



Planning Accessible Meetings and Events

Guidelines to Accommodate All Participants

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) is committed to making all meetings and events sponsored or organized by MDPH accessible to everyone. In adherence with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) it is MDPH's policy to hold events (meetings, conferences and professional gatherings) where physical and communication barriers do not exclude people with disabilities from attending and participating.ⁱ

When planning a meeting or an event, make sure that everyone can find out about, attend and benefit from it. Integrating accessibility into all components of your meeting or event planning will ensure that the event is enriching for everyone.

In this guide, you can quickly find the following topics on planning your next accessible event:

- Facility accessibility
- What to do in case of emergency
- Transportation
- Lodging
- Logistics and timing
- Promotion and registration
- Communication formats for people with visual and/or learning disabilities
- Communication access for people who are deaf or hard of hearing
- What to have on hand
- Websites and IT
- Food, water, air
- Staffing and training
- Coordinating with presenters

- Service animals
- Resources for more information

Developed by Massachusetts Department of Public Health, The Healthy Aging Health and Disability Unit (2007).

For other MDPH Health and Disability Program publications, go to ([Health and Disability Program data and publications | Mass.gov](#)):

- Accessible Print Materials
- Plan for Promoting the Health of People with Disabilities

Facility accessibility

Ensure that people with disabilities can access and navigate the proposed meeting site.

- For a useful accessibility checklist regarding:
 - Meeting and lecture spaces
 - Restrooms
 - Parking
 - Refreshment and common areas, and
 - Directions and navigation

go to the ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities at
<https://www.adachecklist.org/>

- Post clear and logical directional signage in useful locations and at regular intervals.
- Instruct staff greeting participants on directions to accessible routes and on how to give clear verbal directions to those with visual or cognitive impairments. See Disability Etiquette links in Resources, page 18.

What to do in case of emergency

Emergency plans must take everyone's access needs into account.

- Be sure that emergency announcements and alerts are accessible to all. Fire alarms should have audible signals and strobes. Announcements should be available through public address systems and visual means.
- Have evacuation plans and equipment (if necessary) in place for people with mobility impairments, service animals, and vision or hearing losses. Be sure that attendees with cognitive impairments understand how to evacuate the building, or designate someone to provide assistance. Point out evacuation routes at the beginning of the event during the basic "housekeeping" announcements.

- Develop an accessible evacuation plan with the local fire marshal who should be able to evacuate people with disabilities quickly and safely. Include people with disabilities in the development process. The local Center for Independent Living may have helpful input. For a list of Centers for Independent Living, visit <https://www.masilc.org/cils/>

Transportation

Make sure everyone can get where they need to go.

- Check that your event site is served by useful, accessible public transportation. Some public transit only runs at certain hours or intervals, or lacks reliable wheelchair lifts. Familiarize yourself with the routes and schedules serving your event site, and include public transit directions in any directions you give to attendees and presenters.
- Ensure that there is wheelchair-accessible transportation to and from the airport. If people are flying into town for your event, they will need to travel between the airport and the event site. Learn about any accessible airport shuttles in your area, and have those numbers available for any attendees who might need them.
- Be aware of participants' parking needs. Parking should be as close to the event site as possible; the site should have sufficient accessible parking. If your event is intended to appeal to people with disabilities in particular, try to set up extra accessible spaces and drop-off areas ahead of time. For more information on accessible parking specifications, see the Department of Justice's ADA Business Brief on Restriping Parking Lots at <http://www.ada.gov/restribr.htm>. If parking includes parking machines, make sure verbal instructions are also visually represented by icons or text.
- Use vehicles with wheelchair lifts, wheelchair tie-downs, and space for securing mobility devices when providing transportation for attendees. Drop passengers off as close to the accessible entrance as possible. Remember that wheelchairs and scooters require extra space, so have enough accessible vehicles available.

- Call ahead to request accessible taxis, as the number of accessible cabs in an area tends to be limited. Find out how many accessible vehicles each taxi company in your area has and is running at any given time. Keep the phone numbers of the companies with the most accessible vehicles handy. Tell the companies ahead of time that you may need their accessible taxis at a particular time and place.

Lodging

Be sure that appropriate lodging is available for everyone.

- Check out the ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities at **<https://www.adachecklist.org/>** for a useful accessibility checklist. If the facilities were built after January 26, 1992, the ADA Checklist for New Lodging Facilities can be accessed at **<http://www.ada.gov/lodgesur.htm>**.
- Make sure that the signage on the premises is clear, legible, and useful, and that the facility is laid out in a logical fashion. Guests with low vision or cognitive impairments should be able to find their way easily and safely to and from their rooms and common areas. Hotel staff should give directions to people without hearing loss in a complete and straightforward manner, verbalizing each portion of the directions, rather than relying on vague phrases like, “over there”. However, when giving directions to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, staff **should** emphasize pointing and miming and should use pre-printed scripts in conjunction with facility maps.
- Provide convenient, quick, and accessible transportation between the hotel and the event site or ensure that such transportation is easy to find. People with disabilities may have difficulty getting from place to place, particularly if the transportation methods that would normally be most convenient are inaccessible or prohibitively expensive. See Transportation, pages 3-4, for more information.
- Inform hotel staff that guests with disabilities may have service animals with them. Hotel staff should already be aware of this but a reminder may be helpful. Talk to them about service animal laws and etiquette.

The Department of Justice's ADA Business Brief on Service Animals at **https://archive.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm** may be a helpful resource.

- Make sure that hotel staff know where the text telephones (TTYs) are and how to use them properly. Lodging facilities must have functional TTYs available for guest rooms, public phones, and the front desk. Places of lodging with five or more rooms are also required to have a certain number of visual doorbells, visual alarms, visual/tactile alarm clocks and closed captioned televisions in place. Check that the facility has these devices in good working order, and that the staff know where they are kept when not in use and how to install them. (Leaving equipment in the room for the guest to install is not sufficient). Hotel staff should also be ready to read aloud any written materials necessary for checking in or out, and must accept identification other than a driver's license from a person with a disability. See the Department of Justice's ADA Business Brief on Communicating with Guests who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in Hotels, Motels and Other Places of Transient Lodging at **<http://www.ada.gov/hotelcombr.htm>**, and their Guide for Places of Lodging: Serving Guests Who are Blind or Who Have Low Vision at **<http://www.ada.gov/lodblind.htm>**.

Logistics and timing

Arrange the logistics of your event conveniently and efficiently for everyone. All-day or multi-day events can pose particular challenges for people with disabilities.

- Begin the event late enough so that people who receive help from personal care attendants early in the morning can arrive on time. Note that some people with disabilities have sleep or stamina issues that make very early or very late events impossible for them.
- Schedule breaks during long workshops so that people can use the rest room, walk around, take medications, or engage in other self-care activities. Breaks between workshops or activities should be at least fifteen minutes long - in order to allow someone who may move slowly to use the rest room or get a drink of water. Also, communication for deaf people, who may have to read rapidly scrolling CART transcripts or follow an ASL interpreter, can be very tiring.
- Arrange for workshops and activities to be in the same general area of the building whenever possible. This makes navigation easier and allows people to travel between activities quickly, easily, and punctually; it also helps those with mobility or stamina issues. Accessible restrooms should also be located nearby.
- Ensure that “field trips” and off-site events are physically accessible to all participants and include accessible communication. Visit remote sites ahead of time to be sure that all attendees can access them. Check out the ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities at <https://www.adachecklist.org/> for a useful accessibility checklist.
- Be sure that any transportation you provide between one location and another is accessible. If participants must find their own transportation, check to see if convenient and accessible transportation to the sites exist. (See Transportation, pages 3-4, for more information). If not, consider changing the location of one or both sites.

Promotion and registration

Keep in mind that people with disabilities can only attend an event if they know it is happening. Set up the registration process so people with disabilities can register easily and let you know what accommodations will be necessary.

- Ensure that people with disabilities know about your event.
 - Advertise your event with disability-related organizations (such as the local Center for Independent Living), e-mail lists, websites, media, etc.
 - Be sure that your promotional materials are available at locations and in formats that are accessible to people with disabilities. For example, a flyer on a bulletin board will not reach people who are blind or have low vision. Advertising over the radio will not reach people who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Make the registration process accessible.
 - Online registration forms should be accessible and usable by people utilizing assistive technology (See Websites and IT, pages 10-11).
 - All MDPH event announcements and promotional materials must contain the MDPH Accessibility Policy Statement and Graphics available at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/policy-statement-for-publicity-and-accommodations-for-people-with-disabilities> .
 - Prepare telephone staff for TTY and relay calls (See Staffing and training, pages 12-13).
 - On-site registration tables should include someone who can provide assistance, and feature American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters on standby to assist with the check-in process.
- Ask about accommodation needs on your registration form:

- Sign language interpreters, open captioning, assistive listening devices, Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART)
- Note taker
- Braille, large print, audio cassette, disk (include format)
- Wheelchair access
- Lodging, if applicable
- Transportation
- Any assistants accompanying the attendee
- Environmental concerns (food, allergens, etc.). See Food, water, air; page 13

Communication formats for people with visual and/or learning disabilities

Make sure that everyone can access the information available at your event. Written materials are often inaccessible to people with visual impairments or print disabilities.

- Make conference materials available electronically and in large print; they should also be obtainable in Braille and on audio tape when necessary. If materials include videos or DVDs, these should include captioning and audio description.
- Make presentation materials available electronically and in large print; they should also be obtainable on audio tape, and possibly in Braille, when necessary. If materials include videos or DVDs, these should include captioning and audio description.
- Be aware that accessible formats include:
 - Braille
 - Large print
 - Disk (floppy or CD-ROM)
 - E-mail
 - Closed captioning

- Make electronic versions of materials available in plain text (.txt) at the very least; they should also be obtainable in Rich Text (.rtf) or MS Word (.doc). PDF is rarely an accessible format.
- See Accessible Printed Materials: Basic Formatting Guidelines to Accommodate All Audiences at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/accessible-print-materials/download> .

Communication access for people who are deaf or hard of hearing

Plan ahead, as people who are deaf or hard of hearing may have a variety of communication access needs. Proper planning will ensure that everyone can communicate and participate comfortably.

- Set up a deadline for attendees to request sign language interpreters or CART providers; make this deadline as far in advance of the starting date as possible. Then, reserve interpreters and CART providers anyway, just to be on the safe side. If you do not need them, you can always release them at the deadline without incurring any payment penalties. Allow for them when planning room occupancy, meals, and other issues involving exact numbers of people. Make sure there are enough interpreters and reporters to serve everyone's needs adequately. To reserve interpreters or CART reporters, call (800) 882-1155 (V) or (800) 530-7570 (TTY).
- Find out the attendee's preferred mode of communication:
 - American Sign Language (ASL)
 - Pidgin Signed English (PSE), which uses ASL signs in an English syntax
 - Certified Deaf Interpreter
 - Cued speech (modified lip-reading with finger-spelled cues)
 - Oral transliteration (facilitated speech-reading)
 - CART (communication access real-time translation)

Not all people who are deaf or hard of hearing sign; likewise, not all people who are deaf or hard of hearing read written transcripts with ease.

- Be prepared to address the issue of payment and answer questions about the nature of the event when you arrange for the interpreter or CART provider. For example, an event geared towards doctors may involve a great deal of medical terminology; you may need an interpreter or CART provider who specializes in medical interpretation. Generally, an interpreter signs for half an hour at a time and then switches off with another interpreter. If your event is longer than half an hour, you may need two or more interpreters, even if only one person requires an interpreter. A two-hour minimum charge is the industry standard. If you will have people who are deaf both as speakers and audience members, you may need more than two interpreters.
- Make assistive listening devices available for people who are hard of hearing. Check before the event to ensure the devices are working and communicate on the same frequency; change and test the batteries. Make registration staff aware of the location and availability of the devices. Post a sign at the registration table letting participants know what type of devices are available. Remember that a given type of device may not work for everyone and be sure to provide a variety of listening attachments such as headphones, neckloops, silhouette adapters, and earbuds to ensure efficient use.
- Ask the interpreters or transliterators what their needs are in terms of lighting, seating, audio equipment, scheduling, and information.
- Issue CART providers transcripts of prepared training materials so they can incorporate complex terminology into their dictionaries ahead of time.
- Tell event staff not to walk or stand in front of interpreters or block the CART provider's screen.
- Avoid lights that point directly into people's faces or with high levels of glare. Provide sufficient illumination in common areas where people will be gathering and talking so that people who are signing can see each other clearly. Make sure that interpreters are illuminated properly, especially during presentations using projectors where the room may be dark. Signage should be placed in well-lit locations.

- Provide a text telephone (TTY) and make it available if on-site public telephones do not already have them. Instruct registration staff as to its location and use. Post signage at the registration table and public telephones alerting attendees to its availability.
- Be sure that any staff who will be in telephone contact with presenters or attendees are knowledgeable about the proper use of a TTY. Staff should also know how to conduct a telephone-relay call. (Most relay operators will offer to explain the system at the beginning of a relay call). Relay service can be reached from anywhere in the U.S. by dialing 711.

What to have on hand

Keep a few simple items available to help make the event go more smoothly for everyone, regardless of disability status.

- Have the following items for facilitating access available – **note that none of these are substitutes for full physical or communications access!**
 - Paper and pens, for communicating with people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have speech impairments
 - Extra microphones, for lectures and meetings at which people who are hard of hearing are present
 - Magnifiers, for people with low vision
 - Lapel or adjustable-height microphones to accommodate people using wheelchairs

Websites and IT

Make it easier for people with disabilities to access websites and electronic information related to your event.

- Be sure that people can read your e-mail messages about your event no matter what kind of assistive technology they are using to access them. Avoid loading down e-mail messages with graphics and complex layouts and fonts. Focus on simplicity and legibility. When possible, restrict your message formatting to text-only.
- Make your event website, electronic flyers and promotional e-mail messages usable by people with disabilities. Label separate images and graphics; be sure to use meaningful text in your labels. Make sure that all parts of the site can be accessed by keyboard alone, as many people with disabilities can not operate a mouse. For more information on web accessibility and how to design web pages so that they can be used by everyone, see the relevant section in Appendix G: Resources. Any website posted under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts must follow the web accessibility standards listed at <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massgov-web-accessibility-statement>.
- Make all electronic files usable by assistive technology. Regardless of what other formats you use, always make files available in plain text (*.txt), accessible HTML, and if possible, Rich Text Format (*.rtf).

Food, water, air

Do not overlook environmental factors, which are important for an accessible event.

- Provide a variety of refreshments, if applicable, taking into account food allergies or sensitivities identified in any requests for accommodations you may have received. (See Promotion and registration, pages 7-8). Common sensitivities include, but are not limited to, peanuts (which are

not actually nuts), nuts, dairy, wheat, gluten, and sugar. When possible, make a list of ingredients available.

- Include a statement in your promotional literature discouraging attendees and presenters from wearing colognes, scents, or perfumed products when attending the event. Some attendees or presenters may have Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS), and may become ill if certain common chemicals or perfumes are present.
- Make sure bottled water and/or accessible water fountains are available, and provide paper cups and straws next to each for people with mobility impairments. Keep supplies replenished; tell staff working at information or registration tables where water and supplies are located.
- Avoid the use of flash photography, which can negatively impact people with seizure disorders or visual impairments.

Staffing and training

Be mindful of access issues when training event staff.

- Train all event staff in basic disability etiquette. Disability etiquette centers around respect, and encompasses issues such as direct communication and personal space. See Resources, page 18, for some guides. Staff should also have strong communications skills, and should be fluent in and comfortable with the language in which the event is taking place. At a minimum, staff should be trained to understand some ASL signs such as “restroom”, “parking”, “restaurant”, “exit” and “emergency/help”.
- Make staff available to serve as sighted guides for people with visual impairments or to provide other types of assistance to people with disabilities. Staff should not force help on anyone who does not want or request it; staff should be polite and willing to take directions. Sighted guides should offer their left arms to be grasped.

Coordinating with presenters

Do not assume that your presenters are as knowledgeable and prepared for diverse populations as you are. They may be well-versed in issues of accessibility or they may never before have considered such issues. Make them aware of these simple guidelines for making accessible presentations.

- Provide any written materials in large print and electronic formats at the time of the presentation. This may be the responsibility of the presenter or the event organizer, so clarify duties ahead of time.
- Speak clearly and slowly, facing the audience whenever possible, and do not block any interpreters working in the room. Explain communication protocol before the beginning of each presentation, focusing on the need to wait to be called upon, the lag time between a person's speech and interpreters' and CART providers' translation of what the person is saying, and the need to avoid interruptions and simultaneous speaking.
- Always speak into any microphone provided, as audience members who are hard of hearing often rely on such amplification. If an audience member asks a question and is not speaking into the microphone, repeat that question into the microphone. If an audience member is signing, either ask for them to come to the front of the room to face the audience or ask the interpreter to repeat what the deaf person signed if there are several deaf people in the audience. Be aware of the proper use of any assistive listening devices that require you to utilize a headset or microphone.
- Allow a light to be focused on the interpreter when lowering light levels.
- Verbalize all visual aids and presentation elements for the benefit of those unable to see them. If the presentation contains video, it must be closed captioned. If closed captioning is impossible, provide a script. CART providers and interpreters will have difficulty interpreting a video due to room setup and the need for the deaf person to be able to see both the provider/interpreter and the video at the same time.
- Do not comment on the presence of or single out audience members with disabilities solely because of those disabilities.

Service animals

People with a variety of disabilities utilize service animals. Be prepared to handle their particular needs and access issues.

- Ensure that service animals are welcome in the facility. Remind staff that they may not ask for proof of service animal certification.
- Make registration and facility staff aware of the different types of service animals, including guide animals, hearing animals, seizure alert animals, and mobility/balance animals. Not all service animals are dogs.
- Instruct staff on proper service animal etiquette; remind them not to distract or disturb any service animals they may encounter during the event.
- Designate a relief area outdoors near the accessible entrance, and ensure that sufficient trash receptacles are nearby. Some service animals relieve on grass, and others on concrete or other hard surfaces; try to provide both in the relief area.
- Accommodate both service animal handlers and people with allergies. If an attendee or staff member is allergic to someone's service animal, offer to seat the allergic person far away from the service animal and out of the way of any ventilation that might expose them to dander or fur.
- Ask about seating preferences. People with service animals may sit wherever people without service animals are allowed to sit, but may prefer seats with the most space for their service animals, or away from the path of traffic.

Resources for more information

Utilize these agencies, websites and telephone numbers to learn more about planning accessible events.

▪ **Centers for Independent Living**

- ILRU Directory of Centers – <http://www.masilc.org/cils/>

▪ **Accessible events**

- MDPH's accessibility policy statement and graphics – <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/policy-statement-for-publicity-and-accommodations-for-people-with-disabilities>
- Planning Accessible Conferences and Meetings (archived by Hoagies' Gifted Education Page) - <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/eric/e735.html>
- Section508.gov, a web site explaining the law regarding accessibility of federal information technology. Includes a free tutorial on planning accessible events – <http://www.section508.gov/>

▪ **Facility access**

- ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities – <https://www.adachecklist.org/>
- Massachusetts Architectural Access Board – <http://www.mass.gov/aab/>
- ADA Checklist for New Lodging Facilities - <http://www.ada.gov/lodgesur.htm>
- Accessible Parking Lots – <http://www.ada.gov/restribr.htm>
- Department of Justice ADA Information – <http://www.ada.gov/> or (800) 514-0301
- New England ADA Center –<https://www.newenglandada.org/or> (800) 949-4232

▪ **Emergency planning**

- FEMA’s page on Emergency Planning for Individuals with Special Needs - https://www.fema.gov/pdf/library/pfd_all.pdf
 - An ADA Guide for Local Governments: Making Community Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs Accessible to People with Disabilities - <http://www.ada.gov/emergencyprep.htm>
 - National Fire Protection Association’s Home Safety for People with Disabilities Tip Sheet - <https://www.nfpa.org/downloadable-resources/safety-tip-sheets/home-safety-for-people-with-disabilities-tip-sheet>
- Disability Policy Consortium’s page on Emergency Preparedness-
<https://www.dpcma.org/emergency-preparedness>

▪ **Effective communication and alternate formats**

- To reserve interpreters and CART reporters in Massachusetts – <http://www.mass.gov/mcdhh/> or (800) 882-1155 (v) / (800) 530-7570 (TTY)
- To order Braille transcription of an MDPH publication – Perkins Braille and Talking Book Library at (617) 972-7240 or (800) 852-3133 or National Braille Press at (617) 266-6160.

- MA Department of Public Health: Accessible Print Materials and Formatting Guidelines –
<https://www.mass.gov/doc/accessible-print-materials/download>
 - Communicating with Guests who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in Hotels, Motels and Other Places of Transient Lodging –
<http://www.ada.gov/hotelcombr.htm>
 - Guide for Places of Lodging: Serving Guests who are Blind or who have Low Vision – **<http://www.ada.gov/lodblind.htm>**
 - Removing Barriers: Tips and Strategies to Promote Accessible Communication – **<https://fpg.unc.edu/publications/removing-barriers-tips-and-strategies-promote-accessible-communication>**
- **Accessible web design/information technology**
- Commonwealth of Massachusetts Enterprise Web Accessibility Standards, Version 2.0 – **<http://www.mass.gov/> - search for “web accessibility standards”**
 - World Wide Web Consortium’s (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) – **<http://www.w3.org/wai/>**
 - Web Accessibility In Mind (WebAIM) – **<http://www.webaim.org/>**
 - Web-Based Intranet and Internet Information and Applications (1194.22) – **<https://www.access-board.gov/ict/guide/web.html>**
 - Section508.gov, a web site explaining the law regarding accessibility of federal information technology. Includes a free tutorial on accessible web design –
<http://www.section508.gov/>
- **Service animals**
- ADA Business Brief on Service Animals –
https://archive.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm
 - Delta Society – **<http://www.deltasociety.org/>**
 - Guide Dog Users, Inc. – **<http://www.gdui.org/>**
- **Disability etiquette**

- Easter Seals' Disability Etiquette Page - **http://www.easterseals.com/site/PageServer?pagename=ntl_etiquette**
- Removing Barriers: Tips and Strategies to Promote Accessible Communication - **<https://fpg.unc.edu/publications/removing-barriers-tips-and-strategies-promote-accessible-communication>**

For more information and other publications, please contact:

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Health and Disability Program
250 Washington Street, 6thFloor, Boston, MA 02108

<https://www.mass.gov/health-and-disability-program-hdp>

The information provided in this material was supported by Grant/Cooperative Agreement Number U59/CCU103370-17 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. The contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC.

ⁱ Department of Justice Nondiscrimination on the Basis of State and Local Government Services Regulation, 28 C.F.R. Part 35, § 35.160 (2005). Available at www.ada.gov/reg2.html.