

A Guide to Working with Individuals with Disabilities

It is human, natural and not unusual to be concerned about our interactions with people who have disabilities. We may be concerned about saying the wrong thing, asking an inappropriate question, or unintentionally offending the person.

Successful interactions with people with disabilities are those based primarily on respect and courtesy, just like interactions with those who do not have disabilities. With some awareness and understanding from co-workers, those with disabilities can become part of a team as easily as anyone.

When greeting or guiding a person with a disability:

- Extend your hand to shake hands or exchange paperwork. If the individual cannot shake hands or grasp the papers, he/she will tell you. A person with visual impairment will extend their hand to shake. If they do not, and you wish to shake their hand, verbalize your intention to shake hands (e.g. "I would like to shake your hand")
- If you must guide a visually impaired person to another location, let them know about the need to change location and ask if they would like assistance then offer your arm for them to grasp. Do not grab their arm or hand.
- Avoid references that are visually oriented, such as "Over there in the corner."
- When speaking with someone in a wheelchair, give the person a comfortable viewing angle of your face. Looking up at an extreme angle can be difficult and uncomfortable.
- Avoid finishing the person's sentences or statements – actively listen.
- Do not make assumptions about what the person can or cannot do –ask politely.

When in a group that includes a person with a disability:

- Ask the individual what they may need to aide their participation in the group.
- Allow those who may have communication disability the time they require to participate in the discussion.
- Make sure those with hearing disability can see what you are saying. Tell them what you are talking about and explain what is happening. Speak clearly and distinctly but do not exaggerate lip movements.

Considerations to remember when working with someone with a disability:

- Talk directly to the person, not the companion or attendant. This applies whether the person has difficulty with mobility or speech, has a cognitive impairment, or is blind or deaf.
- If you have difficulty understanding what the person is saying, ask the individual to repeat, rather than pretending to understand. Listen attentively, be patient and repeat back what you think you heard to ensure effective communication.

- If you believe the individual needs assistance, go ahead and offer the assistance—but wait for your offer to be accepted before providing aid. Don't be afraid to ask what assistance is needed, the individual probably knows exactly what they need and can guide you – there's no need for a guessing game.
- If speaking to a person who is blind, be sure to identify yourself at the beginning of the conversation and announce when you are leaving. Don't be afraid to use common expressions that refer to sight, such as, "See you later."
- When speaking to a person who is deaf, gently tap the person on the arm or shoulder to get their attention. Look directly at the person, speak in a normal tone of voice, keep your hands away from your face, and use short, simple sentences.
- Do not touch or distract service animals. Service animals are working and it breaks their training to interact with others when they are on duty.
- If an individual is in a wheelchair, when possible put yourself at their eye level. Never lean on or touch a person's wheelchair or any other assistive device. The device is part of a person's personal space. Do not push the wheelchair unless you have permission from the individual.
- You may need to rephrase or repeat what you say to those with cognitive or hearing impairments. Instructions on how to perform a task may need to be put in writing for ensured understanding. It may be useful to provide instructions in small, numbered and sequential steps.
- Recognize that people with disabilities are individuals. Adjust your interactions to the abilities and skills of the individual, not to the disability.
- If verbal communication is too difficult consider written communication as an alternative.
- Introduce yourself and others present in the room.
- The emergency procedures for your department should include additional steps to ensure the safety of those with disabilities and service animals.

Use Words with Dignity...

- Person or individual with a disability, or who is blind, deaf, has cerebral palsy, etc.
- Person who has mental retardation or cognitive disability
- Person who uses a wheelchair or is in a wheelchair
- Individual who walks with crutches
- Deaf and hard of hearing
- Disabled since birth, or born with "..."
- Nondisabled or person without a disability

Do Not Use

- The handicapped
- Crippled with "..."
- Spastic
- Restricted to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
- Invalid, incapacitated, victim of "..."
- Deaf mute or deaf and dumb
- Birth defect
- Lame
- Normal person