

# Assisting People with Disabilities

## FOR ALL INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

- Identify yourself and if you are there in an official capacity, inform the individual why you are there.
- Ask before you help -- "**What can I do to assist you?**" -- wait for the individual to instruct you
- Speak directly to the individual with a disability, not to a companion, aide, or interpreter.
- Treat individuals with disabilities as independent people, do not assume they need help simply because they have a disability.
- Do not touch an individual or any assistive device, service animal etc., without permission. Grabbing an arm or other assistance could disrupt balance especially if they are unaware or not ready for contact.

## WHEELCHAIR USERS/ MOBILITY DISABILITIES

- If an individual is using an assistive device like a cane, walker, etc., or appears to have difficulty standing ask if the person would prefer to sit if a chair or a place is available.
- Put yourself at eye level when conversing with anyone using a wheelchair or other assistive device like a cane, walker, etc.
- Avoid leaning on a wheelchair or assistive device. This is part of an individual's body space.
- Do not assume an individual wants help or a wheelchair user wants to be pushed. Offer assistance, wait for acceptance. Do not move or push without express permission.
- Offer assistance before opening a door even if an individual appears to be having difficulty.
- Move out of the way instead of expecting someone to move around you.
- Keep accessible entrances and pathways clear of obstacles.
- Keep assistive devices with their users whenever possible. If you abandon a wheelchair or assistive device, the individual's mobility and independence may be significantly compromised.
- Taking individuals down stairs while in wheelchairs is not recommended and can place both the wheelchair user and responders in danger.
  - ◆ Many wheelchairs have removable arms, footrests, etc. which do not sturdy handholds.
  - ◆ Most motorized wheelchairs and scooters are too heavy for users to remain in while evacuating.
  - ◆ Transfer users to devices like stair-chairs or other means and have other assistants carry down assistive devices separately, reunite users and equipment as rapidly as possible.
- Be aware of a person's reach limits, try to keep needed items within easy reach.

## BLIND / VISION DISABILITY

- Speak in a normal tone of voice, identify yourself as you approach, announce when you leave.
- Speak directly to the individual. If in a group, identify who you are addressing.
  - ◆ Be descriptive when giving directions, provide a verbal dialog of your surroundings.
  - ◆ Example: "There are 12 steps, this is the first ... this is the last."

- Don't try to avoid words like "look" or "see", there are no good substitutes.
- Provide written materials in large print and have clear contrast for persons with low vision.
- To guide - let the person take your arm so they can follow the motion of your body.
  - ◆ Do not grab the individual's arm first.
  - ◆ Most will take your arm at the elbow and are likely to walk behind and a little to the side.
  - ◆ To sit in a chair or get into a car, guide the individual's hand to the leading edge seat.
- Ensure doors wide open or fully closed, make the individual aware of any hazards like half-open filing cabinets, objects hanging or protruding from the wall, etc.
- Walk on the opposite side of a service animal. Don't pet or distract a service animal without the owner's express permission.
- If food is served, use a clock orientation to inform where food items are on the plate. Some individuals prefer garnishes and inedible food items be removed from the plate, and may ask for food to be cut.

### **DEAF / HEARING DISABILITY**

- Gain attention before starting a conversation – wave your hand, flash the lights, etc.
- Always speak directly to the individual. If the individual uses an ASL interpreter, do not speak to the interpreter unless your question or comment is meant expressly for the interpreter.
- Face the individual directly. Maintain eye contact. Speak in a normal tone of voice unless asked to raise your voice.
- Keep your face in the light and out of shadow. Don't cover your face with your hands.
- Keep language and directions simple. Try rephrasing if the individual is having difficulty understanding.
- People who lip-read catch, at best, 75-80% of what is said.
  - ◆ Most lip readers have great difficulty when a responder has facial hair -mustache, beard.
  - ◆ Avoid obscuring your mouth while speaking.
  - ◆ Stressful situations like a disaster may also lower an individual's comprehension.
- Paper & pencil, cell phone/text devices for written exchanges or drawing pictures may help.

### **SPEECH DISABILITIES**

- Give the individual your full attention. Be patient with delays whether from speech patterns or assistive communication device usage. Take time needed for mutual communication without endangering either of you.
- Try to ask questions requiring short, concise responses. Do not speak for the individual or attempt to finish sentences.
- If you experience difficulty understanding, ask the individual to repeat for verification, confirm mutual understanding. Never pretend you understand.
- If difficulty continues, ask permission to augment communication with pen & paper, a talk board, or other means of facilitating communication.

## **COGNITIVE / INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES**

- Be patient, flexible and supportive. The nature of the disability may affect short-term memory, attention span, perception, balance, disorientation, ability to process instructions, etc.
- Treat an adult as an adult irrespective of comprehension level and can make decisions unless otherwise informed.
- Provide extra time for decision-making.
- Speak clearly in a normal tone of voice using simple words and concrete versus abstract concepts.
- Break down complex ideas or instructions, especially multi-step directions, into smaller parts.
- Take the time to verify you understand each other. Be prepared to repeat information.
- Do not insist on eye contact if it is distracting or creates upset.
- Be aware tone of voice, body language, facial expressions may not reflect intended communication.
- Consider moving to a quiet or more private location if distractions impede communication. Large groups can be overwhelming or over-stimulating for some individuals.
- Offer assistance completing forms or understanding written instructions. Wait for the individual to accept an offer of assistance.

## **HIDDEN DISABILITIES**

- These include medical conditions not readily apparent such as heart, respiratory or seizure conditions.
- Do not make an assumption an individual without a visible disability does not need an accommodation.
- If you see individuals without visible disabilities having difficulties, ask if they need assistance and make the appropriate accommodation where needed.

## **SERVICE ANIMALS**

- Service animals are trained to assist individuals with a wide range of disabilities.
- Service animals allowed wherever their handler goes, ensure handlers and service animals remain together whenever possible.
- Revised ADA statutes define a service animal as a dog. Local jurisdictions may have expanded definitions.
- An individual cannot be asked to provide proof of the animal's status via certification, documentation, demonstration of tasks, or by asking about the nature of the individual's disability. The only questions allowed by law are:
  - ◆ Is the animal necessary due to a disability?
  - ◆ What type of assistance or tasks is the animal trained to provide?
- Many breeds have been trained to perform a wide variety of assistance.
  - ◆ Small breeds like a Chihuahua or terriers may serve as hearing or seizure dogs
  - ◆ Large breeds like a Great Dane may assist an individual with balance problems or help a wheelchair user with mobility.
- The handler retains responsibility for the service animal's care and behavior of the at all times.

- Behavior may not be a reliable indicator of an animal's training as it may be scared or disoriented because of the disaster and not be behaving as usual. Ask the handler to assist in calming the animal.
- If an animal's behavior is threatening or harmful, the handler can be asked to remove the animal.
- A new separate provision covers miniature horses individually trained to work or perform tasks for individuals with disabilities. Entities covered by the ADA must modify their policies to permit miniature horses where reasonable
- Miniature horses generally range in height from 24 inches to 34 inches measured to the shoulders and weigh between 70 and 100 pounds.
- Assessment factors to assist in determining whether miniature horses can be accommodated are
  - ◆ The miniature horse must be housebroken.
  - ◆ The miniature horse must remain under the owner's control.
  - ◆ The facility is capable of accommodating the miniature horse's type, size, and weight.
  - ◆ Its presence will not compromise legitimate requirements necessary for safe operation of the facility.