the deadline for receiving all materials, remember to factor in the time that it will take to produce the alternative formats.

Persons with Visual Impairments Checklist

Text Format

- Use a 16-point font size when possible, but if that is not practical, at least 14 point
- Avoid highly stylized typefaces
- Use easy-to-read fonts with clearly defined letters and clear spacing between the letters, such as sans-serif fonts (e.g., Helvetica, Verdana, Arial)
- Avoid underlining or italicizing large volumes of text
- Avoid using blocks of capital letters for more than a couple of words
- Spell out numbers

Layout

- Align all text on the left, rather than centered or right justified
- Use one-inch margins
- Avoid columns
- Avoid lines of text longer than six inches (for persons using magnifiers)
- Do not hyperlink URLs because underlining reduces readability
- Do not place text directly over or wrap text around an image
- Use at least 1.5 spacing between lines of text paragraphs

Contrast and Color

- Ensure good contrast between the text and background colors
- Use black text
- Use cream instead of white paper for printed materials
- Use a single solid color for documents with a colored background

Paper

- Choose a matte rather than a glossy finish
- Avoid using thin paper, which can bleed images and text from the reverse
- Print on one side

Website

Many organizations include a page or portal for their meetings and events on their website, where persons can register and obtain all relevant information and materials. Be sure to place an accessibility link in a prominent place. On that linked page, include all details about the meeting or event that are relevant for persons with disabilities, as well as the name of the person to contact for accommodations and accessibility issues. For instance, include information regarding accommodations; accessibility of the sleeping rooms, including: a list of amenities; accessible parking; paratransit services; public transportation in close proximity to the venue; a description (oral and electronic, as well as a map) of the venue, including the location of the lobby, front desk, concierge, and elevators, as well as the layout of the meeting rooms; accessible restaurants, hotels, and shopping; accessibility barriers that cannot be eliminated; and the availability of materials in alternate formats. Ask whether the venue has a sensory map available and, if not, consider collaborating with them to create one. For inspiration, see the Kennedy Center’s sensory maps at <http://www.kennedy-center.org/pages/accessibility/sensory>. Publish logistical information, like locations, schedules, and maps, early to ensure that interested persons can be prepared and informed on what to expect.

Ensure that the website is accessible and compatible with the range of assistive technologies used by persons with disabilities such as screen readers and magnifiers, special keyboards, and alternative pointing devices. Include a statement requesting that persons experiencing accessibility issues contact a particular person via telephone or email. The current website accessibility standard is the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0. The WCAG are regularly revised to keep up with changes in technology and greater understanding of the needs of persons with disabilities, so web authors should check frequently to ensure that they are complying with the latest WCAG standard. As of 2018, WCAG 2.1 (<https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG21/>) added several revisions that are highly recommended, though not yet required by law.

All images used (including in linked PDFs and Word documents) should include descriptive “alt text” (alternative text attribute). At a minimum, alt text should describe the content of the image so that people who are blind or have low vision can still glean the necessary information. A useful set of guidelines can be found here: <https://accessibility.psu.edu/images/alttext/>. Images should not feature text in the body of the image itself.

Website Checklist

- Ensure your webpage complies with the current Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) at <https://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/#guidelines>
- Ensure that foreground and background color combinations contrast
- Use a sans serif font like Arial or Calibri
- Provide color invert and magnification tools
- Ensure that any background images are not too “busy” (e.g., have many lines, patterns, or colors) that could make the foreground more difficult to read and understand
- Provide text equivalents to auditory and visual content (e.g., videos and images)
- Ensure that the “alt text” (alternative text attribute) of the image tag conveys what is important or relevant about the image
- Avoid flashing images
- Ensure that any moving text can be paused, stopped, and hidden
- For all videos, provide closed captioning in a readable font with high-contrast colors at a readable speed. Where the format allows, captions should be able to be turned on and off (toggled), and should feature controls for font size, color, and location
- Avoid drop-down menus that cannot be accessed by persons with limited dexterity or mobility impairments with just a keyboard
- If using CAPTCHAs (Completely Automated Public Turing Tests to Tell Computers and Humans Apart), ensure that there are multiple options (e.g., image and audio or “I’m not a robot” CAPTCHA options)
- Define page hierarchy with header tags and lists, and include “breadcrumbs” to assist in navigation where appropriate
- Ensure that all websites and pages are compatible with mobile devices, and can be viewed on them without difficulty

Mobile Apps

Mobile applications (“apps”) have become much more prevalent in recent years. Some organizations design a mobile app for their meetings and events, and many others use third-party apps (such as guidebook apps) for their meetings and events. Many attendees find that using apps is both easier and more accessible than relying on physical media. Ensuring that your app (either a proprietary one or one you have contracted with a vendor to use) is accessible enables you to reach a much broader audience. Follow the WCAG 2.0 guidelines for mobile accessibility at <https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/mobile/>.

Accessibility must be incorporated in the design stage of the app, rather than as an add-on later—universal design is key from both a design perspective and a user perspective. If you do use a third-party app, or if you create content that you expect people to interact with through third-party apps and mobile devices, be sure to apply the same checklist, and ensure that the apps are fully accessible.

Apps Checklist

- Follow the WCAG 2.0 guidelines for Mobile Accessibility
- Resize text at least 200% without using assistive technology
- Enable zooming within the app without having to tilt the device for horizontal panning
- Ensure that browser pinch zoom is not blocked
- Provide on-page controls to resize the text rather than having to go into the app’s settings
- Use appropriate contrast ratios for large and small text
- Provide different color options for people with colorblindness
- Enable keyboard support with Bluetooth and other technologies
- Make touch targets large and noticeable, with adequate spacing
- Keep touchscreen gestures (e.g., directional swipes or singular taps) as simple to implement as possible
- Have on-screen indicators of how and when gestures should be used
- Ensure buttons are easy to access
- Enable speech recognition software and voice commands

Presentations

It is crucial that planners communicate with all speakers/presenters well in advance to ensure that their presentations and materials will be accessible for persons with a wide range of disabilities. Incorporating universal design into presentations ensures maximum inclusion and benefits everyone. Explain both the types of disabilities that attendees have and their requested accommodations. Ask presenters to submit their materials a month before the meeting or event to allow enough time to produce alternative formats, and to provide the materials to interpreters and other service providers and attendees. Make the materials available to attendees in advance; posting them on your website is optimal.

The presenters themselves may also have disabilities. In fact, diversity should be a factor to consider when selecting presenters. Ask each presenter well in advance whether they require any accommodations. Also ask about the type of microphone (table, headset, lapel) and presentation environment (e.g., floor level, stage, podium, table) the presenter prefers. If there are multiple presenters, including one or more with a disability, ensure that all presenters are seated together, whether at floor level or on a stage, to ensure that they are viewed as equals. Avoid podiums and putting presenters who use mobility aids or devices at the end of the table.

Prepare an accessibility checklist well in advance. We have provided a sample checklist below. Schedule a briefing session with the presenters to go over the items on your checklist. Set out your expectations from the start.

Presentations Checklist

General

- Announce when the meeting begins and ends
- Build multiple breaks into the schedule, preferably 5-10 minutes every hour
- Avoid the use of flashing lights and loud sounds
- Ensure that the presentation area and screens are viewable from all areas of the room
- Allow space for interpreters
- For large events, allow people with relevant disabilities to enter the room and find seats before the general audience
- Provide all materials (papers, PowerPoints, agendas, slides) in alternative formats (e.g., large print, Braille, electronic, audio CDs, etc.) and in advance of the meeting/event
- Make electronic versions of materials available in plain text, rich text, or Microsoft Word formats and post on the website
- Make materials available in advance to interpreters and other support personnel to familiarize themselves with the materials and ask any questions

Structure

- At the start of the meeting, introduce the interpreter(s) and other service providers
- At the start of the meeting, orally describe the room layout and location of restrooms, emergency exits, break rooms, and food/beverages
- Provide an overview of the presentation at the start and a summary of the key points at the end
- Build in sufficient time for attendees to get from session to session
- Allow for regular breaks (about every hour) for attendees, service animals, and access service providers such as interpreters, CART providers, notetakers, and readers

Presenter

- Always face the audience; never turn away
- Use a microphone
- Keep hands and other objects away from your mouth when speaking
- If interpreters are being used, do not walk while speaking
- Be visible to everyone; stand in good light
- Do not stand in front of a window or bright screen in order to avoid the silhouette effect
- Speak in well-modulated tones and at a pace that allows interpreters to interpret accurately
- Keep the presentation clear, simple, concise, and organized
- Use simple language; avoid acronyms, jargon, and idioms
- Give attendees enough time to process information by pausing between topics
- Use multiple communication methods to accommodate different learning styles (verbal information, pictures and diagrams, text, auditory)
- Check in with attendees to ensure that presentation is understood and clarify if needed
- Avoid using gestures and visual points of reference
- When reading directly from text, provide an advance copy in print and digital format and pause slightly when interjecting information not in the text
- Describe verbally all visual materials (e.g., slides, charts, PowerPoints, etc.)
- Provide captioning for all videos
- Provide CART for all sessions

Q&A/Audience

- Instruct attendees to wait to be called on, to not interrupt, to speak one at a time, and to speak clearly into the microphone
- Provide attendees with the option of writing their questions ahead of time, which the presenters can then read before responding
- Repeat questions posed by people in the audience before responding
- Reserve seats in front of the presenter for persons with visual, hearing, and processing impairments

Meals and Social Functions

Planners must ensure that meals and social functions, such as receptions, are accessible to persons with disabilities. These networking opportunities can be as important to attendees as the substantive meetings and presentations.

Meals and Social Functions Checklist

General

- Do not overfill the venue
- Ensure sufficient room for everyone to maneuver safely and independently
- Ensure an accessible route of travel to the food and entertainment and between tables
- Ensure that any entertainment is accessible
- Arrange for accessible transportation to and from the social event
- Avoid self-serve meals or buffets; otherwise, have personal assistants on hand
- Include finger foods that do not require persons to use utensils or hold plates
- Avoid common allergens like nuts and shellfish
- Provide food and drink options that are vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, dairy-free, and allergen-free
- Set up more than one food and beverage area
- Avoid setting up food and beverages in tiers
- Separate alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks into multiple bars
- Clearly mark food and beverages
- Provide a choice of cutlery and crockery (e.g., straws, lightweight plastic cups and plates)
- Provide bendable straws (either by default or upon request)
- Avoid long, billowy tablecloths
- Have personal assistants and interpreters on hand
- When appropriate, allow people with disabilities to enter the room before the general audience to minimize any maneuvering difficulties

Layout

- Make tables and chairs available
- Ensure that tables and bars are at a correct height (28 to 34 inches) for persons using mobility devices
- Avoid counter-top high tables and chairs
- Avoid fixed seating attached to tables
- Ensure adequate room under dining tables for mobility devices to roll under
- Ensure sufficient space between seating areas for mobility devices and service animals
- Avoid seating persons with disabilities in one area or on the fringes of the venue

Staff and Volunteer Training

Staff (both event and venue) and volunteers (e.g., readers, notetakers, guides, and personal assistants) are critical to holding an accessible meeting. Thus, planning accessible meetings and events will require the commitment of staff and volunteers to identify and remove barriers to full participation. Make sure that service providers, like interpreters and CART operators, have the proper certification and licensure.

In the planning stage, appoint a point person for accessibility and accommodations who will be responsible for ensuring that all aspects of the event are accessible. They should be listed as the contact on all materials and the website, and be the person staff go to with their accessibility questions. Create a plan for accessibility problems that may arise during the conference. For assistance with developing or providing training, contact one of the ten previously mentioned regional ADA National Network Centers.

Make sure to train those staff responsible for registering attendees and answering questions about the event. They should be knowledgeable about the available accommodations, the use of assistive devices, emergency procedures, and accessibility features of the venue and meetings. They should also be trained in etiquette for communicating and interacting with persons with disabilities and service animals.

Before the meeting or event, hold an orientation for all staff and volunteers that addresses how to best assist and communicate with individuals with disabilities. Emphasize that accessibility and creating a welcoming and inclusive environment are priorities, and set forth expectations. Discuss both visible disabilities and non-visible disabilities, such as learning, cognitive, and mental health impairments. Review all meeting and event activities, including social events, to ensure they are accessible.

Similarly, hold an orientation for interested attendees with disabilities. Assure them that trained staff and volunteers will be on site. Review the accessibility features of both the venue and the meetings, and provide a tour. To help attendees with visual impairments find the meeting and event locations, tactile maps or prerecorded instructions can be very helpful. In addition, identify the location of aides such as assistive listening devices. Make sure staff and volunteers are clearly visible and identifiable through signs, uniforms, or highly visible buttons/nametags. Also, take care of any additional accommodation requests. For instance, people with visual impairments may need a guide to go from one meeting or event to another. Persons with cognitive impairments may need an explanation of what meetings and events will be going on and where.

Furthermore, in the days prior to and on the day of the meeting or event, the point person—accompanied by the appropriate staff and volunteers and persons with disabilities—should do a walk-through of the facility and the meeting/event rooms. All technical equipment should be tested upon its arrival, as well as on the day of the event.

Staff and Volunteer Training Checklist

- Create a plan for accessibility problems that may arise during the event
- Contact regional ADA National Network Centers for assistance with training
- Appoint a “point person” for accessibility issues and list as contact on all materials and the website
- Train staff/volunteers about accommodations, use of assistive devices, emergency procedures, and accessibility features of the venue and meeting/event
- Hold orientations for staff and volunteers on types of disabilities and disability etiquette
- Hold orientation for attendees with disabilities to review accessibility features, location of meetings/events, and accommodations
- Do a walk-through of the venue a few days before and on the day of the meeting/event
- Test all technical equipment when it arrives and on the day of the meeting/event
- Ensure that staff and volunteers are clearly visible through their uniform, signage, or other notable features

Communication and Etiquette

Communicating with individuals with disabilities should be no different from the same respectful, clear communication deserved by everyone. This is especially important to remember given that the majority of disabilities are “hidden” or “invisible,” i.e., not obvious. Below are some general guidelines.

Every Person

- Treat the person with the same respect that you extend to every person
- Focus on the person, not their disability
- Do not ask about their disability
- Do not make assumptions about the person’s ability or inability to participate in an activity or perform a task
- Do not assume that the presence of one disability (e.g., a speech impairment) indicates the presence of another (e.g., a cognitive impairment)
- Do not make decisions for the person
- Ask each person what will make them most comfortable
- Always ask the person if they need assistance and how you can assist; do not assume they need help
- Address the person directly rather than the sign language interpreter, reader, or other access provider

Persons Who Use Mobility Devices

- When speaking for more than a few minutes, bend to eye level or pull up a chair
- Never lean on, push, move, or touch the mobility device

Persons Who Use Service Animals

- Service animals are not required to wear a vest when they are working
- You can ask two questions regarding a service animal: 1) is this a service animal? 2) what duties does it perform?
- Remember that service animals perform a variety of tasks, many of which may not be immediately visible; do not make assumptions and remember to respect the handler’s privacy
- Approach a service animal calmly and speak to the person, not the animal
- Do not touch, pet, feed, whistle, or make sounds at the service animal without asking permission; the service animal is working and petting or otherwise engaging with it could distract and stop it from performing its duties
- Walk on the opposite side of the service animal

Persons Who Are Blind or Have Visual Impairments

- Ask the person their name
- Introduce yourself and others if present
- Identify your job or role
- Avoid touching without permission; to get their attention, say their name or, “excuse me”
- Avoid shouting
- Be descriptive when giving directions
- Offer your arm if person needs to be guided
- Avoid using visually-oriented references
- Describe where you are going and any obstacles if you are serving as a guide
- Find a place with good lighting, but not too bright
- With permission, guide the person’s hand to the back of a chair if you offer someone a seat
- Let the person know when you are leaving

Persons Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- To get their attention, wave to them; avoid touching them without permission, and only then tap lightly on their shoulder
- Ask the person how they prefer to communicate (e.g., sign language, gesturing, writing, or speaking)
- Face the person when talking
- Speak clearly, avoiding gum chewing or obscuring your mouth with your hand
- Use your normal tone of voice and volume
- Maintain eye contact with the d/Deaf or hard of hearing person
- Have pen and paper or a device to text on hand as alternative communication method
- Address the person rather than their interpreter
- Avoid spaces with background noise
- Find a well-lit room, but avoid glare
- Ensure that the venue has an induction loop that stops background noise from interfering if the person is wearing a hearing aid
- When communicating with a person who reads lips, speak clearly in a normal way that does not overexaggerate words, use short and simple sentences, avoid blocking your face, and stand in a well-lit place
- If there is a window in the room, place the person with their back to it to avoid the silhouette effect
- In groups, request that people speak one at a time
- If communicating in a smaller group setting, arrange seating or stand in a circle so d/Deaf or hard of hearing attendees can see signing and/or lipreading
- Ask, if you have any doubts, if the person understood you
- Do not pretend to understand when you do not
- Ask for clarification if you do not understand something
- Be aware of situations involving announcements or calling out names so you can notify persons who are d/Deaf or have other hearing loss

Persons with Speech Difficulties

- Ask each person what will make them most comfortable
- Give the person your full attention
- Find a quiet space
- Listen carefully
- Do not finish sentences for the person or interrupt
- Do not pretend to understand when you do not
- If you do not understand, ask the person to repeat; if you still are unable to understand, ask the person to write the information or to recommend an alternative method of communicating
- Consider writing as an alternative means of communicating

Persons with Learning/Cognitive Difficulties

- Ask each person what will make them most comfortable
- Ask the person how they prefer to communicate (e.g., written or verbal)
- Listen carefully
- Speak clearly
- Check for understanding
- Use clear, concrete language, avoiding abstractions
- Allow the person extra time to process the information and ask questions
- Don't overload the person with too much information
- Find a quiet place without distractions

Persons with Developmental Disabilities

- Ask each person what will make them most comfortable
- Keep to the person's schedule and routine
- Speak clearly
- Do not use "baby" talk, and speak at a normal volume unless asked to do otherwise
- Model your pace of speech and vocabulary on that of the person
- Ask neutral questions
- Allow time for decision-making
- Use simple words and concrete, not abstract, concepts
- Break down complex concepts into small parts
- Verify responses by repeating questions in a different way
- If you are not sure if the person understood you, ask them to repeat the information

Persons with Psychosocial Conditions

- Ask if there is a preferred time to communicate
- Schedule communications in the late morning or early afternoon
- Keep the pressure of the situation to a minimum
- Use automated reminders to highlight times and locations of meetings
- Provide written instructions
- Allow for breaks

Post-Meeting/Event Survey

All meetings and events should include a survey for attendees to provide their feedback. These questions will allow planners to examine ways to both increase and improve the accessibility of your future meetings and events. For instance, how would you rate the accessibility of:

	Very	Somewhat	Not Very	Inaccessible	N/A
Registration Process	<input type="radio"/>				
Registration Materials	<input type="radio"/>				
On-site Registration	<input type="radio"/>				
Accommodations Process	<input type="radio"/>				
Promotional Materials	<input type="radio"/>				
Website/App	<input type="radio"/>				
Meeting/Event Site	<input type="radio"/>				
Hotel Rooms	<input type="radio"/>				
Transportation	<input type="radio"/>				
Parking	<input type="radio"/>				
Meeting/Event Rooms	<input type="radio"/>				
Presentations	<input type="radio"/>				
Presentation Materials	<input type="radio"/>				
Receptions/Social Activities	<input type="radio"/>				
Meals	<input type="radio"/>				

Additional Comments:

Conclusion

We recognize that the sheer volume of information provided in this toolkit can be daunting if tackled all at once. Organizing accessible events and meetings will take some time, and may require staff trainings. However, by following the advice laid out above, you will provide a space for people to share new ideas and learn from one another. By incorporating universal design principles into your own programming, you will benefit everyone involved.

If you have any questions, contact: Amy L. Allbright, Director, ABA Commission on Disability Rights, (202) 662-1575 or Amy.Allbright@americanbar.org.

