DISABILITY RIGHTS MISSISSIPPI

Disability Etiquette

Tips on Interacting with People with Disabilities and Inclusivity



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About Us

Disability Rights Mississippi is the federally mandated Protection and Advocacy (P&A) Agency for the State of Mississippi and was designated as such in 1982 by the Governor. Since 1982, DRMS has provided advocacy services — free of charge — to Mississippians with disabilities. Our mission is to promote, protect and advocate for the legal and human rights of all people with disabilities, and to assist them with full access in home, community, education, and employment.

Disability Rights Mississippi is a proud member of the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN). NDRN works in Washington, D.C. on behalf of the P&As and Client Assistance Programs (CAP), which are the nation's largest provider of legal advocacy services for people with disabilities. The P&A system is a national network of disability rights agencies tasked with investigating abuse, neglect, and providing legal representation, as well as other advocacy services for people with disabilities.

To fulfill its duties, P&A agencies are given extensive access authority to do the following:

- Investigate incidents of abuse and neglect;
- Provide information, referrals, and training about the rights of people with disabilities and about DRMS services;
- Monitor service providers and program compliance with respect to the rights and safety of residents; and
- Pursue administrative, legal, and other appropriate remedies to ensure the protection of the rights of Mississippians with disabilities.

> *The mission of **Disability Rights Mississippi** is to promote, protect, and advocate for the legal and human rights of all people with disabilities, and to assist them with full access in home, community, education, and employment.*



What is a disability?

This might be a question you are afraid to ask: what exactly *is* a disability? We're glad you're here. This information is for anyone who wants to learn more about the disability community and strives to interact with people with disabilities in a helpful, respectful manner.

So, again, what exactly is a disability? According to The Center for Disease Control, a disability is any condition of the body or the mind that makes it difficult for a person to interact with the world around them or do certain activities. Disabilities can affect many aspects of a person's life, including:
Impairment: Changes to a person's body structure or function, or mental functioning. Examples include loss of a limb, loss of vision, or memory loss.
Activity limitation: Difficulty with activities such as eating, breathing, walking, working, or taking care of oneself.
Participation restrictions: Problems an individual may experience in involvement in life situations.

Disabilities can be genetic, acquired due to an injury or illness, or occur at any time across the lifespan. They can be permanent or temporary, or experienced as part of the aging process.

Over 70 million adults in the US have reported a disability, which is more than 1 in 4. The disability community is incredibly diverse and there is no "one size fits all" approach to disability etiquette. However, there are some helpful things to know regarding various disabilities, and we hope this booklet can boost your confidence in interacting respectfully with people with disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 was created with the goal of integrating people with disabilities into all aspects of American life, particularly in the workplace and in communities. Respect toward people with disabilities is not only in the spirit of the ADA, but it is the right thing to do as a businessperson, supervisor, and citizen. Practicing disability etiquette is an easy way to make people with disabilities feel welcome at work, school, the grocery store, the football game, the park, and beyond.

You don't have to feel awkward when dealing with a person who has a disability. They are a person, just like anyone else. While this booklet will provide some basic tips for you to follow, if you are ever unsure of what to do or say with a person who has a disability, just ask!

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The Basics

Ask Before You Help

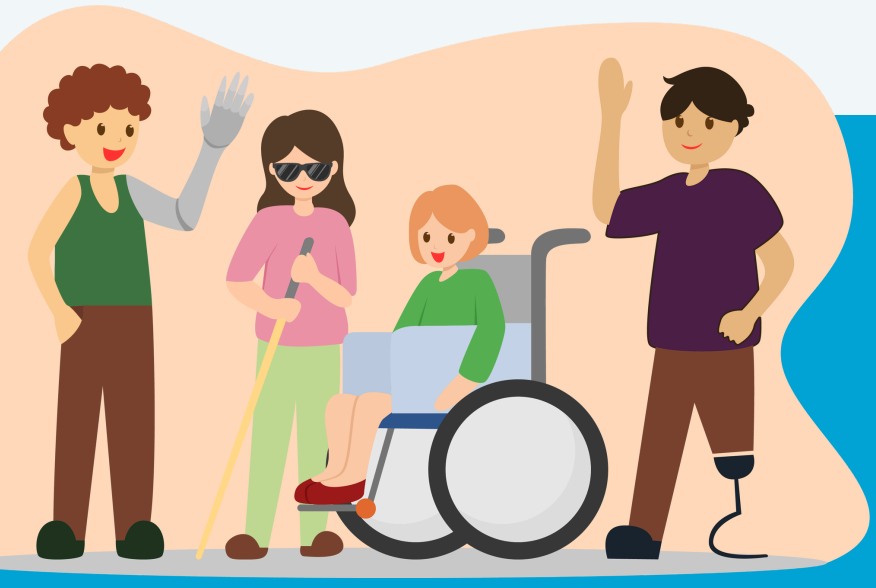
Just because someone has a disability, don't assume they need help. If the setting is accessible, people with disabilities are typically equipped and capable of getting around fine. People with disabilities want to be treated as independent, capable people. Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it. And if he or she does want help, ask how they would like to be helped before you intervene.

Personal Space

Just like anyone else, people with disabilities do not want their personal space invaded. Be sensitive about physical contact. Not only is it impolite to cross physical boundaries, but some people with disabilities might move differently than you or have a different physical experience. Grabbing them or touching them, even when your intention is to assist them, could knock them off balance, expose them to unsafe germs, or disrupt them physically in some way. Avoid patting a person on their head or touching their wheelchair, scooter, cane, or other accessibility device. People with disabilities consider their equipment part of their personal space.

Think Before You Speak

There is a reason we learned the old adage "think before you speak" when we were young. It is always useful. When speaking with a person with a disability, always speak directly to them, not to their companion, aide, or sign language interpreter. Speak to a person with a disability just like you would anyone else; you can make small talk, chat about your interests, the weather, or whatever you wish. However, respect their privacy, just like you would with anyone else. If you ask about their disability, they may feel as if you are treating them as a disability, not a human being.



Don’t Make Assumptions

People with disabilities are the best judge of what they can or cannot do. Do not make decisions for them about participating in any activity. Depending on the circumstance, you might even be violating the ADA if you are excluding someone because of a presumption about their limitations or inability to complete an activity.

Reasonable Requests, Gracious Responses

If a person with a disability asks for an accommodation (as is their right under the ADA) at your business or out in the world, it is not a complaint. It shows they feel comfortable enough to ask for what they need! Respond graciously to their requests.

Common Misconceptions

Let’s correct a few common misconceptions and narratives about people with disabilities.

- Disability Equals Inability: Many people assume that having a disability means a person cannot do anything or that they are completely dependent on others. In reality, individuals with disabilities often lead independent and fulfilling lives, pursuing careers, hobbies, and relationships.

- All Disabilities Are Visible: Some people think that disabilities are always apparent. Many disabilities, such as mental health conditions, chronic pain, or learning disabilities, may not be visible, leading to misunderstandings about a person's abilities or challenges.

- All People with Disabilities Are the Same: This oversimplification ignores the diversity within the disability community, where experiences, needs, and preferences can vary widely.

- Assistive Devices Are Only for Those Who Are Have A Severe Disability: Many people with varying degrees of disabilities use tools like wheelchairs, hearing aids, or screen readers to enhance their daily lives.

- People with Disabilities Can’t Work or Contribute to Society: Some people make this assumption, when in fact many individuals with disabilities have successful careers and contribute meaningfully to society. With appropriate accommodations, they can perform tasks just as effectively a person who does not have a disability.

- People with Disabilities Cannot Participate in Sports or Physical Activities: Many individuals with disabilities activity participate in sports and/or physical activities, including adaptive sports.

- People with Disabilities Are Always Unhappy or Frustrated: Just like anyone else, people with disabilities experience a range of emotions. Many are happy and fulfilled, focusing on their passions, family and friends. Ensuring people with disabilities are fully included in society, conversations, and community enables them to experience the full range of human experience, just like anyone else.

Person First: Tips for Terminology

Put the person first.

Person-first language is the gold standard in the disability community. You are, quite simply, putting the person first, before their disability. Say “person with a disability” rather than a “disabled person.” For specific disabilities, saying “person with Tourette syndrome” or a “person who has cerebral palsy” is usually a safe bet, but some individuals have their own preferences. Again, it is respectful and allowable to simply ask a person what they prefer!

Words like “handicapped” or “crippled” are not only outdated, but they could be taken as offensive. Many people in the disability community dislike jargon or euphemistic terms like “differently abled” or “physically challenged.” There is no need for you to inspire them or tip-toe around them about being a person who has a disability.

A person who uses a wheelchair is not “confined to a wheelchair” or “wheelchair bound.” They are “a wheelchair user” or a “person who uses a wheelchair.” A wheelchair or other mobility aid enables a person with a disability to move around in the world and participate in their community; it is not a confining, negative situation.

It is okay to use idioms and everyday expressions with people with disabilities. For example, saying “it was great to see you today!” or “I really enjoyed talking to you!” to a person who is blind or a person who uses ASL. People with disabilities also use these expressions in their everyday language.

Many individuals who are Deaf communicate with sign language and consider themselves to be members of a cultural and linguistic minority group They refer to themselves as Deaf with a capital *D* and may be offended by the term “hearing impaired.” Others may not object to the term, but in general it is safest to refer to people who have hearing loss but communicate through spoken language as “hard of hearing” and to people with profound hearing loss as Deaf or deaf. You can say “Deaf or hard of hearing” if you are unsure.

Refrain from using negative, disempowering words like “victim” or “sufferer.” Of course, it should go without saying, but slurs are absolutely unacceptable. Whether you are around a person with a disability or not, slurs have no place in civilized society and are ***never*** funny, “just a joke,” or appropriate.



Interacting with Individuals with Mobility Impairments



People who use wheelchairs or mobility aids have different disabilities and varying physical abilities. Some can use their arms and hands, while others cannot. Even though someone might not appear be able to use their hands, they may be able to move and control their wheelchair's movement themselves. Some people can even get out of their wheelchairs and walk for some distance.

Person First

People who use wheelchairs are people, not equipment. Do not lean over someone in a wheelchair to shake another person's hand, or ask a wheelchair user to hold coats or another item. Setting your drink on the desktop attached to someone's wheelchair is a no-no. Think: would I do that to someone who doesn't use a wheelchair?

Accessibility Matters

Keep ramps and wheelchair accessible doors to your building unlocked and unblocked. Under the ADA, displays should not be in front of entrances, wastebaskets should not be in the middle of aisles, and boxes or other items should not be stored on ramps. Never use an accessible bathroom stall unless if there are other stalls available.

Hands Off!

Do not push or touch a person's wheelchair; it is a part of his or her personal space. If you help someone down a curb without waiting for instructions, you may knock them out of their chair. You may inadvertently damage a very expensive wheelchair. Would you push someone who doesn't use a wheelchair? We think not.

Be Considerate

Be aware of someone who is using a wheelchair's reach limits. Place as many items as possible within the grasp of as many people as possible. Be sure there is a clear path of travel throughout the space. If you are talking to a wheelchair user, try to find a chair to sit at their level. If you cannot, stand in a position so that they aren't straining to look up at you.

- If the service counter at your place of business is too high for a wheelchair user to see over, step around it to provide service. Have a clipboard handy for completing forms or signing papers.
- If your building has different routes through it, be sure that signs direct to the most accessible routes around the facility for those in a wheelchair. People who walk with a cane or crutches also need to know the easiest way to get around, but stairs may be easier for them than a ramp. Be sure staff, receptionists, and security guards can answer questions about the most accessible paths around buildings and grounds.
- If you offer to seat a person with a mobility disability, keep in mind that chairs with arms or with higher seats are easier for some people to use.
- Falls are a risk for people with a mobility disability. Be sure there is adequate warning signage after floors have been washed or there was a spill. If you are setting out mats or towels, be sure they are not making the floor impassable for someone in a wheelchair.
- If the nearest public restroom is not accessible or is located on an inaccessible floor, allow the person in a wheelchair to use a private or employee's accessible restroom.
- People who use canes or crutches need their arms to balance themselves, so never grab them. People with a mobility impairment may lean on a door for support as they open it. Pushing the door open from behind or unexpectedly opening the door may cause them to fall. Even pulling out or pushing in a chair may present a problem. As always, ask before assuming they need help.
- Some people have limited use of their hands, wrists, or arms. Be prepared to offer assistance with reaching for, grasping, or lifting objects, opening doors, or operating vending machines or other equipment.
- People who are do not have an apparent or visible disability still have needs related to their mobility. For example, a person with a respiratory condition may have trouble walking long distances or moving quickly. Be sure your space has ample benches or spots for visitors to stop and rest.



Interacting with People who have a Visual Impairment or are Blind

People who have a visual impairment and blind people know how to orient themselves and move around. They are competent to travel unassisted, though they may use a cane or service dog. A person may have a visual impairment that is not obvious. Be prepared to offer assistance when asked, but never make assumptions or help without being asked.



Identify yourself before you make physical contact with a person who is blind. Tell them your name, and your role if it is appropriate. Be sure to introduce them to others who are around or in the group so they are not excluded.

A blind person may need their arms for balance, so offer your arm if they need to be guided; don't take theirs without asking. However, it is appropriate to guide a person's hand to a banister or back of a chair to help direct them to a stairway or seat, though it is better to announce you are doing so before touching them.

If a person has a guide dog, walk on the side opposite of the dog. As you are walking, describe any obstacles in the setting, such a stairs (noting "up" or "down") or a big crack in the sidewalk. Yelling "look out!" does not tell a person if they should stop, run, duck, or jump.

Keep walkways clear of obstructions. If a person who is blind is a regular customer, inform them about any physical changes in the space, such as a table being moved.

If a new customer or employee is blind or has a visual impairment, offer to provide them with a tour of the business, building or facility.

If you are leaving, inform the person first and alert them to where the exit is. Leave them near a wall, table or other landmark.

Do not touch a person's cane or service animal. The dog is working and needs to concentrate; it is not a pet. The cane is a part of the individual's personal space. If the person puts the cane down, do not move it.

Offer to read written information - such as the menu, merchandise labels, or bank statements - to customers who are blind or have a visual impairment.

A person who is visually impaired may need materials written in large print. A clear font with appropriate spacing is just as important as the font size. Labels and signs should be clearly lettered in contrasting colors. It is easiest for most people to read high contrast, meaning bold white letters on a black background or vice versa.

Interacting with People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

American Sign Language (ASL) is an entirely different language from English, with a syntax all its own. Speech reading (lip reading) is difficult for people who are Deaf if their first language is ASL because the majority of sounds in English are formed inside the mouth, and it's hard to speech read a second language.

People who are hard of hearing, however, communicate in English. They use some hearing but may rely on amplification and/or seeing the speaker's mouth move to communicate effectively.



There is a range of communication preferences and styles among people with hearing loss that cannot be explained here. It is helpful to note that the majority of adults who become deaf later in life do not communicate with sign language and instead use English and may be candidates for writing and assistive listening devices to help them communicate. People with cochlear implants, like other people with hearing impairments, will usually inform you what works for them.

When the exchange of information is complex, such as during a job interview, a doctor's visit, or discussion of financials, the most effective way to communicate with a native signer is through a qualified sign-language interpreter. For a simple interaction, such as ordering in a restaurant or checking in at a hotel, writing back and forth is usually okay.

Follow the person's cues to find out if they prefer sign language, gesturing, writing, or speaking. If you have trouble understanding the speech of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, let them know.

When using a sign language interpreter, look directly at the person who is Deaf, and maintain eye contact to be polite. Talk directly to the person ("What would you like?") rather than to the interpreter ("Ask them what they would like.")

People who are Deaf need to be included in the decision-making process for issues that affect them; don't make decisions for them.

Ensure you have the person's attention before you begin speaking with them. Rephrase, rather than repeat, sentences that the person doesn't understand.

Face the person you are talking to and speak clearly. Most people who are hard of hearing rely on watching people's lips as they speak to help them understand. Avoid chewing gum or obscuring your mouth with your hand or a document while speaking.

People who are deaf (and some who are hard of hearing or have speech disabilities) make and receive telephone calls with the assistance of a device called a TTY (short for teletypewriter, also called TDD). A TTY is a small device with a keyboard, a paper printer or a visual display screen and acoustic couplers (for the telephone receiver).

There is no need to shout at a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. If the person uses a hearing aid, it will be calibrated to normal voice levels; your shout will just be distorted.

When a TTY user calls a business that does not have a TTY, she places the call through her state's relay service. Likewise, a business that does not have a TTY can reach a customer who is a TTY user through the relay service. If you receive a relay call, the operator will identify it as such. Please do not hang up; this is the way that people who are deaf are able to place an order at your restaurant, call your store to find out what your operating hours are, or make a reservation at your business.



Interacting with People with Speech Disabilities

A person who has had a stroke, is severely hard of hearing, uses a voice prosthesis, or has a stammer or other type of speech disability may be difficult to understand.

- Give the person your full attention. Don't interrupt or finish the person's sentences. If you have trouble understanding, don't nod. Just ask them to repeat. In most cases, the person won't mind and will appreciate your effort to hear what they have to say.
- If you are not sure whether you have understood, you can repeat for verification.
- If, after trying, you still cannot understand the person, ask him or her to write it down or to suggest another way of facilitating communication.
- A quiet environment makes communication easier.
- Don't tease or laugh at a person with a speech disability. The ability to communicate effectively and to be taken seriously is important to all people.

Interacting with People with Physical Differences

A different issue confronts people who may not be limited in their life activities, but who are treated as if they have a disability because of their appearance. People with facial differences, such as a cleft lip or palate, cranio-facial disfigurement, or a skin condition; people whose body size is different or who have a growth-related disorder; people who may display visible effects of a medication, such as a tremor – in short, people who look different have the frequent experience of finding people staring at them, looking away or looking through them as if they are invisible.

- Everyone needs to have positive self-image to be a fully participating member of society. Be sure that you don't contribute to stigmatizing people who look different.
- If you see someone who fits this description, treat them kindly as you would anyone else.
- If the situation is appropriate, strike up a conversation and include the person in whatever is going on, just as you would with anyone else.

In the case of someone being of short stature:



- Communication can be easier when people are at the same level. Persons of short stature have different preferences. You might kneel to be at the person's level; stand back so you can make eye contact without the person straining his neck; or sit in a chair. Act natural and follow the person's cues.
- As with people who have other disabilities, never pet, pat or kiss a person of short stature on the head. For an adult, being treated as childlike can be demeaning.
- Be aware that persons of short stature count on being able to use equipment that is at their height. Be sensitive about not using lower telephones, bank counters and urinals if they are in limited supply.

Mental Health

People with mental illness may at times have difficulty coping with the tasks and interactions of daily life. Their disorder may interfere with their ability to feel, think, or relate to others. Most people with mental illness are not violent; in fact, a person with a mental illness is more likely to be the victim of violence than they are to be violent.

One of the main barriers that people with mental illness face is the attitudes that others have about them. Because mental illness is a hidden disability, you might interact with someone you do not even realize has a mental health condition.

Check In

In a crisis, stay calm and be supportive as you would with anyone else. Ask how you can help, and find out if there is a support person who can be called.

If someone you know is struggling emotionally or having a hard time, you can be the difference in getting them the help they need. Contact 988 so that you can find out what resources are available in your area, or encourage your loved one to reach out. Calls are routed to your local 988 Lifeline contact center that can provide you with resources.

Patience and Respect

Stress can affect a person's ability to function. Try to keep the pressure to a minimum.

People who have mental illness have varying personalities and different ways of coping with their disability. Some may have trouble picking up on social cues; others may be very sensitive. One person might be high energy, while another might not be. Treat each person as an individual. Ask what will make them most comfortable and respect their needs to the fullest extent possible.



Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Developmental disabilities are a group of conditions appearing in early childhood that include an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas.

- Speak to the person in clear sentences and plain language. Help them understand a more complex idea by breaking it down into smaller parts.
- Do not use “baby talk” or talk down to people with developmental disabilities.
- Remember that a person with a disability is an adult and, unless you are informed otherwise, can make their own decisions.
- It may be difficult for someone with a developmental disability to make quick decisions or adapt quickly to a new environment or routine. Be aware a change in routine or a decision may require patience and understanding.

Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities are lifelong disabilities that interfere with a person’s ability to receive, express, and process information. You may not realize a person has a learning disability because it is an invisible disability.

- People with dyslexia or other reading disabilities have trouble reading written information. Offer to provide verbal explanation and allow additional time for reading.
- Don’t be surprised if someone asks for simple instructions to be written down. A person with, for example, auditory processing disorder may need information demonstrated or in writing.
- Ask the person who can best relay information to them. Be direct.
- It may be easier for the person to function in a quiet environment without distractions.



Specific Disabilities

The disability community is incredibly diverse. One-size does not fit all, and no two experiences are the same. However, some experiences, based on disability, are similar. The following tips relate to specific disabilities, but it should be noted that are generalized. It's always best to put the person first and determine what suits their needs.



Cerebral Palsy

As a result of injury to the central nervous system, people with cerebral palsy (CP) have difficulty controlling their muscles.

- Follow the prior tips for interacting with people with have speech disabilities.
- Many people with CP have slurred speech and involuntary body movements. Your impulse may be to discount what they have to say. Don't. Monitor your responses and interact with the person as you would anyone else.
- A person who may appear to be sick or have a medical emergency might in fact have CP or another disability. Get the facts first before acting on your first impression, whether the situation is business, social, or law enforcement.

Tourette Syndrome

People with Tourette Syndrome may make vocalizations or gestures such as tics that they cannot control. A small percentage of people with the syndrome may involuntarily say obscene words or inappropriate phrases. A person with Tourette Syndrome will benefit from understanding and acceptance of others.

- If a person with Tourette makes vocalizations during a conversation, simply wait for them to finish, then calmly continue.
- The more the person tries to contain these urges, the more the urges build up. It may be helpful for the person to have the option to leave a meeting or conversation temporarily to release the build-up in a private, safe place.

Epilepsy and Seizure Disorders

Epilepsy is a neurological condition characterized by seizures that happen when the electrical system of the brain malfunctions. The seizures may be convulsive or the person may appear to be in a trance. During complex partial seizures, the person may walk or make other movements while they are, in effect, unconscious.

- If a person has a seizure, you cannot do anything to stop it. If they have fallen, be sure their head is protected and wait for the seizure to end.
- When a seizure has ended, the person may feel disoriented or embarrassed. Try to ensure that they have privacy to collect themselves.
- Be aware that repetitive noises and strobe lights can trigger seizures in some people.

Respiratory Disabilities

People with respiratory disabilities such as asthma or emphysema react to toxins in the air. Stale air, fumes from cleaning products, perfume, carpeting, air freshener or even the fumes from magic markers can trigger severe reaction.

- Try to avoid spray-cleaning tables, windows and other surfaces while people are in your place of business.
- Maintaining good ventilation and overall indoor air quality will not only benefit your customers who have respiratory disabilities, but will help all customers and employees stay healthier.
- Second-hand smoke can be particularly harmful to people with respiratory disabilities. Follow and enforce non-smoking regulations, including in restrooms and stairwells.

Traumatic Brain Injury

People with TBI have had damage to the brain usually as the result of trauma, such as an accident or stroke.

- Some of the factors that affect a person with learning disability also apply to a person with TBI. People with brain injury may have a loss of muscle control or mobility that is not obvious. For example, a person might not be able to sign their name even if they can move their hand.
- A person with TBI may have altered impulse control, or may not process social cues.
- A person with TBI may have short-term memory or directional orientation issues.

HIV/AIDS

People with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) have impaired immune systems, so their bodies have trouble fighting off infections.

- You cannot catch HIV from casual contact such as shaking hands, so don’t be afraid to touch a person with AIDS.
- A person with HIV/AIDS is at a significant risk of contracting airborne diseases. Be mindful of not putting someone else at risk if you have a respiratory infection or other easily transmittable illness.
- Many people with AIDS feel stigmatized. By simply greeting or shaking a person’s hand, you are letting them know they are accepted.

A Word About Confidentiality: You may really care or you may just be curious about a person with a disability who is in crisis, suddenly ill, or who misses work for unexplained reasons. In spite of your concern, please respect the privacy of the person with a disability. Allow him or her to discuss their situation if and when they feel comfortable.

Signage

Note accessibility of your business or program by using the symbols whenever possible. Be sure to use the verbal description, along with the symbol.



Service Animals

Some people deaf or blind, or who have a traumatic brain injury, seizure disorder, or a range of other disabilities may use a service animal to assist them with daily living.

- While a business may inquire whether an animal is a service animal, the person does not have to have any documentation identifying an animal as such. This means that, in general, a “no animals” policy must have an exception for service animals. Barring a direct threat to health and safety, this is a requirement of the ADA and typically takes precedence over any health codes or personal preferences.
- Service animals are highly trained and well behaved. If the animal is not under the person’s control, you may ask the person to remove the animal.
- Emotional Support Animals are not defined by Title II and III of the ADA. While Emotional Support Animals (ESA) are often used as part of a medical treatment plan as therapy animals, they are not considered service animals under the ADA.



Conclusion

People with disabilities are just that, people. They are individuals with families, jobs, hobbies, friends, likes and dislikes, and problems and joys. While a disability may be an integral part of their human experience, it alone does not define them. Don't make them into disability heroes or victims. Treat them as individuals and as people.



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