

Creating Accessible Events

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It is estimated that 1 in 5 Americans has a disability and the numbers will grow as baby boomers age. This has big implications for the meetings industry and furthers a trend for creating events that are more accessible, functional and user-friendly.

It started with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Any meeting or event open to the public, sponsored by a government agency or offered to employees must ensure that people with disabilities can attend and take part in all aspects of the function. This includes physical and communication access.

With advance planning, meetings can be more welcoming and user-friendly. Following are a few basic tips for choosing a venue, planning logistics, serving food, and ensuring communications and materials are accessible.

CHOOSING A SITE

Staff: Talk to site staff about accessibility. Find out if the facility been surveyed for access and if there are plans to remove any identified barriers. Is staff cooperative when discussing special needs and, better yet, trained in disability awareness? Inquire about available public and private transportation to the location and if it is accessible. Inquire about the use of chemicals and scents that can cause sensitivities.

On the Outside: Check for designated accessible parking, close to an accessible entrance that is along a barrier-free route that has a level, smooth surface. Note curb cuts for all sidewalks. At least one primary entrance should be accessible and clearly marked as such. All doors (inside and out) should be at least 32 inches wide, easy to open using five pounds of pressure and have lever, push-pull or automatic-open hardware.

Getting Around: Inside, can you get to all common areas without using stairs? Check that floors are level, have low-pile carpet or hard surfaces and are clear of obstacles such as throw rugs. Check for directional signs mounted for easy viewing at 60 inches above the floor, with raised, high contrast lettering. Paths of travel should be 36 inches wide and objects not protruding into the path higher than 27 or lower than 80 inches. All ramps have a maximum rise of one inch per foot.

If there are upper floors, look for at least one elevator, conveniently located, with a minimum of 48"X48" floor space. Confirm that Braille or raised-letter buttons are reachable and floor changes are visible and announced by audible signals.

Rest Rooms: Is there at least one accessible rest room close to the event? It should have 5' x 5' of clear floor space, a doorway of at least 32 inches, and toilet with grab bars (side and back) and seat height of 17-19 inches. The sink should be a maximum height of 34 inches with space underneath for a forward approach, and have lever-handled faucets.

Exposed plumbing under the sink should be insulated for safety. Dispensers, hand dryers & accessories should be mounted with controls no more than 48” from the floor.

Emergencies: Check to see if there are visual and audible emergency signals in restrooms, hallways, and common areas and that an evacuation map of adequate size, height and contrast is posted. Look for emergency notification “pulls” and fire extinguishers no more than 54 inches above the floor. Find out if there is an evacuation plan that includes provisions for persons with disabilities.

YOUR MEETING:

Communication: Provide a way for participants to request reasonable accommodations through a registration form or other mechanism. Educate yourself in disability etiquette and alternative communication methods. Plan for the cost of accommodations as part of your budgeting process. Understand how to secure sign language interpreters or other accommodations and how to make materials available in alternate formats such as large print or Braille. Request ahead of time that attendees refrain from using perfumes or scents. Use every effort to fulfill accommodation requests and contact a local disability organization if you have questions. Some requests may be difficult to meet or are beyond what the laws require. Educate yourself about these issues so you are prepared to respond.

Meeting Rooms: Meeting rooms should have a clear pathway of 36 inches throughout and have unobstructed sight lines. Areas should be fragrance & smoke-free, well-lit, ventilated, and have low noise-level. Chairs and tables (between 28-34 inches high) should be movable so that wheelchairs and scooters may be integrated. Confirm that a sound system is available for using assisted listening devices. Make sure a stage can be ramped and that adjustable height and/or cordless microphones are available. If there is fixed stadium seating, insist on spaces where a wheelchair may be integrated.

Food Service: Do your best to accommodate diet requests and restrictions. If a menu is provided, make it available in alternative formats such as large print. With a buffet, insure that additional site staff be on hand to assist and that food is within reach. Make straws, lightweight cups, and non-sugar beverages or water available. If participants are on their own for meals, list accessible, local eateries in materials.

Guest Rooms: If your meeting requires an overnight stay, accessible guest rooms will need to be available. Remember doorway width (32”) and path of travel (36”) and that furniture should be movable. Accessible restrooms within guest rooms are a critical element including sufficient turning radius, grab bars, knee clearance of at least 29” under the sink and a means to access the bathtub or shower. See that locks, temperature controls, peepholes, switches and closet rods are within reach. Check to see that the room can be equipped for someone who is deaf or hard of hearing.

REMEMBER

- Cooperation and creativity are keys to achieving an inviting and accessible event.

- Location, Location! Select an accessible site with courteous, trained staff.
- Success is in the details. There are many comprehensive resources and checklists available.

RESOURCES

A Guide to Planning Accessible Meetings

By: June Isaacson Kailes and Darrell Jones

Accessibility Checklist for Events and Meetings, Edition 1.1

By June Isaacson Kailes

Accessibility Guidelines for Speakers

By: June Isaacson Kailes

Available From:

JUNE ISAACSON KAILES

Disability Policy Consultant

6201 Ocean Front Walk, Suite 2

Playa del Rey, California 90293-7556

Phone 310 821 7080, Fax 310 827 0269

Planning Accessible Meetings: A Guide to ADA Compliance

By: Bill Scott

Available From:

American Society of Association Executives

1575 I Street, NW

Washington DC 20005

Design for Accessibility: A Cultural Administrators Handbook

National Endowment for the Arts

Available From:

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

1029 Vermont Avenue, NW, 2nd Floor

Washington, DC 20005

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Great Lakes ADA And Accessible IT Center

800-949-4232 (V/TTY)

<http://www.adagreatlakes.org>

ADA WI Partnership

608-244-5310

<http://www.adawipartnership.org/>