

# Making Meetings and Events Accessible to People with Disabilities and Deaf People



- Whether you are inviting members of a disability organization to a meeting or hosting an event that is open to the public, it is essential that both the content and the physical space are made accessible to Deaf people and those with disabilities. When you invite Deaf people and those with disabilities to the proverbial (or literal) table, it is your responsibility to make sure that the table is accessible to them.
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As you set out to host accessible events, embrace two principles simultaneously. First, events should be made accessible to as many people as possible from the get-go. This means taking proactive steps to make sure materials, content, and physical or virtual spaces are accessible to the widest array of people, including those with disabilities. In this sense, your fundamental access measures are not doled out on a case-by-case basis; they are built into the event and benefit all who attend.

Second, even with general accessibility measures in place, many Deaf people and people with disabilities will require **individualized** accommodations to attend and contribute to your meetings, whether they are virtual or in person. An accommodation is an adjustment or modification that enables a person to fully and equally participate in a process, benefit from a program, and so forth. The Americans with



Disabilities Act (ADA) applies to local and state government agencies as well as private and nonprofit service providers, and it prohibits them from discriminating against people with disabilities. Therefore, these entities are required by law to provide accommodations to people who need them for their services and events.

This tip sheet begins with guidance for hosting in-person and virtual meetings that work for the widest array of attendees, including those who have requested accommodations. Then it provides practical steps for asking about and providing individualized accommodations to those who need them to equitably participate in and contribute to your meetings.

## Prepare to provide baseline access and individualized accommodations

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For meetings and events to be inclusive of disability and Deaf communities, you will need to establish baseline accessibility and a process for asking about and providing individualized accommodations. However, the first step to hosting accessible events is doing **up-front planning** to provide accommodations.

Some accommodations, such as larger print materials or adjusting seating arrangements to accommodate a service dog, can be done at little-to-no cost. Others, such as providing sign language interpretation, require a higher level of coordination and can have costs associated with their provision.

To be prepared to host accessible meetings and events, you should become familiar with resources and service providers available in your community and state. If they exist in your area, reach out to city- and county-run disability offices to explore their services. Consult the [Common Types of Disability and Deaf Organizations](#) factsheet for further suggestions of disability and Deaf organizations that can provide support around offering accommodations or connect you to other agencies that can.





## Tips for establishing baseline accessibility in meetings

As described earlier, hosting accessible events means making sure general accessibility measures are in place from the start. For example, even if you host a meeting in a wheelchair accessible building, you will need to employ additional measures to make the meeting room itself accessible to people who use wheelchairs. Further, following these tips will help ensure that the event is set up so that people who have requested additional accommodations will be able to fully benefit from their requests. Deaf participants, for example, will not be able to participate if their sightlines to interpreters are obstructed by a column in the middle of the room.

### Tips for in-person events

- **Location and timing of your meetings** – Is your location reachable by public transportation and does it have adequate parking? Does the timing allow for someone who uses paratransit to arrive and depart at convenient times?
- **Building and meeting room** – Does your meeting space allow for full access to someone using a wheelchair, including a motorized wheelchair? The space must have an accessible restroom, meaning that the bathroom entryway and at least one stall can accommodate a wheelchair — at least a 36-inch wide door and 60 inches of clearance in the stall or room — and have grab bars installed adjacent to the toilet.



- **Room configuration** – Ensure 36-inch aiseways throughout the room and between tables.
- **Signage and orientating attendees to the space** – Ensure signage is prominent, easy to read, and points people in the direction of your meeting and the restrooms. If your meeting is in a large building or is taking place across multiple spaces, more signage will be needed. For people who have vision disabilities, you should provide an auditory orientation to the space.
- **Accessible materials** – All materials — including outreach materials, PowerPoint slides, agendas, handouts, et cetera — should be accessible both in content and in formatting. See [Making Materials Accessible tip sheet](#) for guidance in designing accessible printed and electronic materials. You may also receive individualized requests ahead of time for alternate formats such as larger print materials.
- **Interpreters** – Sign language interpreters typically work in teams of two. Large or lengthy meetings generally require multiple teams of interpreters. If you are hosting an event with co-occurring activities like break-out discussions, there needs to be at least one team assigned to each activity; otherwise, Deaf attendees will be deprived of the range of options made available to hearing people. Deaf participants need to be seated close to the interpreters with unobstructed views in order to view their signing. For more information about hosting meetings with interpreters, see [Providing Sign Language Interpreters](#).
- **Audio** – If the event is larger than a small meeting, it's critical to use microphones so anyone with hearing loss and interpreters can fully hear the content.





- **Adequate breaks** – For multi-hour or day-long meetings, schedule breaks that are at least twenty minutes long. Some people with mobility disabilities need more time getting to and from the restroom, and longer breaks will support people who have disabilities that affect attention span. Interpreters also need regular breaks. Breaks should be noted on the agenda so that participants know when to expect them.
- **Breakout rooms** – Check any breakout rooms to ensure that the tables are not too close together, with at least 36-inch aisleways. Continue to use microphones even in smaller rooms.
- **Meals and refreshments** – Avoid placing food and refreshments on risers that are out of reach for people using wheelchairs. If you are providing full meals, keep in mind that buffets can be inaccessible to people with mobility and dexterity disabilities, so plated meals are preferred. Ask about dietary restrictions ahead of time, including if anyone needs pre-cut meals.
- **Interactive activities** – Activities that rely on visual or audio cues, dexterity, or physical movement will likely need to be altered to ensure access and that everyone can participate.



## Tips for virtual events

- **Virtual event information** – Provide attendees with step-by-step instructions for joining virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Include the meeting ID number in your meeting invitation.
- **Setting up the virtual space** – Spotlight or pin interpreters so users can view them on screen at all times, including when you are displaying visuals such as a PowerPoint presentation. Avoid shifting video squares as this interferes with line of sight to interpreters and can cause Deaf participants to miss important content. If you are using virtual break-out rooms, be sure that any accommodations such as ASL interpretation “follow” the users to their break-out room.
- **Captions** – Most virtual meeting platforms allow you to enable automatic captions. You typically need to enable captions in the platform’s settings ahead of time. Note that auto-generated captions are not fully accurate. If a participant requests live captioning, you will need to work with a captioning provider for this service.
- **Materials** – Ensure that presentations and other meeting materials are accessible, including for screen-readers. Some participants may request materials in advance for disability-related reasons.
- **Visual content** – Provide a description of any visuals, including presentation slides, for participants who have vision-related disabilities. If any videos are shown, ensure they are captioned or have the interpreter interpret the content.
- **Pacing** – Pause on each new slide or piece of visual content so participants have a moment to review before the presentation resumes. Anyone speaking should start with their name, so Deaf participants can identify who is talking. Pause all speaking when there is a break or switch of interpreters.





## Tips for asking about and providing individualized accommodations

### Provide instructions and event context for accommodation requests

Disability is common and many disabilities are invisible, meaning that you cannot know if someone has a disability simply by their appearance or even by interacting with them. You should always assume that there will be people with disabilities at your events and therefore need to establish a practice of asking all potential attendees if they have access needs ahead of time. This means that you must announce the event with enough time for participants to submit accommodation requests and for you to fulfill them.

Outreach materials and invitations for your events should prime people to be able to make informed accommodation requests.

Tips for doing so include:

- Making your outreach and/or registration materials accessible as described in [Making Materials Accessible tip sheet](#)
- Providing context and describing the event, including venue, format, length of time, materials to be shared, etc. This will help attendees determine if they need accommodations to participate. For example: This event will be held in the high school auditorium and will include a screening of a 60-minute documentary followed by a 30-minute panel discussion.



- Describing which access measures will be proactively offered and made available to all attendees. For example: The auditorium is wheelchair accessible. The event will have American Sign Language and spoken Spanish interpretation.
- Including a close date for registration and ensuring that it allows you enough time to fulfill accommodation requests — typically at least two weeks ahead of the event. If the event is open to the public and does not require registration, state a due date for any accommodation requests. These dates should be set so they allow adequate time for people with disabilities and Deaf people to submit their requests after becoming aware of the event.
- Explaining how participants should make requests. This includes specifying a point of contact for any questions about the event as well as giving people multiple methods for making their requests — i.e., phone call and/or online form.
- Asking attendees for their contact information when they submit their requests. This will allow you to follow up with them about their requests, obtain clarifying information, and communicate to ensure that their accommodations will be adequately met.

### **Ask detailed questions about accommodation needs**

Asking the right questions about accommodations is the best way to ensure that your meetings and events are accessible to people with disabilities and Deaf people. The more specific your questions and answer choices, the better equipped you will be to successfully meet the needs of your attendees.

Given the wide range of disabilities, it's crucial to include an open-ended question for registrants to provide more detail or to request an accommodation not listed on your form.





The following provides a template for an accommodation request form:

**[Provide overview of any accommodations or access features that will be proactively offered to all meeting attendees.]**

**1. Do you need any additional accommodations to participate in this event? If yes, check all that apply:**

- ☐ Electronic materials sent in advance
- ☐ Live captioning such as CART  
(Communication Access Realtime Translation)
- ☐ Materials in large font. What size? \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Materials in Braille
- ☐ Materials in plain language
- ☐ Printed materials on site
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Do you need interpretation?  
If yes, check all that apply:**

- ☐ American Sign Language interpreter
- ☐ Certified Deaf interpreter
- ☐ Tactile interpreter
- ☐ Spoken language interpreter:  
(specify language) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_



**3. Do you have any dietary needs?**

**If yes, check all that apply:**

- ☐ Gluten-free
- ☐ Kosher
- ☐ Vegetarian
- ☐ Vegan
- ☐ Pre-cut meals
- ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**4. Describe any additional needs you may have for this meeting. Please be as specific as possible.**

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**5. What is the best way for us to follow up with you about your request(s)?**

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone call: \_\_\_\_\_

Text message: \_\_\_\_\_

**In order to fulfill your requests, please submit this form before [date]. You can contact [staff person] at [phone number] or [email address] if you have questions or need further assistance with your request.**



**Making Meetings and Events Accessible to People with Disabilities and Deaf People** is part of a tip sheet series that offers practical guidance for creating equitable and meaningful partnerships with disability and Deaf organizations.

Other tip sheets in the series include:

- [Enhancing Criminal Legal Reform Initiatives Through Partnerships with Disability and Deaf Organizations](#)
- [Common Types of Disability and Deaf Organizations](#)
- [Making Written Materials Accessible](#)
- [Providing Sign Language Interpreters](#)

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**Activating Change** is a national nonprofit organization working to end the victimization, criminalization, and incarceration of people with disabilities and Deaf people.

To learn more about our work, visit [www.activatingchange.org](http://www.activatingchange.org) or email [hello@activatingchange.org](mailto:hello@activatingchange.org).

