

MAKING MEETINGS AND CONFERENCES ACCESSIBLE TO INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, individuals with all types of visible and hidden disabilities may now be attending SUNY-sponsored meetings and conferences. The following suggestions are offered to you as ways in which you can make these meetings both physically and otherwise accessible to such individuals. As meeting and conference planners or coordinators, we hope that you will share this pamphlet with your volunteers and paid staff, with workshop coordinators, planners and participants, conference speakers, campus-wide special event presenters and others who will either be planning upcoming meetings or participating as presenters in future meetings. This information is designed to assist you in making your meetings and conferences successful and accessible to all meeting participants whether they are presenters or attendees.

1. Pre- registration

- A. Provide space on preregistration forms for registrants to indicate whether they have special needs: materials in alternative formats such as in large print, braille or on tape or disk, sign language interpreters, ramps for getting on and off platforms, “handicapped” parking, etc and make sure that you list a contact person for the registrants who have these and other needs.
- B. Assign someone to the registration or reception area to see that participants with disabilities are told of the arrangements that have been made to accommodate their needs.
- C. If the service requested cannot be provided, call the registrant with a disability as soon as possible, explain the situation, and attempt to work out some alternative accommodation.
- D. Before the conference or meeting, give your staff and volunteers an orientation dealing with how they can best help individuals with disabilities. You can have staff from the Office of Student Disability Services, or individuals with disabilities help you conduct these orientations. Be sure that you cover all groups of disabled persons—those with visual or hearing impairments, mobility impairments, individuals needing various types of physical assistance, and those with hidden disabilities such as the learning disabled and those with hidden physical disabilities. Be sure that you go over the activities of the meeting and how all these activities can be made accessible to everyone. Address the relevant aspects of providing meeting access and always make this orientation part of your conference planning.

- E. Appoint someone on your staff to be the disability services coordinator for the meeting. This person should be the same one who was the contact for registrants having special needs.

2. Physical Access

- A. Make sure that there are parking facilities available for individuals who need “handicapped parking.” This parking should be near the conference space.
- B. Make sure that all facilities to be used by meeting or conference attendees are physically accessible. This includes restrooms, all meeting areas, coffee and lounge facilities, dining areas, etc. Accessibility must be convenient and, if access is difficult, be sure that there is conference staff available to assist participants.
- C. Be sure that all facilities to be used inside the conference buildings are also accessible. Check that there are conveniently situated accessible restrooms, dining facilities, etc.
- D. In order to ensure that everything is physically accessible, walk the facilities either with a physically disabled individual or an individual on campus, such as the Coordinator of Student Disability Services, who will know how to evaluate the facilities in question. Also, keep a record of various facilities and their accessibility (this could be kept with the SDS Coordinator or in that office where meetings and conferences are planned.).
- E. If, during or after the meeting, you are planning a reception, or if meals are in buffet style, ask participants with disabilities if they will need assistance and assign staff to help at breaks or meals.

3. Access for Individuals Who Are Deaf or Hearing Impaired

- A. In the Americans with Disabilities Act, all meetings and conferences must be accessible to individuals with hearing impairments. Therefore, you must make provisions for people who are both hard of hearing and totally deaf.
- B. Make sure that you can obtain the use of some type of assistive listening device that can be used by an individual who uses a hearing aide or who needs listening amplification. Usually, the Office of Student Disability Services has access to such equipment. It is good to know how to obtain this equipment if needed. You should also learn how to hook up the equipment or obtain the

services of someone who can do this and who can be on call if the equipment is not functioning during the day or days of the meeting.

- C. If requested, the host campus must provide for a sign language or other interpreter for the hearing impaired or deaf individual. Therefore, you must make budgetary provisions in case such a service is requested. Again, the SDS Office can provide you with names of qualified interpreters should they be required.
- D. You may also be requested to provide note takers for these individuals. This is also a legitimate request and can be provided from the SDS Office or by using volunteers from meeting sessions or staff members who have this assignment.

4. Services for Individuals with Visual Impairments

- A. In planning your conference or meeting, make provisions to put all information used by participants into large print, or on tape, on computer disc or in Braille. Again, ask for this information on your registration form and make budgetary provisions for such accommodations. Documents should be prepared in advance in the format that is the registrant's preferred mode of communication.
- B. Train one or more individuals to serve as guides and/or readers for visually impaired attendees. The guides will probably be asked to take an individual to a specific workshop, the rest room or lounges and dining areas. Guides may be asked to leave the participant, stay with him or her or to come back for him or her after the workshop or activity has been completed. The guide may also be asked to orient someone to the meeting facilities so that he or she can travel about independently. Readers may be asked to read anything from the entire printed meeting program, help with session evaluations and other print materials. This may even occur when an individual wants his or her information in another format. This is because, often, these alternative materials are not available enough in advance so that you can send them to the attendee who requests the accommodation.
- C. Someone at the registration desk should be prepared to read items for an individual or to fill out evaluations and other forms. If you have more than one workshop, be sure that the workshop coordinator is prepared to help the person with a visual impairment fill out the workshop evaluation form at the end of the session.
- D. Make an area available to a person with a Guide Dog so that the animal can relieve itself during the day.

5. Access for Individuals with Learning and other Hidden Disabilities

- A. Individuals with learning disabilities may also request readers, note takers or guides. These requests are legitimate and should be honored.
- B. If possible, have an area set aside so that individuals with disabilities such as diabetes, heart conditions, asthma, arthritis, etc. can have a place to rest once in a while. This “rest area” may serve multiple purposes such as giving a learning disabled individual a quiet place to read information or fill out evaluations or just be away from meeting confusion.
- C. You are not responsible for giving an individual medication but you should know how to get in touch with medical personnel if necessary.
- D. Make sure that you have a list of both adapted and public transportation including cabs, accessible vans, city busses if any or those who might volunteer to give people rides to hotels, etc.

6. Hints for Conference Presenters

- A. Meeting or conference presenters should put their materials into large print, on tape or disc or in Braille to meet the needs of attendees who might request such accommodations.
- B. Send each presenter information on speaking to audiences where there are people with disabilities. Give them hints, such as:
 - 1. Do not turn away from your audience.
 - 2. Do not speak to an interpreter but to the person for whom the interpreter is working.
 - 3. If you write on a blackboard, say what you are writing and do not turn away to write while speaking.
 - 4. If you use overheads, read what’s on them and, if possible, make print-outs of the overheads and put them in alternate formats.
 - 5. Speak clearly. If you have to use a microphone, do not put the microphone too close to your mouth – this muffles your speaking voice.

6. Make sure that all rooms are arranged so those individuals using wheelchairs have access.
7. In the description of your presentation, indicate whether or not there will be any writing or reading activities during the session. This is so those individuals with visual, learning or motor disabilities can be prepared to participate fully in these activities.
8. Allow individuals with visual or learning disabilities to tape meetings or conferences and if you do not want to allow this, make arrangements for them to have access to conference materials.
9. If you are doing a technical presentation, remember to write unusual words or phrases on a blackboard and spell them for the benefit of anyone who may need such assistance.

7. Hints for Conference Planners

1. When budgeting for meetings or conferences, include accommodating people with disabilities as a budget item. If you need to get an idea of costs, speak to the Coordinator of Student Disability Services or others on your campus who have already planned events where people with disabilities were accommodated.
2. When staffing, find individuals on campus who would be willing to volunteer as readers, guides, and personal assistants and do other functions related to accommodating individuals with disabilities. Be sure that these volunteers are included in any staff orientation and make sure that they have training as to how to work with people with disabilities.
3. Have communications and other assistive devices readily available for the use of individuals with disabilities. These devices such as a TTY-a device used by the deaf and hard of hearing for access to telephones.

Check with your ADA or Student Disability Services Coordinator for other suggestions.

If there are any questions about how to make your meeting or conference more accessible to individuals with disabilities, contact your campus Office of Student Disability Services or the Director of Disability Services and Information at SUNY System Administration.