

This resource is a working document and consists of a compilation of tips and best practices gathered from MAC workshops and staff training guides from various cultural institutions. Please contribute your own suggestions and additions by sending an email to us at [museumaccess@gmail.com](mailto:museumaccess@gmail.com).

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## How do you know if someone has a disability?

Oftentimes, it's not possible to assess whether an individual has a disability. There are both visible and invisible disabilities. While you might be able to deduce when a person is blind or has significant mobility/physical challenges, most disabilities are invisible, including deafness, hearing impairments, low vision, learning disabilities, color blindness, and many other physical and developmental disabilities. The [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) requires reasonable accommodations for and effective communication with people who have disabilities. Since disabilities are both visible and invisible, it's best to assume that universal access is necessary for all visitors. Therefore, the most exemplary approach is to strive to provide an inclusionary experience for all visitors and bear in mind best practices in accessibility in all of its forms, including communication and programmatic, architectural and physical, and emotional and attitudinal.

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## Definitions:

### Access – noun

1. the ability, right, or permission to approach, enter, speak with, or use; admittance.
2. the state of quality of being approachable.
3. a way or means of approach

## **Inclusion – noun**

1. the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure.

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## **General recommendations:**

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### **Use language that puts people first**

Rather than defining people by their disabilities, it's best to use language that acknowledges the person first, then the disability. [Click here](#) to view Art Beyond Sight's communication strategies, including a chart that describes appropriate uses of people first language.

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### **Always ask, never assume**

It's welcoming and always appropriate to make eye contact with visitors when they enter your site and offer assistance. Be prepared for some people to say they do not want assistance.

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### **Giving directions**

Be specific about the location of people, places, or things. Avoid vague terms such as "over there." This is especially true when providing directions to a person who is blind but descriptive and specific language is a best practice for all audiences.

When giving directions to visitors, refer to right and left as they apply to your audience.

Indicate the approximate distance to a requested location using number of paces or footsteps and provide information about landmarks along the way.

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## **Tips by audience:**

## For visitors who use wheelchairs

- Accessible parking: If a visitor who uses a wheelchair and/or the person who accompanies him/her calls in advance to inquire about parking, encourage all individuals who use wheelchairs to utilize accessible parking spaces and provide them with directions and instructions to those parking spaces, as well as other relevant information for their visit.
- Visitor or Concierge services: engage with visitors who have wheelchairs across accessible counters: When a visitor who uses a wheelchair is speaking with a visitor services or concierge staff member, engage with him/her at the fully accessible counter whenever possible. Accessible counters are 36 inches above the floor.
- For guided tours: build in extra time to get from place to place. Transitioning between galleries and tour stops will take more time. Redistribute time allotment to ensure the experience of moving between places is not rushed. If the experience involves moving from floor to floor, a best practice is to take everyone in the group on the elevator together whenever possible. This provides a more inclusive experience for the person who uses a wheelchair.

## For visitors with other mobility impairments:

- Anticipate needs and communicate with participants and caregivers to ensure needs are being met.
- Know alternate routes and communicate alternate routes during program.
- Open doors for all participants and allow all people to enter.
- Position yourself so that you can see everyone and everyone can see you.
- Offer an elevator, whenever possible, and then offer to assist as they go up or down stairs or ramps.
- Be discreet but do ask if there's anything you can do to provide a comfortable and enjoyable experience for him/her.

- Offer chairs and/or the option of sitting down. Invite visitors to sit down on a bench or chair whenever one is nearby.
- Provide clear instructions regarding the elevators (if applicable) available to him/her.
- Walk at a slower pace, adapt the program to reduce the amount of walking, etc. Make extra time for visitors who have mobility impairments and, in some cases, slow down and adapt your program.

## **For visitors who are deaf or hard of hearing:**

- Face visitors directly and maintain eye contact when talking to them.
- Keep distracting movements to a minimum.
- Use facial expressions and gestures when appropriate to help communicate the tone of your message.
- Be sure that your face is well lit and that it is clearly visible to the group so that people who need to read lips have a clear view of your mouth when you speak.
- Do not stand with your back to a window or with the sun behind you. Be aware that backlighting or glare from windows or general outdoor sun glare can make it difficult for people to see your face and mouth clearly.
- Adjust pace of program.
- Do not talk while the lights are off or dim. If you the lights are out or dim and you continue talking, people with hearing impairments may not be able to follow your talk because they cannot see your face.
- Rephrase instead of simply repeating what you've already said when a visitor doesn't understand your remarks.
- Speak in a normal tone of voice and consider moving closer to the person, but be careful not to enter his/her personal space. It's ok to ask, "May I move in a little closer to speak with you?" Shouting or raising your voice distorts the sound of your voice making it more difficult for people who use hearing aids. Shouting also makes it harder for people who lip-read to recognize words.

- Avoid sound bleed at all costs. Background noise, including noise from the street or even from an exhibit, can make it difficult for people who are hard of hearing to understand what is being said. If the visitor is in a noisy place, invite them to join you in a quieter location.
- Repeat questions that are asked by visitors, especially when they are joined by others, so that everyone in the group knows what the visitors are sharing. This is especially important because everyone can see your face, but not necessarily the faces of other tour participants for lip-reading purposes.
- Have participants speak one at a time so that it is easier for everyone to understand.
- Use written transcripts: When playing audio or video recordings, provide written transcripts whenever possible for individuals who may not be able to hear what is being said.

## **For visitors who are blind or who have low vision:**

### **General communication:**

- Introduce yourself using your name and/or position, especially if you are wearing a name badge containing this information. Ask the person if he/she needs any help.
- Greet people who are blind immediately when they enter a room or a service area to let them know you are present and ready to assist. Initiating conversation right away also eliminates uncomfortable silences.
- Speak directly to a person who is blind or partially sighted, not through a companion, guide, or other individuals.
- DO NOT pet service dogs. Ignore guide dogs or other service animals. Remember that canes and guide dogs help a person who is visually impaired to "see" where they are going. Guide dogs have a job to do and should not be distracted.
- Use a natural conversational tone and speed when speaking. Do not speak loudly and slowly unless the person also has a hearing impairment.

- Address people who are blind or partially sighted by name when

- Address people who are blind or partially sighted by name when possible. This is especially important in crowded areas.
- In a group setting, encourage all participants in the discussion (and especially quiet listeners) to introduce themselves or introduce them to the person who is blind and explain where they are located. For example, "My friend Daniel has just walked up to our group and is standing to your left. Daniel, this is Michelle!"
- Indicate the end of a conversation or encounter to avoid the embarrassing situation of leaving a person speaking when no one is actually there. Do not walk away without saying you are going.
- Feel free to use words that refer to vision during the course of conversation. Vision-oriented words such as "look," "see," and "watching" are a part of everyday verbal communication. The words "blind", "visually impaired," "partially sighted," are also acceptable words in conversation.
- Be precise and thorough when you describe people, places, or things. Do not leave items out or change a description because you think it is unimportant or unpleasant.
- Provide very detailed directions using directional language and physical rather than visual cues. Be prepared to provide directions by using directional language, such as right, left, numbers of steps up and down. Be sure to identify physical markers, such as ramps, signs, waste-level drinking fountains, and stairs, whenever possible.
- Use and encourage visually descriptive language. Making reference to colors, patterns, designs, and shapes is perfectly acceptable and accentuates the quality of the experience for all visitors. Encourage sighted visitors to share what observations they're making while on the tour.
- Incorporate touch, taste, smells, and sounds to illustrate ideas, concepts, or stories.
- Examples of use of touch – Emphasize aspects of the program that are tactile. Integrate handling objects into the experience for animals or plants that can't be touched. If possible, integrate taste.
- Examples of use of sound – Draw group's attention to sounds in the landscape.

## Orientation and Mobility:

- Remember that service dogs are welcome but do not pet or acknowledge the dog directly. If necessary, it is within the statutes of the ADA to ask what job a service animal is trained to perform but never ask a person if s/he has a disability.
- Always ask before physically assisting a visitor. With visitors who are blind, let him/her know that s/he can take your arm and that you're happy to help guide him/her. Do not grab his arm or push him in front of you.
- Walk normally and a pace that suits the visitor.
- Tell the visitor about obstacles like stairs, doors, exhibit cases, and people. Obstacles include ropes set up for cues, protruding objects that are not identifiable with a cane (above 24 inches from the floor).
- Do not leave a person who is blind or visually impaired standing alone in "free space" when you serve as a guide. If you have to separate from the person momentarily, lead them to an area where they will not interrupt the flow of other visitors or guide him/her to a seating area. If the person wants to sit down, put his hand on the back of the chair for assistance.
- When the visitor is ready to leave, make sure s/he has all his belongings and any purchases. Make sure s/he knows the way out, and that s/he is prepared for where s/he is going next.

## When processing a purchase for someone who is blind or has low vision:

- Announce how much the bill is and ask the visitor how they would like to pay.
- Offer to show the visitor where to write the signature on checks and credit card slips.
- Count the visitors change back to them aloud; coin by coin, dollar by dollar, as you place it in their hands.

## For people with autism spectrum disorders:

- Ask visitor and/or the person accompanying him/her if you can be of

assistance – Be open about asking about needs and accommodations.

- Physical setting: Clear visual boundaries, minimal noise and visual stimulation, quiet/break area available. Identify a quiet space where s/he can go. Some individuals on the autism spectrum can have difficulties with sensory overload or overstimulation. A quiet space to relax for a while is important for remedying any negative reactions that might occur in response to overstimulation.
- Clear communication about the layout of your program, tour, and/or exhibit is important and, whenever possible, use visual prompts. Use photographs on the website, a slideshow, visual schedules, visual cues, and images to provide an orientation to engage the visitor.
- Group management: Establish positive rules that teach appropriate behavior, provide schedules attached to rewards, clear transitions, and instructions.
- Adaptations: Hands-on learning, visual prompts (ie: present social narrative or visual schedule of program and site in pre-visit materials and again at beginning of visit), simple to understand language, allow for students to bring their own food or belongings.
- If you see a person flapping his or her hands and/or making repetitive motions, stimming or flapping is often an expression of joy and repetitive motions (rocking or repeating a phrase, for example) can be calming to individuals who have autism.
- When doing an art or crafts-based project or a structured activity, show the end result at the beginning of the activity, if possible.

## **For a person who has dementia:**

- If you suspect an individual may have challenges with memory loss or does not appear to be entirely lucid, be sure to offer to help him/her (ie: offer a place to sit, etc) and watch to make sure s/he is safe at all times. Discreetly notify other staff members to watch the visitor to make sure s/he is safe and in case s/he needs additional assistance.
- Offer a multi-sensory experience
- Ask him/her feelings-based questions





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