

# Creating an Accessible Meeting Environment

Tip Sheet No. 4  
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The environment you create for an event sets the tone for participants' overall experience. Event planners help set this tone by determining the set-up of meeting rooms, the look and placement of signage, and the types of materials to provide.

When designing an accessible and inclusive meeting environment for people with disabilities and Deaf people, it's important to think about their experience so they will be able to fully engage in and benefit from the meeting content. This tip sheet addresses the key considerations for a welcoming environment, such as signage, on-site registration, materials, meals and refreshments, room set-up, and meeting agenda and activities.

## Signage

One of the key ways to enhance participants' comfort in the meeting environment is to ensure they know where to

go when moving throughout the event property. Providing robust signage and wayfinding throughout your meeting enables participants with disabilities to take the most direct route to the event spaces and have visual cues to confirm they're going the right way. In addition to navigation, signage also allows you to communicate important information to participants, such as the location of accessible restrooms and the service dog relief area, and brief agendas. Consider the following tips:

- > Signage is intended to offer a quick reference, so it should be simple, short, and easy to understand. Avoid decorative fonts, use contrasting colors, and supplement text with images. Where relevant, include international symbols for access, which are easily recognizable.
- > Provide signage with important meeting information, such as session locations

## Federal legal requirements: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires any business or organization to make all of their services available to people with disabilities. Title III also requires public and private entities to provide appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to ensure people with speech, hearing, and

vision disabilities understand what is said or written and can communicate effectively.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits organizations receiving federal funding from excluding or denying individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to receive program benefits and services.



### Tip!

The larger your venue, the more signage you will need. For events at large venues consider turning the hotel's floor plan into a sign for easy navigation.

and start and end times, so that meeting participants are not required to carry meeting materials throughout the event, which can be cumbersome.

- > Place signage in the hotel lobby to serve as a visual indicator that people have arrived at the correct location, and to indicate where to find registration and meeting rooms. Place additional signage at all decision points,

such as near elevators and at corners to confirm for people that they're moving in the right direction.

- > Ensure that signs do not protrude into pathways and create obstructions or trip hazards.

## On-site registration

On-site registration is likely the first in-person interaction participants will have with event staff and can set the tone for the rest of the event. Use the following tips to demonstrate your commitment to access at this critical juncture:

- > One of the most important ways to make participants with disabilities feel welcome at your event is for the staff greeting them to be knowledgeable

about working with people with disabilities and Deaf people. If staff is not accustomed to working with people with disabilities and Deaf people, provide them with training on disability etiquette and Deaf culture, such as using people-first language.

- > Schedule an adequate number of staff to be available during registration in case any participants need additional assistance.



### Tip!

People-first language puts the person **before** the disability, and describes what a person has, not who a person is. For example, “a person with or who has a disability” is preferable to “a disabled person.”

- > If Deaf participants have registered for the event, have interpreters available during registration. In the event that interpreters are busy working with other Deaf participants, be sure to have pen and paper available at the registration desk so that staff can communicate with a Deaf participant while waiting for the interpreters to become available.

- > If people who are blind or have low vision will be attending your meeting, ensure that staff know to review materials out loud, describe the surroundings, and offer to help participants to the room.
- > Prepare to connect participants with any accommodations they requested during online registration. The process you use to check people into the event should indicate any accommodation requests, and staff should know how to meet those requests. For example, a staff member should know if an attendee has requested materials in large print and have those materials already available when that person arrives.
- > Ensure that staff at registration are aware of important access features, such as the location of accessible restrooms and the service dog relief areas, and any areas in the building that may have mobility barriers.

## Meeting materials

It's likely you will be distributing meeting materials during on-site registration and at other times throughout the event. Some meeting materials cover important information about the event, such as an

agenda and workshop descriptions. Other materials are designed to supplement the content areas being explored. To ensure these materials are useful to all participants, design them to be fully accessible and available in alternative formats.

- > Consider strength and mobility variations when deciding how to provide the materials. For example, binders can be difficult to open for people with limited mobility.
- > Design printed materials with a sans-serif font in a size no smaller than 14 point and use contrasting colors to make them accessible to the widest range of participants, including those with low vision.
- > During online registration, you will ask people if they need materials in alternative formats, such as an electronic text file or hard copy of materials to be available on site, materials in Braille, and materials in fonts larger than 14 point. Be sure to have the requested alternate formats available at the registration desk.
- > Include information in the event program about local resources available to attendees with disabilities, such as accessible transportation and where to find medical devices.

- > Include meeting guidelines in the program that promote an accessible and inclusive environment, such as encouraging participants to use people-first language, always using a microphone when available, and pushing their chairs under the table when they leave the room to allow adequate pathways for people using mobility devices.

## Meals and refreshments

If you will be providing food and refreshments at your event, there are a number of considerations about how to make dining accessible, outlined below:

- > Buffets often create access barriers for people with disabilities affecting mobility or dexterity, so plated meals are preferable for lunch and dinner.
- > If you'll be offering plated meals, be sure to ask about dietary restrictions and requirements during online registration, including the need for pre-cut meals.
- > For continental breakfast, coffee service, and light snacks, make sure nothing is on risers and do not stack cups more than two high.
- > Provide room on the table for people to rest their plates while serving themselves.

- > Avoid heavy containers for serving beverages and ensure everything is within reach of the edge of the table.
- > Make bendable straws available for people with limited mobility.
- > Have staff available to assist any participant, if needed.

## Room configuration

A number of factors contribute to how a meeting room will be set up. One is the size of the space relative to the number of participants. Another is the type of learning environment you want to create. For example, do you want participants to be able to interact and network with others at their table? Or is the style of presentation more conducive to having all participants face the presenter? When creating accessible and inclusive events,

there are additional factors to consider. For example, for people who are hard of hearing, they may need the option to sit anywhere in the room where the sound is most clear. If a person has a disability that impacts her or his dexterity, she or he may require a hard surface to write on. For this reason, it's critical to set up the room in a way that allows for flexibility of use so people with disabilities or Deaf people can determine where and with whom to sit to optimize their learning and networking.

For all event areas, ensure 36-inch pathways between all obstacles to allow adequate room for people who use mobility devices, such as wheelchairs, and provide at least some tables to allow for a hard writing surface for those who require it. Additional layout considerations, outlined below, are affected by the size of the

### Room size

Venues generally attempt to fit as many people as possible into a meeting space and provide estimates that do not account for people with disabilities. For this reason, you should secure a meeting space that, according to the venue, can accommodate 30 percent more people than you

anticipate attending. For example, if you're planning an event with 100 participants, tell the venue you need space that can seat 130 people. This will generally allow for adequate aisle ways for wheelchair access and an accessible room set-up.

room and can look significantly different in plenary and breakout sessions.

## Plenary sessions

- > Many organizations use round tables in their plenary sessions to allow for networking and discussion among participants at their tables. Generally, event venues attempt to fit as many people as possible around a table, but doing so creates access barriers. For an 8-foot table, request that no more than 10 chairs be placed around the table. For a six-foot table, no more than eight chairs should be used.
- > For larger meeting spaces, you will likely need a stage to ensure clear lines of sight among participants, presenters, and interpreters. Stages must have an ADA-compliant ramp with handrails, be at least 36 inches wide, and have a slope of one foot per inch



### Tip!

Your contract with a venue should include language that requires all your function space to have 36-inch aisle ways between tables and all obstructions.

(for example a stage that is 12 inches high will require a 12-foot ramp).

- > If presenters will be using visuals, such as PowerPoint presentations, you may need two separate screens to allow for a clear line of sight in a large room.
- > Because of the size of the room, it's critical to use microphones during plenary sessions so that participants and interpreters are able to hear the presenter and questions or comments from other attendees. Ensure the audiovisual cart doesn't impede access.

## Breakout sessions

- > Because breakout sessions are generally held in smaller rooms, the room style must be different than a plenary session layout to maintain access.
- > It's difficult to set up smaller rooms with round tables, so meeting planners will often opt for classroom style, which allows each participant a hard surface on which to write. However, it can also be difficult to maintain 36-inch aisle ways with this style of seating.
- > If classroom style isn't possible, theater style allows you to create more space in the room. If you select this style of seating, provide at least

one row of tables to allow for a hard writing surface.

- > It may be necessary to use microphones in smaller breakout rooms if the acoustics are bad or if someone indicated on their registration form that they use an assistive listening device.

## **Confirming your event configuration**

Once determined, your preferred set-up and access considerations should be reflected in the hotel contract. Include set-up instructions and access considerations in the audiovisual and room set-up list you send to the hotel. Ensure that preferred set-up and access considerations are reflected in the banquet event orders (commonly referred to as BEOs). The night before the event, visually check for the presence of an ADA-compliant ramp and stage and other layout considerations. Make sure all cords are taped down to minimize trip hazards. Confirm that there are no items blocking anyone's line of sight and move obstructions out of the way. Doing this the evening before the event allows time to solve with the hotel any issues that may arise and reconfigure the room, if necessary.

## **Agenda**

When creating the agenda, event organizers determine the event schedule and learning activities to be used during presentations, both of which affect the learning experience of participants with disabilities and Deaf attendees.

### **Event schedule**

- > People with disabilities may have morning routines to prepare for the day, including working with a personal care attendant, managing medication, and physical therapy. Because it can be difficult for people with disabilities to adjust their morning schedule, meeting planners should establish a start time that works for the widest array of participants, generally no earlier than 9 a.m.
- > Because participants may rely on similar routines throughout and at the end of the day, it's important to closely follow the established event schedule and begin and end the day as you previously indicated.
- > The length of the meeting is also an access consideration for some people with disabilities. For example, Deaf



## Tip!

If your venue is large or your meeting space is spread out across multiple floors, allow for longer breaks for participants to have down time and to be able to get to where they need to go.

participants, who rely on interpreters to participate in the meeting, must concentrate harder and may experience eyestrain.

- > Providing longer breaks, ranging from 15 to 30 minutes depending on the size of the meeting, is also important. People with limited mobility may need additional time to tend to their personal needs, such as using the restroom, getting refreshments, and finding a quiet space to make urgent

calls. If breaks are shorter, people with disabilities may arrive after the meeting has started or resumed, because they didn't have sufficient time to attend to these needs.

## Interactive activities

An optimal learning environment generally includes a variety of activities to engage participants' different learning styles. It's important to consider the barriers that such activities could create for people with disabilities. Activities that rely on visual or audio cues, dexterity, or physical movement will likely need to be altered to ensure access. If presenters from other organizations are responsible for any of the meeting content, it's the role of the host organization to work with those presenters to ensure they're addressing the possible access needs of participants.

## Additional Resources

### **U.S. Department of Justice, ADA Home Page, Accessible Information Exchange: Meeting on a Level Playing Field**

<https://perma.cc/ZJ8X-ANFU>

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### **For more information**

The Center on Victimization and Safety (CVS) at the Vera Institute of Justice works with communities around the country to fashion services that reach, appeal to, and benefit all victims. Our work focuses on communities of people who are at elevated risk of harm but often marginalized from victim services and the criminal justice system. We combine research, technical assistance, and training to equip policymakers and practitioners with the information, skills, and resources needed

to effectively serve all victims. To learn more about CVS, contact [cvs@vera.org](mailto:cvs@vera.org).

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