

Guide to Etiquette for Working with Voters with Disabilities

**Iowa Protection and
Advocacy Services, Inc.**

**Protection and Advocacy for
Voting Access – PAVA**



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This summary is about disabilities. It is important to remember that you are not working with disabilities; you are working with individuals who have disabilities. Please use this packet as a guideline only. Some voters with disabilities may request other alternative methods to assist them. With this in mind, please consider the following tips when working with persons with disabilities.

- **Use common sense.** People with disabilities want to be treated the same way everyone else is treated. Remember, a person is a person first. The disability comes second.
- **Don't be patronizing.** Show the person the same respect that you expect to receive from others. Treat adults as adults.
- **Be considerate and patient.** Anticipate what the person's needs might be and offer assistance when possible. Be patient if the person requires more time to communicate, to walk, or to accomplish various tasks.
- **Don't put unnecessary pressure on yourself to know and to do everything "right."** Be patient with yourself in learning the specific needs of each person. Do not be embarrassed if you find yourself doing or saying the wrong thing. Remember, the person with a disability is usually aware of and sensitive to your discomfort and your good intentions in the situation.
- **Don't be afraid to offer assistance.** If the person looks as if they need assistance, ask if there is something you can do. Do not automatically give help unless the person clearly needs it or has asked for it.
- **Communicate with the person.** Remember that some people with disabilities may have an assistant, interpreter, or companion with them. It is important to always look and speak to the person with a disability directly rather than to his/her companion.
- **Respect the person's privacy.** Refrain from asking questions which would otherwise be inappropriate to ask of any person. (ie – medical condition, private life)
- **Be sensitive to their needs.** Individuals are much more independent than people give them credit for. Many times, navigating the physical environment is less frustrating than trying to communicate with people who are not sensitive to their needs.

Voter is Blind and/or has a Visual Impairment

Things to Do

- Introduce yourself and identify who you are. Give the person verbal information about things that are visually obvious to those who can see.
- Be descriptive when giving direction. Saying, "Step over here," has little meaning to someone who cannot see where you point. "Three steps to your left, then two steps forward," is a more descriptive and helpful instruction.
- Lead someone who is blind only after he/she has accepted your offer to do so. Touch his/her arm, and then offer your arm to guide that person. Allow the voter to hold your arm rather than you holding onto that person. It is important to let people control their own movements. Verbally describe the area you are in while you are walking.
- Describe things from their perspective, not yours. Some persons who are blind use a "clock" reference for things or obstacles directly in front of them. For example, you can state, "There is a chair at 10 o'clock." Before using this method, ask the person if it is useful to them.
- Face the person with a visual impairment when you are talking. If your eyes are directed towards them, your voice will be, too.
- Try to keep the path to the voting booth clear of obstacles.
- Inform the person of snow levels and/or icy conditions when walking on the sidewalk or ramp near the door. This can help prevent accidents.
- Describe what you are doing as you do it.

Things to Avoid

- Do not use references that are visually-oriented such as, "Go ahead to the voting booth. The one in the corner is available."
- Do not pet, touch, or interact with a guide dog while it is working.



Voter is Deaf and/or has a Hearing Impairment

Things to Know

- Find out how the person best communicates.
- If the person reads lips, speak in a normal fashion. Do not exaggerate your speaking. Short and simple sentences are best. Avoid blocking the view of your face and mouth.
- Get someone's attention by tapping his/her shoulder or gently waving your hand in front of that person before starting a conversation.
- If there is some doubt whether they understood you correctly, ask them. If they did not understand, try to rephrase your statement. When someone with a hearing impairment asks, "What did you say?" it is often answered with, "Never mind," or "It's not important." These responses may give people the impression that you think they are not worth taking the time to repeat your statement.

Things to Avoid

- Do not become impatient or frustrated with the person if it takes longer to communicate.
- If the person is using hearing aids, try to avoid conversations in large, open, and noisy areas.

Voter has Speech Difficulties

Things to Do

- If you do not understand what the person is saying, bring it to his/her attention immediately and ask how the two of you may better communicate.
- If it is a stressful situation, try to stay calm. If you are in a public area with many distractions, consider moving to a quieter location.
- Consider writing as an alternative means of communication.
- If you and the person cannot find a successful way to communicate, consider asking if there is someone who can help interpret what he/she is saying.

Things to Avoid

- Do not pretend to understand when you really do not.
- Do not interrupt. Wait for sentences to be completed.
- Do not become impatient or frustrated with the conversation.
- Do not finish people's sentences for them.

Things to Consider

- Many persons with difficulty in speech find themselves in situations where people treat them as if they are drunk or are stupid. They are accustomed to being avoided, ignored, and treated disrespectfully.
- Accessibility for individuals with speech difficulties lies within your power. Your understanding, patience, and communication skills are as important to someone with speech difficulties as a ramp or a grab bar is to someone who uses a wheelchair.



Voter Uses a Wheelchair

Things to Do

- Do not assume a person using a wheelchair needs assistance. Ask them if they need assistance first. People may require different degrees of assistance.
- When you handle someone's wheelchair, treat it with the same kind of respect you would when holding someone's eyeglasses. They are similar in many ways: they can break, they are difficult to have repaired on short notice and weekends, and it is extremely difficult for the person to do daily activities without them.
- When speaking to someone who uses a wheelchair, try to speak to him/her at the same level in which he/she is sitting. Having to look straight up at you if you are standing can be quite uncomfortable.
- When helping someone in a wheelchair down a step, ask the person which way he/she prefers it be done in order for both of you to feel secure.

Things to Avoid

- Do not start pushing someone around in a wheelchair without asking first.
- When communicating, do not stand too close to the person in the wheelchair. Give that person some space.
- Do not hang on a person's wheelchair. Many people in wheelchairs feel like it is an extension of themselves. Hanging or leaning on a wheelchair can be perceived as an invasion of personal space.
- Do not push open a door using a person's foot pedals.

Voter has a Developmental Disability

Things to Know

- A developmental disability is a condition that arises in infancy or childhood. It can also be caused from a serious head injury. This disability can cause problems in language, learning, mobility, and other areas.

Things to Do

- Speak in concrete terms, use short sentences, and avoid using abstract instructions.
- Complete one step of instructions before giving instructions for the next step.
- Demonstrate how things should be done. Explain what you are doing as you do it.
- Give extra time to complete a task.
- Speak in a normal voice. If you have difficulty in communicating, ask the person and his/her attendant, if applicable, for better ways to communicate.
- Based on the level of disability, individuals may not be able to ask for personal assistance or follow directions. Look for behavior or body language clues to anticipate individual needs.

Things to Avoid

- Do not become impatient if the individual does not understand the direction given.
- Do not get defensive. Bluntness may be a part of the person's natural way of communication.
- Do not use terms that describe the level of disability of the person such as, "low or high functioning."



Voter has a Mental Illness

Things to Know

- Mental illness is a term used for a group of mental disorders which can cause severe disturbances in thinking, feeling, and relating to others. This can often result in a diminished capacity to cope with the ordinary demands of life. Mental illness can affect persons of any age, race or ethnicity, or socioeconomic level.
- Mental illness is sometimes confused with mental retardation. However, these two disabilities are not the same. Individuals who have mental retardation have an intellectual impairment that is usually present since birth. A person with a mental illness, on the other hand, does not necessarily have an intellectual impairment. Yet, medications taken for a mental health condition may produce side effects that interfere with thinking, reasoning, and concentrating.

Things to Do

- Speak directly to the person when asking questions or giving instructions.
- Speak in a normal voice at a normal volume
- If a person with a mental illness begins to show signs of agitation, speak to him/her calmly. You may wish to ask that person if he/she would like to take a break and start the process again when comfortable.
- Allow time for responses. Some medications used in the treatment of mental health conditions can cause side effects such as slow responses in thought.

People First Language Guidelines

*When referring to a person's disability,
use People First Language.*

People First Language

People with disabilities

People with mental retardation
He has an intellectual disability.

My son has autism.

She has Down Syndrome.

He has a learning disability.

I have paraplegia.

She has a physical disability.
She has a mobility impairment.

He is of short stature.

She has an emotional disability.

He uses a wheelchair.

A person without a disability
A typical person

He receives special education services.

He has a congenital disability.

Accessible parking, bathroom, etc.

She has a need for...

Labels NOT To Use

The handicapped or disabled

The mentally retarded
He is retarded.

My son is autistic.

She is a Downs kid.
She is a mongoloid.

He is learning disabled.

I am paraplegic.

She is crippled.

He is a midget or dwarf.

She is disturbed.

He is wheelchair bound.

A normal or healthy person

He is in special ed.

He has a birth defect.

Handicapped parking,
bathroom, etc.

She has a problem with...



Tips for Using People First Language

- Do not refer to a person's disability unless it is relevant. REMEMBER, people are people first, disability second.
- Use the word "disability" rather than "handicap."
- Avoid using the word "normal" to describe people without disabilities. Instead use "typical" or "persons without disabilities" if comparisons are necessary.
- Never assume that a person with a communication impairment also has an intellectual disability such as mental retardation.
- Do not patronize people with disabilities as being overly courageous, brave, special, or super human. They want your respect rather than your sympathy.

For more information about working with voters with disabilities, please contact:



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