

# Planning Accessible Meetings for Persons with Hearing and Vision Loss

---

## The Population

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act 1990 (ADA), “disability” means a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the individual’s major life activities; or a record of such impairment or being regarded as having such an impairment.” Source: ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act); Justice Department; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 5USC301; 28USC509, 510; 42USC12186 (b); 28CFR35.104

Some disabilities are visible; others, such as hearing loss, are invisible. A person can be young or old, be born with hearing loss, or acquire hearing loss as a result of an injury or chronic illness. Hearing loss may be combined with visual loss and/or other disabilities. This paper concerns itself with an overview of what meeting planners should know about communications accessibility for persons with hearing loss and is not intended to be exhaustive in its content. For more information contact the Florida Coordinating Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing [www.FCCDHH.org](http://www.FCCDHH.org).

There are 51.2 million people with disabilities in the United States, or 18.1% of this nation’s population (2000 U.S. Census Bureau). And almost 42% of adults 65 and older have disabilities. The Florida Association of the Deaf estimates approximately three million Floridians have hearing loss sufficient to impact their ability to participate in meetings without accommodation. Assuring the availability of an accessible facility, program, and assistive communications technologies will help ensure access and allow effective participation by persons with hearing and/or vision loss.

## Accessibility and the Law

The ADA is a federal civil rights law enacted by Congress to ensure that qualified individuals with disabilities are afforded the same opportunities that are available to persons without disabilities. Title I of the ADA requires state employers to provide reasonable accommodations for qualified employment applicants and employees with disabilities. Title II of the ADA applies to programs and services of state and local government entities. It requires them to remove communication barriers and afford accessibility for all their services, programs, or activities.<sup>1</sup> Title III applies to public accommodations and services operated by private entities. Examples include attorneys, mediators, physicians, hotels, transportation services, restaurants, stores, airlines, and shopping malls. Title IV applies to telecommunications. Title V contains miscellaneous provisions.

The Florida Accessible Electronic and Information Technology Act<sup>2</sup> of 2006 requires each state agency to develop, procure, maintain, and use accessible electronic information and information technology that is fully accessible to individuals with disabilities, except when

---

<sup>1</sup> Title II, Pub. L. 101-336 (42 U.S.C. 12131 et seq.).

<sup>2</sup> Sections 282.601 - 282.606, Fla.Stat.

compliance with this section imposes an undue burden. However, in such instance, a state agency must provide individuals with disabilities with the information and data involved by an alternative method of access that allows the individual to use the information and data.

## Guiding Principles

A meeting environment that is accessible, functional, and safe benefits everyone. With pre-planning, awareness, and willingness to consider the possible needs of a variety of people, the host can ensure a usable and comfortable environment for all meeting participants. Creating a barrier-free meeting requires a degree of flexibility and willingness to make last-minute changes to any aspect of the meeting. By treating each meeting as though someone with hearing and/or vision loss might attend, the meeting planners can begin to eliminate barriers to full participation.

1. Facilities where meetings are held should meet all basic ADA accessibility standards.
2. Meetings should be designed to allow effective participation by participants with sensory, physical, and communication disabilities.
3. Information should be presented in a way that is easily understood by individuals with a variety of listening abilities.
4. Participants with hearing loss should be given the opportunity to request accommodations that they might need to participate in the meeting, and planners should make every reasonable effort to fulfill those requests.

## Accessible Meeting Sites

All committee-sponsored meetings and activities should be held in locations that are physically accessible. Committee chairs and staff should take reasonable and necessary steps, prior to any meeting; to ensure that hotel, public buildings, and/or other proposed meeting sites comply with the ADA Standards for Accessible Design. . In some instances it may be necessary to make an on-site visit to evaluate the accessibility of the physical environment. Community meeting sites that are often accessible include: libraries, senior centers, community colleges, universities, and newer buildings.

## Modifications to Policies

The ADA requires reasonable modifications to policies and programs in order to afford qualified individuals who have disabilities with an equal opportunity to enjoy programs, services, and activities. A few examples of policy modifications that may arise in a meeting or conference setting include:

- Allowing a participant to bring an attendant or companion to the meeting
- Taking more frequent breaks
- Allowing service animals even though pets are prohibited
- Permitting individuals to stand and stretch during a presentation
- Set the pace of discussion, voting, and presentations a bit slower allowing time for people using accommodations to fully participate; have each participant state his/her name prior to speaking

## Auxiliary Aids and Services

The ADA requires public and private entities, upon request, to make the attempt to provide appropriate aids and services to afford effective communication for persons with hearing loss to participate equally in that entity's employment, committee meetings, activities, and events. The ADA may exempt entities such as private businesses from providing accommodations that place an undue hardship on the business, even though the ADA does not specify what constitutes an undue hardship. The ADA places higher standards for state/local government when it comes to providing accommodation requiring that a public entity take appropriate steps to ensure that communications involving persons with disabilities are as effective as with others. This includes providing appropriate auxiliary aids and services to ensure equal opportunity to participate and enjoy the benefits conducted by the public entity. The ADA further directs public entities to give primary consideration to the requests of the individual with a disability (CFR Part 35, subpart E – Communications, Section 35.160 General). Florida's State Government will not place a surcharge on a particular individual with hearing loss or any group of individuals with hearing loss to cover the cost of providing auxiliary aids and services nor shall "No-show" charges may be levied.

Examples of auxiliary aids or services that may need to be provided for qualified individuals with disabilities who participate in committee meetings or events include:

- Assistive listening devices and sound systems
- Qualified sign language interpreters, oral interpreters, and tactile interpreters
- Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART) services in accessible formats such as large print, Braille, LCD projection, and remote-CART for conference calls
- Qualified readers who know tactile sign language

## Special Considerations for CART Services

Communication Access Real-Time Translation (CART) accommodation can be provided by placing a CART provider in the meeting or it can be provided remotely utilizing an Internet and telephone interface. The provision of an effective accommodation using CART depends not only on the skill of the CART provider, but also on the ability of the CART provider to hear what every speaker is saying. This may require amplification of all of the speakers' voices, an assistive listening device for the CART provider and, in the case of remote CART, a powerful telephone microphone. A weakness in any of these provisions will compromise the effectiveness, and hence the legality, of CART accommodation. This is one area where it does not pay to cut corners in order to reduce cost. Meeting planners are urged to consult closely with their selected CART provider to ensure all conditions necessary for success are in place several days in advance of the meeting. In the case of remote CART, there needs to be a responsible person on site during the meeting to trouble shoot technical difficulties if they arise.

In addition, speakers must identify themselves every time they speak so the CART provider can identify them to the remote listeners. Reminders to speakers are frequently needed. The responsibility for issuing these reminders lies with the person who is conducting the meeting. If remote CART is to be used to provide communication accessibility, special attention must be paid to the meeting site, the auditory arrangements, and the behavior of the speakers. This cannot be emphasized strongly enough.

## Notice Language

Announcements of committee meetings, training sessions, and other state government-sponsored activities should include information about the availability of accommodations for participants with hearing loss, upon request and with advance notice. A sample ADA notice language for committee-sponsored meetings, teleconferences, videoconferences, and other events follows:

Persons with disabilities who need an accommodation to participate in [insert the name of the event] should contact [insert name, address, phone number, and email address of the appropriate staff member] as far in advance as possible but preferably at least five working days before the date of the scheduled event. Persons using a TDD may contact [insert appropriate staff member's name] through the Florida Relay Service, 711.

## Accessible Presentations and Materials

In addition to physical and communication access, it is important to provide accessible presentations and materials. Meeting planners should understand that there is not a one-size fits all solution. Committee chairs, committee staff, and other meeting planners must ensure that all materials are developed in an accessible manner, as well as be prepared to offer and respond to requests for materials in alternate forms.

Committee reports and other documents must be designed so that they are accessible to persons who use assistive technology. Committee websites must also be accessible. And, if a committee provides information in multimedia formats – streaming media, CD-ROMs, etc. – this information must be accessible. For example, audio must have text alternative; videos should include captioning and video descriptions and a text transcript should be available. Assistive technology should be able to navigate the multimedia application without using a mouse; and flashing, blinking, or moving text should not be used.

Upon request by a qualified individual with a disability, committee work products must be provided in alternate formats such as Braille, large print, audiotape, or on CD. Sample language that should be included on committee reports and similar work products follows:

### **Alternate Formats**

Upon request by a qualified individual with a disability, this document will be made available in alternate formats. To request this document in an alternate format, please contact [insert name, address, phone number, and email address of the appropriate staff person].

### ***Special Considerations for Auditory Accessibility:***

- Keep the lights on bright enough to see the speaker's face, at all times.
- When speaking to a person with hearing loss individually, speak to the person with hearing loss and not the interpreter.
- Speak clearly, audibly and slowly when an interpreter is present. Allow the interpreter to sit or stand in the front of the room or in the location preferred by the client. The client's preferences for the location of the interpreter should be accommodated.

- Be certain the person with hearing loss does not have to stare into a bright light source in order to see the speaker. Close drapes and blinds during the presentation when needed.
- All videos and other auditory media should be closed or open captioned.
- Persons speaking should try to stay in one location and face the audience.

#### Sources Consulted in Preparing these Tips

Debbie Howells, Office of the State Courts Administrator, 500 S. Duval Street, Tallahassee, FL 32399-1900, Phone 850-922-4370, Fax 850-488-0156, Email [howellsd@flcourts.org](mailto:howellsd@flcourts.org)

Barbara Cain, Director, Clearinghouse on Disability Information, Governor's Commission on Disabilities, 4030 Esplanade Way, Suite 315C, Tallahassee, FL 32399, Phone 850-921-4170, Email: [Barbara.Cain@dms.MyFlorida.com](mailto:Barbara.Cain@dms.MyFlorida.com).

The Florida Coordinating Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing [www.FCCDHH.org](http://www.FCCDHH.org)

Emily Taylor-Snell, Florida Outreach Project, University of Florida, 1600 SW Archer Rd., P.O. Box 100234, Gainesville, FL 32610

Florida State Courts System's Court Facility Survey, May 2007, Office of the State Courts Administrator  
Common ADA Errors and Omissions in New Construction and Alterations, June 1997, U.S. Department of Justice  
ADA Checklist for New Lodging Facilities, U.S. Department of Justice

Accessible Customer Service Practices for Hotel and Lodging Guests with Disabilities, December 20, 2006, U.S. Department of Justice; [www.ada.gov/accesscust.htm](http://www.ada.gov/accesscust.htm)

Removing Barriers: Planning Meetings that Are Accessible to All Participants, 2005, North Carolina Office on Disability and Health in collaboration with The Center for Universal Design, <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncodh/pdfs/rbmeetingguide.pdf>

How to Plan Events that Everybody Can Attend, August 2001, New York Department of Health, [www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/promo/events.htm](http://www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/promo/events.htm)

508 Accessibility Check List, June 2008, Tricia Knox, Supreme Court of Florida, and Phil Pollock, Office of the State Courts Administrator

Guidelines for an Accessible Presentation, Summer 2006, Florida ADA Working Group

#### Additional Resources for Planning Accessible Meetings

Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Section 504 Programs and Activities Accessibility Handbook, [http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/dro/504/504\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/dro/504/504_handbook.pdf)

National Assistive Technology Technical Assistance Partnership (NATTAP), Arranging Accessible Meetings, <http://www.resna.org/taproject/library/bulletins/tapaug.html>

Association of Science and Technology Centers, Accessible Best Practices (resources for accessible science centers, museums, exhibits, displays, presentations, tours, and meetings), <http://www.astc.org/resource/access/best.htm>

Education Resources Information Center/Office of Special Education Programs, Planning Accessible Conferences and Meetings: An ERIC/OSEP Information Brief for Conference Planners, <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/eric/e735.html>

An on-line tutorial on planning accessible meetings is posted at <http://www.section508.gov>.

Click on the link to "508 Training", then the link to "REGISTER", where you will need to enter a user name and password to access the tutorials in the "508 Universe". Once you have entered the system, you will see on the left side of the page a link labeled "508 Training Courses" under the heading "My 508 Universe". Follow this link to find a list of the courses, including "Accessible Conferences".