



# Guest Service for Guests with Disabilities

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# Guidelines and Principles

## Principles for Communicating with Persons with Disabilities

1. RELAX: Treat people with respect and consideration. Do not be embarrassed to use common expressions such as “See you later” or “Did you hear about . . .”
2. Speak directly to the person rather than through a companion or sign language interpreter who may be present.
3. When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. Shaking the left hand is OK as well.
4. When meeting a person, who is blind or has partial sight, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to who you are speaking. Remember, just because the person is blind or has low vision it does not mean they have a hearing impairment, so don't shout.
5. If you offer assistance, wait for the offer to be accepted. Then ask/listen for instructions.
6. Treat people as people. Use first names only if appropriate and do not pat people on the head or shoulder. Avoid that ‘sing-songy’ tone of voice often used with children and puppies.
7. Leaning or hanging on a person's wheelchair is invading their personal body space. Avoid this unless you have permission.
8. Listen carefully when conversing with a person who has difficulty speaking. Do not interrupt or correct the person. Ask short questions that require short answers. Do not pretend you understand if you do not, repeat what the person has said and allow the person to respond. Do not be afraid to say you do not understand.
9. When speaking to a person, who uses a chair or crutches, place yourself at eye level. Be aware not all people are alike and some folks are uncomfortable with this.
10. To get the attention of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, tap them gently on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look the person in the face and speak clearly so if they want they can read your lips. (Remember that not all people read lips.) Avoid putting food or cigarettes near your mouth.

## People First Language – Speaking with Awareness

Language is a living entity that reflects our culture, our attitudes, and conveys the respect we have for others. Words create subtle and not so subtle attitudinal barriers.

The use of appropriate language that is both sensitive and accurate conveys awareness about disability and is an important tool in building an inclusive community.

VSAFL promotes the use of “people first” language—language that puts focus on individuals rather than on a disability. People first language helps us remember that people are unique individuals and that disability is only a part of a whole person.

## Key to Quality Guest Service Interactions

Guests will continue to patronize businesses that:

**welcome them,  
are helpful,  
are accessible, and  
provide quality services.**

The key to providing quality services to guests with disabilities is to remember that all guests are

individuals. Persons with disabilities come in all shapes and sizes with diverse personalities, abilities, interests, needs and preferences. The following are some basic tips for interacting with guests who have disabilities. However, in most cases the best way to learn how to assist guests with disabilities is to ask them directly. As always, don't take offense if your assistance is refused.

**Always ask:  
“May I assist you?”**

**Follow up by asking:  
“How may I assist you?”**

Offer the guest the opportunity to state what assistance they may prefer. This will provide you with an easy way to accomplish your responsibilities as a guest service agent. If necessary, practice a few good sentences in your head and be ready to use them. Other examples include: “May I be of assistance?”; “Would you like assistance?” You will encounter people who appreciate your assistance and others who may reject your every effort to be helpful. There are numerous reasons why an individual may not want or need your assistance.

Etiquette considered appropriate when interacting with guests with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Listen and learn from what the guest tells you regarding his or her needs.

### REMEMBER THESE GENERAL TIPS FOR QUALITY GUEST SERVICE:

- See the person who has a disability as a person, not as a disability.
- Relax. You are there to assist all of your guests, with or without disabilities, to enjoy their visit.
- Listen to the guest.
- Maintain eye contact without staring.
- Treat the guest with dignity, respect, and courtesy.
- In an effort to be helpful, people tend to talk much louder than necessary. Remember there is no disability which is served in this manner; don't yell.
- Don't "talk down". Avoid responding to people with disabilities out of "gratefulness" for not having a disability yourself.
- DO NOT touch or otherwise distract a service animal. Dog guides, hearing dogs, and service dogs are all working.
- Speak directly to the individual, not to a companion or an interpreter.
- Extend the usual social courtesies. If you shake hands, offer your handshake to all.
- Ask the guest to tell you the best way to help and listen to their response.
- Offer assistance, but do not insist on providing it.
- Be considerate. Let the guest set the pace walking and talking.
- Keep the guest informed . . . communicate! Let them know what is going on if there is a delay or other unexpected situation.
- Deal with unfamiliar situations in a calm, professional manner and get assistance from a co-worker if necessary.

# Assisting People with Mobility Disabilities

Mobility disabilities cover a wide range, from the person who has difficulty walking great distances to the person who uses a wheelchair all the time. “An estimated 19 million people have mobility impairments or 6.9% of the national population. The mobility impairment may take the form of paralysis, muscle weakness, nerve damage, stiffness of the joints, or lack of balance or coordination.” Florida’s population with mobility impairments is 1.3 million.

A wheelchair may be the most visible sign of a disability but it is important to remember that the wheelchair is a tool. The guest using the chair may or may not be able to walk without crutches, canes, braces, other aids, and may be using the wheelchair because it is faster, to conserve energy, or for increased mobility and greater access.

## KEEP IN MIND SO YOU CAN INFORM YOUR GUESTS:

- Where the accessible restrooms, water fountains, and phones are located? What are the routes to these and other amenities. Does it involve stairs? Ramps? Doors?
- What is the evacuation procedure for guests who use mobility devices?

## Assisting People Who Use Wheelchairs

### Types of Wheelchairs

There are several forms of mobility aids that have wheels: Motorized power or battery operated wheelchairs, manual wheelchairs, and three-wheeled scooters.

A person using a power wheelchair will generally not need to be pushed. Remember there might be a rare exception to this rule. Always ask the guest.

A person using a scooter will not need to be pushed. Usually when the motor of a scooter is turned off, it is very difficult to move. The guest, if they are transferring and there isn’t room for the scooter by their chair, may wish to leave the scooter nearby. Never ride or try to “drive” a guest’s scooter. This can be dangerous to you and other guests.

Individuals in manual chairs may or may not want assistance having their wheelchair pushed. Always ask first. You will see a type of wheelchair, commonly known as sports chair, that doesn’t have handles on the back of the chair. These chairs are definitely intended to be maneuvered by the person sitting in them and not by someone pushing.

## Use of Service Animals

Service animals serve a great variety of functions beyond “guide dogs.” They can fetch dropped items, alert owners of sounds, and even pull wheelchairs. These animals are defined by their function. Never call or distract service animals away from their owners and do not pet them without asking first. Remember, they are working animals.

### REMEMBER THESE BASIC TIPS:

- Don’t lean, hang on, or touch a person’s wheelchair. It is an extension of the person’s body. If you bump into it, remember that a jolt may cause pain or discomfort.
- If a person is sitting or is short in stature, get on an eye to eye level if the conversation continues for more than a few minutes. Don’t force someone to physically look up at you.
- If the front desk is too high, come around to the guest side of the desk during your interaction.
- Allow a person who uses a wheelchair or other mobility device to keep them within reach if they transfer to a seat.
- Consider distance, weather and surfaces such as stairs, curbs or inclines when giving directions.
- When pushing the wheelchair, be gentle and don’t start, stop, or turn corners abruptly. When going up or down a slope, warn the person in the chair.
- Don’t ever try to maneuver a chair with a person in it if you feel that you will lose control. Get assistance and use two people, if necessary.
- If you have to “bump” a chair up or down a curb or step, ask the individual what direction they prefer. Some may wish for you to lead so that you take the person and the chair backwards.

- Never lift, transfer, or carry a person in a wheelchair up or down a flight of stairs, or in and out of their seats. This could present a safety hazard for you and the guest.
- If you are pushing someone in a wheelchair through a noisy area be aware that they may not hear you speak if you're directly behind them.

## Assisting People Who Use a Walker, Cane, or Crutches

### REMEMBER THESE BASIC TIPS:

- Offer your arm, never grab or take their free hand or arm. This could cause them to stumble or fall.
- Always ask the individual if they would prefer for you to stand to their right or left.
- If they have a mobility aid such as a cane, crutch, or walker, the guest may be safer using those than holding on to you. Never grab a cane or walker to assist someone.
- Warn guests about changes in level or texture of the floor. Be aware of modifying your pace. Walk slower, so that you aren't rushing the guest.
- Warn the guest about changes in light. If you are moving from an area that is brightly lit to a dark space, or vice-a-versa, give the guest's eyes time to adjust.
- Offer your arm when going up or down stairs or a ramp without handrails.

# Assisting People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision

There are approximately 6.8 million blind and visually impaired people in the United States or 2.3% of the total population. Florida has 437,000 individuals with visual impairments with the largest prevalence being ages 18-64 and 75 and older. (American Foundation for the Blind, October, 2008)

A person who is legally blind can see at 20 feet what a person with vision can see at 200 feet. Total blindness is the complete absence of vision and light perception. Guests with vision loss will range from those who are completely blind to those who can't adjust quickly to changes in lighting conditions. However, many people with vision loss have light perception or may see various images or fields of images.

## REMEMBER THESE BASIC TIPS:

- Introduce yourself. State your name and position. Use a normal tone of voice, there is no need to yell or exaggerate your speech.
- Use the person's name, or touch their arm when starting a conversation so they know you are talking to them and they can determine your location in the room. Tell the person if you leave or move away from the conversation.
- It's always appropriate to offer your help; just don't be surprised if he'd rather do it himself. And when he does do it, it isn't necessary to applaud.
- If a person gives you permission to walk with him, don't grab his arm—let him take yours. After that, it's something like dancing; from the motion of your body, he can tell when you come to curbs, or steps, or turns. To avoid surprises he may walk a half step behind you.
- When sitting down, guide the person's hand to the back of the chair and tell him or her whether the chair has arms.

- When giving directions, be as clear and specific as possible. For example: Instruct the individual to "move forward or continue in your path of travel" rather than "go straight" or "straight ahead". Identify landmarks that their cane may encounter like a potted plant, water fountain, or noises like a humming soda machine. Estimate the distance in steps. Point out obvious obstacles in the direct path of travel as well as changes in surface level such as stairs or ramps, and floor textures such as carpet and wood floors.
- Announce when you enter or leave a room, especially if you're wearing sneakers.

## Assisting People Who Use Dog Guides or Canes

There are basically three ways people who are blind or have low vision travel: With a dog guide, with a cane, and without adaptive assistance.

**Dog Guides.** While the dog is in harness that dog is "working" and you should never pet, talk to, feed, or otherwise distract it. Some people prefer that you walk behind their left or right shoulder and give verbal direction. Others may wish you to walk on the opposite side, away from the dog. Always ask the guest which he or she prefers.

The guest may opt to have the dog follow you or else ask you to be a sighted guide. If the dog follows you, be aware that it is easy to get separated in a crowd and that it is useful for you to give verbal directions and warnings.

**People who use canes** will either follow you or ask you to be a sighted guide. Walk on the side opposite the cane. Guests detect objects and potential obstacles by swinging the cane in a wide arc but cannot detect overhangs (i.e. exhibit cases, wall mounted signs, etc). You need to verbally warn them of these potential obstacles.

**People who don't use dog guides or canes frequently do not appear blind.** It is important not to make assumptions concerning how much a person can see simply by the way they look. The person still may benefit from the use of a sighted guide. They may have limited vision or difficulty with light and shadow perception.

### Making Information Accessible: How to Prepare Large Print, Taped and Braille Materials.

#### Large Print

- Do not use paper any larger than the standard 8 ½" x 11".
- Use black ink on white, opaque, matte finish paper.
- Use right hand margins that are "ragged" and not flush.
- The minimum font size should be 18 point bold.
- Best typeface is Helvetica or Arial or similar sans serif fonts.
- Use lower case letters with initial capital letters rather than all capitals.
- Lines of text should be no longer than six inches.
- Use one-and-one-half or double spacing between lines.

#### Braille

- Local volunteer tapes and Braille services can often transcribe copies of brief information in Braille, provided the volume needed is small.
- Keep in mind that they may need a fair amount of advance notice.
- For more information on Braille, large type, and tape-recorded materials, contact the local Lighthouse for the Blind.

# Assisting People Who Are Deaf or Hard Of Hearing

Over 10.3 million people have hearing impairments or 3.5% of the national population. Florida reports 680,140 individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Many individuals have hearing that enables them to benefit from the use of assistive listening systems.

Hearing loss ranges from mild to profound. One person may be able to hear everything but very high-pitched sounds while another may hear only the roar of a jet engine and another hears nothing. A hard of hearing person may have difficulty developing his or her speech depending on the degree of hearing loss and when it occurred. The range of hearing loss included the person who has age-related mild hearing loss to the person who is congenitally (born) deaf.

## REMEMBER THESE BASIC TIPS:

- Get the person's attention tactfully. Wave your hand, gently tap their shoulder, or flash the lights.
- Be a lively speaker. Use facial expressions that match your tone of voice, and use gestures, body language and pantomime to communicate.
- Look directly at the person while speaking. Even a slight turn of the head can obscure the deaf person's vision. Other distracting factors affecting communication include moustaches obscuring the lips, smoking, pencil chewing and putting hands in front of face.
- Some people who are deaf or hard of hearing will read lips, but it is generally believed that approximately 30% of what is spoken can easily read and understood.
- Don't be embarrassed about communicating via pencil and paper. Getting the message across is more important than the medium used.
- Try to rephrase a thought rather than repeating the same words. If the person doesn't understand you, try to re-state the sentence.
- Be flexible with language. If the person does not understand you, rephrase your statement using simpler words. Do not keep repeating the same phrase over and over. Try writing it down.

## terminology:

**Hard of Hearing:** Used to describe people who have usable residual hearing or who use hearing aids to amplify sounds.

**Deaf:** Used to describe people who have little or no usable residual hearing.

- Speak clearly and slowly, but don't exaggerate or shout. This does not help the person to hear. Keep your sentences short.
- If a sign language interpreter is involved, speak directly to the person who is deaf – not the interpreter.
- Be sure only one person is speaking at a time in a group situation. When the speaker changes, indicate so with a visual cue.
- Don't assume that a person wearing a hearing aid can hear you. Sometimes hearing aids are used to increase general sounds like traffic alarms, etc.
- Keep your hands and hair away from your mouth. Be aware if you are a full-mustached or bearded man that you may be difficult or impossible to lip read.



# Assisting People Who Have Speech Difficulties

According to the 2005 U.S. Census, 328,700 people fifteen years old and older experience severe difficulty with speech. The causes of these difficulties are varied. People with speech disorders often have perfect hearing. Raising your voice to communicate with guests who have speech difficulties is unnecessary.

Achieving effective communication is more important than the method used and there are many ways to facilitate conversation, such as writing back and forth to each other or typing a conversation on a computer. Use techniques like repeating the part of the sentence that you understood—"Now let me see . . . I understood you to say that you would like to buy a soda". Or you can try phrasing things so that the answer is yes or no—"Would you like to buy a soda"? Followed by "do you know where the concession stand is located?" or "Would you like assistance?"

You may see someone using a communication board. A communication board can be as simple as someone pointing to various pictograms (pictures that represent concepts such as the figure of a woman or man found on signs at restrooms) or commonly used words or phrases, cut out and pasted on a piece of cardboard. There are also computerized communication boards that an individual uses to type out words, phrases, or sentences that are converted into computerized speech or text. Using a communication device can take longer, so be patient and allow the individual to finish before you try to respond.

## REMEMBER THESE BASIC TIPS:

- Give your complete attention to the person who has difficulty speaking.
  - Be patient. Do not correct and do not speak for the person. Allow extra time for the person to articulate what they are trying to convey.
  - If you do not understand something do not pretend that you do. Ask the guest to repeat what he or she said and then repeat back the parts that you understand.
- Ask for assistance only after making every effort to understand the guest. People tend to give up too quickly when encountering persons who have speech difficulties. Seek assistance from another docent, volunteer or staff person as a last resort. Always be respectful of the guest when asking for assistance.
  - Keep your manner encouraging. The longer you talk the easier it will become to understand. People with speech disorders want to be understood as much as you want to understand. Often the guest is used to having to repeat things in order to be better understood.
  - Ask questions that require short answers, a nod or shake of the head, when necessary.
  - Consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask the person if that is acceptable. Understanding what is being said is more important than the method of communication.
  - If no solution to the communication difficult can be worked out between you and the guest, perhaps he or she has an attendant, companion or spouse who could interpret on the guest's behalf. Once again, it is important that you always speak directly to the guest—not the companion.
  - Are pens and paper readily available should you need them to communicate?

# Assisting People Who Have Cognitive Disabilities

The reported numbers of individuals with cognitive disabilities are 13.5 million or 4.8% of the total U.S. population. Florida is reported to have 827,000 individuals with cognitive disabilities. As with all other disabilities, cognitive disabilities have a wide range of manifestations, from the individual with dyslexia whose reading speed may be slower to the individual who requires a personal assistant to accomplish daily tasks. Remember, people with cognitive disabilities often have good hearing and vision, but the message is not sorted properly once it is received. The category of intellectual disabilities is included in this category.

## **myth:**

*A person with a cognitive disability should be pitied and treated with special attention.*

## **fact:**

If an individual is at your facility, she is expecting the same enjoyable experience as all the other guests. Having knowledge of different accommodations and communication aides will assist you to provide effective and satisfactory services. Flexibility and creativity in communication are the common keys to respectful communication.

## **REMEMBER THESE BASIC TIPS:**

- Speak slowly and distinctly. Support what you are saying with body language and other visual cues.
- Give specific instructions and set simple guidelines. Don't underestimate the individual's potential to understand you.
- Phrase instructions in the positive. For example, "Walk carefully and slowly inside, it is very dark" is more easily understood than "Don't fall".
- Help the person feel comfortable. Maintain a pleasant voice and facial expression.
- Treat the adult who has a cognitive disability as an adult, not a child. Don't "talk down" to the individual.
- Consider moving to an area with fewer distractions allowing for more direct focused contact.
- Some information processing problems may affect social skills such as an unconventional or complete lack of response. Do not confuse this with rudeness.

# Assisting People Who Have Mental Illness

One in 6 Americans has a severe mental illness. Mental illnesses are medical conditions that disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning. Mental illnesses are medical conditions that often result in a diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life.

Having a mental illness can create an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors. Some mental illnesses can generate erratic behavior. Reacting in a negative manner or punishing the person for behaviors that they may not be able to control does not assist individual gain control over their behavior. Incidents when guests behave in a confrontational or otherwise difficult manner will be very rare.

## REMEMBER THESE BASIC TIPS:

- Speak slowly and distinctly. Support what you are saying with non-verbal expressions (i.e., smile, positive body language.)
- Listen in a supportive way by keeping good eye contact and maintaining a relaxed body posture.
- Help the person feel comfortable. Maintain a pleasant voice and facial expression.
- Explain the rules and procedures and follow them gently but firmly.
- Keep alert to body language and gestures. These can replace speech if the individual is experiencing difficulty conveying information with words. Don't insist that an individual verbally respond to you.
- Consider moving to an area with fewer distractions allowing for more direct, focused contact.
- Think ahead. Plan your response to a situation if a guest creates a disturbance in the audience.
- If the person appears to be in crisis or is exhibiting behavior you do not understand, ask them if there is some way you can assist them. Do not automatically assume they are dangerous or call 911.

# Assisting Older Guests

Older guests love to travel. The older population is expected to comprise 21% of the population by year 2030 (U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging). This significant figure emphasizes the importance of learning more about older adults and working to meet their needs.

Twenty percent of the population over the age of 65 has some degree of disability. Of the remaining 80% who are not disabled, many experience sensory changes that many affect their ability to enjoy a museum exhibit. Most people will experience some sensitivity to sensory stimulation as they age. When reaching age 70 or older, individuals may discover that their vision, hearing, taste and smell are not what they used to be. These individuals may be a large portion of your guests as we also know that as people age they expect to continue to do the things that they have always done. Although many older adults may not need specific assistance, they can benefit by your understanding their specific needs.

The changes a person may experience in mobility, vision, and hearing vary according to the person. In addition to sensory changes, older adults may also move more slowly and have less stamina. Almost 50% of older adults have arthritis and most individuals have some degree of weakening in their muscles. Therefore, they may have difficulty standing or walking for long periods without a break.

As with any disability, the manifestation of that disability can range from imperceptible to pronounced. Do not make assumptions about what assistance is required based on a guest's age.

## REMEMBER THESE BASIC TIPS:

- Be respectful. All people deserve to be treated with courtesy and respect. Someday you may also experience limited mobility, sight, hearing, or a slow down of cognitive comprehension.
- Pride often prevents older guests from asking for assistance, so be alert for any signs of fatigue or confusion and offer assistance. Don't take offense if they refuse.
- When providing directions to guests, be sure to give them from the person's point of view (i.e. from their right or left, etc.).