

Planning an Accessible Meeting or Event

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring access for all participants is key for planning a successful online or in-person event. This resource explains steps to take before, during and after the event that are best practices for enhancing accessibility. While this guide provides extensive information on making events accessible, remember that any accommodation that may be requested is based on that person's own disability and should be reviewed on an individual basis.

Before the Event

ALL EVENTS

- Ask attendees and speakers what accommodations they need on the event registration form. Follow up with any participants and speakers who need accommodations. Make sure that people can add a personal attendant or assistant to their registration.
- Provide steps on accessing accommodations, such as interpreters or closed captioning, prior to event.
- If requested, arrange American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters or CART (real time captioning and transcription) at least **one week in advance**. See below for resources on providing interpreters and captioning.
- Provide a date by which attendees should request accommodations. You can qualify this request by saying all participants requesting accommodation will be provided with an accommodation, but the time needed to provide the most effective accommodations varies. Providing a date one week before the event is a common practice.

Here is a common accommodations statement: *"Please request alternate formats, sign language interpreters and other reasonable accommodations by (at least five business days prior to event) via email to (insert point of contact or email address)."*

- Be sure that any graphics or images in your outreach materials have text descriptions. Consult the resources below for information on document accessibility.
- Provide a calendar invite, confirmation email and several follow-up emails that include:
 - ✓ Event details
 - ✓ Information about how to access accommodations
 - ✓ Instructions for accessing the event
 - ✓ A point of contact for any questions about accessibility.
 - ✓ A list of what attendees should bring with them

- Provide speakers with accessibility guidance provided within the “During the Event” section, including:
 - ✓ Instructing speakers in advance to state their name and organization
 - ✓ Reminding speakers to describe what they look like when introducing themselves
 - ✓ Reminding speakers to describe, in words, any visual information such as slides, pictures, graphics or demonstrations, because not everyone can see.
- Provide electronic presentation copies prior to the event. Be sure that presentations are accessible. Consult the resources below for more on digital accessibility.
- Provide speakers with resources on accessible presentations and workshops. Consult the resources below for some examples.
- Provide speakers and attendees with accessibility guidance provided within the “During the Event” section.
- Schedule short breaks if the meeting is longer than one hour.
- Have one person or team manage all accessibility matters.
- Make sure that virtual or physical backgrounds are plain to reduce distractions.
- Designate one person or team to provide technical help during the event. Make sure the person or team is familiar with common accessibility needs such as screen-reader software and captions. Designate a backup person for technical help as well.
- Designate primary and backup point of contacts in the event the primary point of contact is not able to respond to inquiries.
- If possible, conduct a test run meeting in advance of the actual event to check all accessibility features.



VIRTUAL EVENTS

- Provide all documents in accessible, editable formats. Users should be able to type within the document, or change the size, color and style of the text font, if possible.
- Familiarize yourself with the accessibility features of your chosen platform, including captions, screen reader commands and keyboard navigability. Make sure your platform has a call-in option on the telephone. See below for resources on digital accessibility.



IN-PERSON OR HYBRID EVENTS

- Host the event at an accessible location. An accessible location will have ramp and elevator access, automatic doors, Braille and tactile signposting in rooms, elevators and hallways, wheelchair-accessible restrooms, wide doorways, alternative emergency devices and other features. See the resources below for information on building accessibility, including detailed checklists.

- Identify information for signage and instructions on where to find various rooms, restrooms and potential places to set aside as quiet areas. You may need to visit the location to do so. If possible, include signage to and from the event from common access points, including public transportation stops.
- Add information about requesting an accessible parking spot in the registration form. Reserve a specific parking spot for anyone who requests one.
- Include information about accessible parking and public transportation options in confirmation emails and follow-up communications.
- If you can, provide information about emergency evacuation procedures in advance, and make sure that this procedure includes people with disabilities. A plan should account for differences in mobility, seeing or hearing information and how much time it may take someone to move somewhere. You can use a plan that already exists for a location, such as a workplace.
- Reserve additional seating at the front of the room for people who are following interpreters or captions and people who are blind or low-vision. Provide chair-free space somewhere in the room for attendees who use wheelchairs.
- Make sure the event space is free of obstacles or trip hazards. Tape over any wires where people will be walking.
- Clear a curbside area of any obstacles to allow for paratransit and accessible vehicles to drop off passengers who use mobility devices.
- Ask attendees to not wear perfume or cologne, as many people with disabilities are sensitive to scents.
- When communicating with attendees, provide information about the location's accessibility – for example, where the wheelchair-accessible entrances to the building are.
- If possible, let speakers and participants visit the rooms in advance.
- Make sure that microphones and speakers are set up for the event.
- Make sure the space has adequate lighting for the area where speakers, captions and interpreters will be.
- For a hybrid event, make sure that both in-person and remote attendees can see the captions.
- For a hybrid event, ensure that both in-person and remote audiences can hear the speakers and any audience participation.
- Make sure to provide information to staff about what to expect, and what accessibility requests they may receive from attendees. Make staff aware that attendees with disabilities may communicate in different ways. Some may speak, others may write. Staff should be ready to help blind and low-vision attendees navigate the space and find nametags, if applicable.

During the Event

ALL EVENTS

- If possible, record all sessions from start to finish. You will need to ask for attendees' and interpreters' consent.
- Speak directly to anyone using ASL, rather than the interpreter.
- Describe, in words, any visual information such as slides, pictures, graphics or demonstrations, because not everyone can see. Read aloud any text on a slide.
- Do not use any flashing objects, moving objects or animations during the session.
- Talk to attendees with disabilities with the same tone as you would to anyone else. Consult the resources below for more information on disability etiquette.
- Do not ask attendees to disclose their disability or to talk about their disabilities. Many people with disabilities find such questions uncomfortable. However, if an attendee begins to discuss their disability, allow them to discuss it – do not ask to change the subject.
- People with disabilities may have involuntary body movements, look elsewhere or communicate differently. Avoid remarking on these differences. Consult the resources below for more information on disability etiquette.
- Specify a process by which people ask questions or speak, such as raising hands virtually or in person.
- Repeat any questions or comments made by audience members for all to hear.
- Keep the designated technical help person or team, and their backup, on standby to assist with any virtual or in-person technology needs. Let all attendees know how to get assistance early and often.

VIRTUAL EVENTS

- Communicate with attendees by both chat and audio, and allow attendees to do the same. If important information appears in the chat box, read it aloud to the group.
- Admit interpreters and captioners to virtual meetings first. Spotlight or pin ASL interpreters alongside speakers. Make sure that your meeting settings are open to external attendees, as captioners and interpreters may come from external providers.
- Enable captions or live transcription at the start of every Zoom or Teams session. Make sure that captioners have access to the captions feature.
- Review the features of the platform, including accessibility features like captions, at the start of every session.
- Speakers should have their cameras on, face the camera and make sure their mouth is visible to engage participants, and to allow attendees with certain hearing disabilities to better process the information.
- Provide a phone number to call into virtual meeting rooms. Telephone options are more accessible for many blind and low-vision people.

- Ensure good lighting so your face is clearly visible without shadows.
- Make sure that your virtual background contrasts with your face, so that you are visible to people with vision disabilities or who are color-blind.
- Make sure that interpreters or captioners and people who need them are in the same breakout rooms.



RECORDED EVENTS

- Include instructions on how to access accessibility features, such as captions, on any recording.
- Ensure that any recordings have captions and/or a transcript. Videos should have captions.
- Include an ASL interpreter side-by-side with speakers, or create a version of the event with the ASL speaker side-by-side.
- Create an audio description version of the event, if visual information is not described in the event. You will need **two to three weeks** to have a recording processed by an audio description service. Learn more about digital accessibility in the resources below.
- If the event has a public “launch” during which you expect a large audience to view the event, ensure that a tech support person is standing by for any issues in real time.



IN-PERSON OR HYBRID EVENTS

- Provide information on the location of emergency exits, restrooms and information desks for all attendees at the start of every session.
- Position interpreters and captioners at the front of the room, and reserve nearby seating for people who have requested these services. If unsure, ask the interpreter where the best position would be.
- Make sure the interpreters and/or captioning device or screen are easily visible from reserved seating.
- Make sure that displays, tables and exhibits are not blocking paths of travel. A path of travel needs to be at least 3 feet wide, and ideally more than 5 feet.
- Make sure that tables are at a wheelchair-accessible height. See the resources below for more information.
- Provide a quiet space or set-aside area for people to take a break, if needed. Keep the area as quiet as possible. You may need a larger space for a quiet area if the event is held in a room with high ceilings or an atrium, which can carry more noise.
- Provide plenty of signage and information at the beginning of each session on the locations of restrooms, quiet areas and exits. Make sure signs are accessible. See the resources below for additional information.
- Introduce yourself to anyone who asks, even when wearing a nametag.
- Speak into a microphone, and connect the microphone to the streaming for hybrid attendees.
- Remind all speakers to use the microphone. Speakers should be offered lavalier (worn) microphones to enhance sound quality.
- Assign someone to bring or pass a microphone to attendees when attendees are invited to speak or ask questions. Remember to call on or speak with both hybrid and in-person attendees.

After the Event

- Make sure all follow-up emails, resources and websites are accessible. Consult the resources below for more information.
- Provide follow-up contact information for attendees, and include both email and telephone.
- Provide any notes, slides or materials distributed at the meeting in digital form to attendees.
- Survey attendees about their experience. Record any feedback on access problems.

Resources

- The [Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology \(PEAT\)](#), an ODEP Technical Assistance Center, offers the following resources:
 - [Digital Accessibility Basics](#)
 - [Choosing an Accessible Virtual Meeting Platform](#)
 - [Including Live Captioning](#)
 - [Working with Sign Language Interpreters](#)
- [This guide from the General Services Administration](#) provides information on planning and conducting accessible meetings and events.
- You can learn about accessible presentations from [the W3C](#).
- You can learn about accessible digital communications from:
 - [Section508.gov](#) – a federal website with helpful training on document, email, meeting and website accessibility
- The National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) hosts an [online database of qualified sign language interpreters](#) across the U.S.
- [This guide from the ADA National Network](#) offers tips and advice on organizing and running accessible conferences and events.
- The University of Maine provides [helpful guidance](#) (PDF) for accessible in-person and hybrid events.
- The ADA National Network produced this [comprehensive guide](#) for accessible in-person events.
- [This guide from SIGAccess](#) provides a comprehensive overview of steps to take for accessible conferences. Many of the points also apply to other events, such as career fairs.
- The [Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability \(EARN\)](#), an ODEP Technical Assistance Center, offers a range of resources on [disability etiquette](#), [digital accessibility](#) and [wider disability employment](#).
- The [Job Accommodation Network \(JAN\)](#), an ODEP Technical Assistance Center, offers sample language for accessibility and guidance on providing common accommodations.

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