



## King County

### Department of Transportation Metro Transit Division

ADA Compliance  
KSC-TR-0200  
201 S. Jackson St.  
Seattle, WA 98104-1598

## Disability Awareness

There are an estimated 55 million people with disabilities in the U.S., about 20 percent of the country's population. Disabilities can affect how a person hears, or gets around or speaks but it doesn't affect who they are as a person. Just like all people, people with disabilities have diverse personalities, abilities, interests, needs, and preferences. The key to providing quality services to people with disabilities is to remember our similarities.

Focusing on similarities is easier if you are comfortable knowing when communications and interactions can be impacted by a disability. Here are a few tips for situations you might encounter when communicating with people with various kinds of disabilities.

- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions, such as "See you later" or "want to go for a walk?", that seem to relate to the person's disability.
- Ask before you help. Just because someone has a disability, don't assume they need help. If the environment is accessible, people with disabilities usually can get around fine. Adults with disabilities want to be treated as independent people. Offer assistance only if the person appears to need it. Respond graciously to requests for help. Keep in mind that in most cases, the best way to learn how to accommodate a person who has a disability is to ask them directly. Listen and learn from what the person tells you regarding their needs.
- Language used to refer to people with disabilities is important. Many people prefer to be referred to as a person first, not their disability. For example, "the person who uses a wheelchair" is preferred over "the wheelchair person." Terms such as "handicapped" or "confined to a wheelchair" are inappropriate and should not be used. If you have a question about how someone would like to be referred to, ask that person. Avoiding saying the wrong thing by saying nothing at all will further segregate people with disabilities.
- When talking with someone who has a disability, speak directly to them, rather than through a companion or interpreter who may be along.
- Deaf and hard of hearing people communicate in different ways, depending on several factors – age at which deafness began, type of deafness, language skills, speech abilities, personality, intelligence, family environment, and educational background. Some individuals are more easily understood than others. Some use speech only; or a combination of sign language, fingerspelling, and or speech; or writing; or body language and facial expression.



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- To get the attention of a person who has a hearing disability, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly and expressively to establish if the person can read your lips. Not everyone with hearing impairments can lip-read. Those who do will rely on facial expressions and other body language to help understand. Show consideration by facing a light source and keeping your hands and food away from your mouth when speaking. Shouting won't help, but written notes will.
- When greeting a person with a severe loss of vision, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. Say, for example, "On my right is Amelia Pandey". When conversing in a group, remember to say your name and the name of the person to whom you are speaking to give vocal cue; for example, "Markus, this is Paige – are you talking about the...?" Speak in a normal tone of voice, indicate when you move from one place to another, and let it be known when the conversation is at an end.
- Give whole, unhurried attention when you're talking to a person who has difficulty speaking. Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting, and be patient rather than speak for the person. When necessary, ask questions that require short answers or a nod or shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Repeat what you understand. The person's reaction will guide you to understanding.
- Service animals provide valuable assistance for a range of disabilities. They can alert their owners to obstacles in the pathway and sounds such as an approaching car, protect a person having a seizure, or pick up things when a person is unable to bend down. Service animals are not required to have any special identification card, collar, or harness. Remember, service animals are working so do not pet a service animal unless the owner gives you permission.
- Although many disabilities are apparent due to physical differences or use of aids such as a wheelchair or a white cane, some disabilities are hidden or invisible – the condition is not obvious to an observer. Even though conditions of a disability may be non-apparent, they nevertheless may impact how a person interacts with their surroundings. So if someone appears confused or disoriented or is not responding to a situation, ask if you can be of assistance.