

# Guide to Etiquette and Behavior for Working with People with Disabilities

# ***GUIDE TO ETIQUETTE AND BEHAVIOR FOR WORKING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES***

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 the following guidelines unless someone with a disability tells you they want it done a different way. With this in mind, please consider the following:

- 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. Don't 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 or has asked for it.
- Communicate with the person, not his or her interpreter, companion or assistant. Respect the person's privacy. Refrain from asking questions which would otherwise be inappropriate to ask of any other person. (Private life, medical condition)
- Be sensitive to their needs. Individuals are much more independent than people give them credit for. Many times, negotiating the physical environment is less frustrating than trying to communicate with people who are not sensitive to their needs.

## ***DISABILITY - BLIND AND/OR VISUAL IMPAIRMENT***

### **THINGS TO DO:**

- Introduce yourself and identify who you are (Hi! My name is John and I'm an election judge.) Give the person verbal information about things that are visually obvious to those who can see.
- Be descriptive when giving directions. Saying "Step over here," has little meaning to someone who can't see you point. "Three steps to your left, then two steps forward," would be much more helpful.
- Lead someone who is blind only after they have accepted your offer to do so. Touch their arm, and then offer your arm to guide them. Allow them to hold your arm rather than you holding theirs. It is important to let them control their own movements. Verbally describe the area as you go.
- Describe things from their perspective, not yours. Some persons who are blind use a "clock" reference for things directly in front of them (an obstacle in their path). For example, a large rock 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 talking. If your eyes are directed towards them, your voice will be as well.
- Make sure the path to the voting booth is 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 interact with a guide dog while it is working.

## ***DISABILITY - DEAF AND/OR HEARING IMPAIRMENT***

### **THINGS TO KNOW:**

- Find out how the person best communicates.
- If the person reads lips, speak in a normal, not exaggerated way. Short simple sentences are best. Avoid blocking their view of your face.
- Get their attention by tapping their shoulder or waving your hand in front of them before starting a conversation.
- If there is some doubt whether they understood you correctly, ask them. If they did not understand, rephrase your statement. When someone asks, "What did you say?" the answers, "Never mind," "Nothing," or "It's not important," are very common replies. These responses may give the person the impression that you think they are not worth you 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.

## ***DISABILITY - CONDITIONS WHICH CAUSE DIFFICULTY WITH SPEECH***

### **THINGS TO DO:**

- If you do not understand what the person is saying, bring it to their 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 quiet or private location.
- Consider writing as an alternative means of communication.
- If no solution to the communication problem can be worked out with you and the person, consider asking if there is someone who can interpret what they are 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 communication.
- 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, mentally impaired, or mentally ill. They are accustomed to being avoided, ignored, and even hung up on by phone.
- Accessibility for individuals with speech difficulties lies within your power. Your understanding, patience, and communication skills are as important to someone with speech that is difficult to understand as a ramp or a grab bar is to someone who uses a wheelchair.

## ***DISABILITY - USES WHEELCHAIR***

### **THINGS TO DO:**

- Do not assume a person using a wheelchair needs assistance. Ask them if they would like 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 if you were 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 when the chair is out of commission.
- When speaking to someone who uses a wheelchair, try to speak at the same level in which they are sitting. Having to look straight up is uncomfortable.
- When helping a person down a step, ask them which way they prefer it be done for them to feel secure.

### **THINGS TO AVOID:**

- Do not start pushing someone who uses a wheelchair without asking.
- When communicating, do not stand too close to the person in the wheelchair. Give them some space.
- Do not push open a door using a person's feet or foot pedals.

## ***DISABILITY - 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 capacity for independent living.

### **THINGS TO DO:**

- Speak in concrete terms, use short sentences and avoid abstract instructions.
- Complete one step of instructions before giving instructions for 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 attendant for better ways to communicate effectively.
- Based on level of disability, individual 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 directions given.
- Do not get defensive. Bluntness may be part of the person's natural way of communication.
- Do not use terms that describe level of disability such as low or high functioning.

## *DISABILITY - MENTAL ILLNESS*

### **THINGS TO KNOW:**

- Mental illness is a term used for a group of mental disorders which cause severe disturbances in thinking, feeling, and relating. This often results in a greatly diminished capacity to cope with the ordinary demands of life. Mental illness affects persons of any age and socioeconomic level, and it can occur in any family.
- Mental illness is sometimes confused with mental retardation, but these two disorders are not the same. Individuals who have mental retardation have a cognitive impairment, usually present since birth. A person with a mental illness, on the other hand, does not necessarily have a cognitive impairment; however, medications may produce side effects that interfere with thinking, reasoning, and concentrating.

### **THINGS TO DO:**

- Speak directly to the person when asking questions or giving directions.
- Speak in a normal voice at a normal volume.
- If a person with mental illness begins to show signs of agitation, speak calmly; gently urge them to go with you away from the situation causing stress.
- Allow time for responses. Some medications used in the treatment of mental illness cause side effects such as slowing of thought processes.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

*Disability Rights Montana*  
1022 Chestnut Street  
Helena, MT 59601  
406-449-2344 *Voice/TDD*  
1-800-245-4743 *Toll Free*  
406-449-2418 *Fax*  
[raylynn@disabilityrightsmt.org](mailto:raylynn@disabilityrightsmt.org) *E-Mail*

All programs and activities conducted by *Disability Rights Montana* shall be accessible to people with disabilities. To receive this material in an alternative format, or to request accommodations, please contact *Disability Rights Montana* at the above numbers.