Disability Awareness and Etiquette 101: A Resource for Maryland Transit Administration Drivers

Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities
at Kennedy Krieger Institute

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Overview and Guide Development

PROGRAM OVERVIEW: The Community and Professional Development Training Program at the Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities (MCDD) at Kennedy Krieger Institute is committed to supporting and enhancing professional development opportunities for professionals and community members and expanding their knowledge and skills to engage in effective advocacy, in order to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities and their families.

RESOURCE GUIDE DEVELOPMENT: This resource guide is designed to help Maryland Transit Administration drivers, as they strive to increase their awareness of disability etiquette, knowledge, attitudes and social interaction skills toward people with and without disabilities. The creation of this resource guide was supported by a targeted review of literature and resources that share the most relevant research on disability awareness and etiquette. Lessons learned are presented in this resource guide. Individuals and organizations using this guide should review and apply its recommendations according to their specific service and training needs and goals.

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Definition of Terms

What is a disability?

A disability refers to any condition of the mind or body that causes:

- An impairment of physical or mental functioning;
- The limitation of activities such as walking or hearing; and
- The restriction of participation in activities of daily living, such as working or obtaining healthcare services (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).

What is ableism?

Ableism refers to the prejudice or discrimination against people with disabilities. Recognizing it in our society is a component of allyship with the disability community (Ostrove et al., 2019).

What is disability etiquette?

Disability etiquette refers to instruction on the proper ways to interact with people with disabilities (American Association on Health & Disability, 2011).

What is transportation equity?

Transportation equity is defined as using the needs of the recipient to provide adequate access and resources within public transportation (Griffin & Sener, 2016).

It is vital because access to transit services is required to participate in social activities, seek education, find and secure employment, and access healthcare services (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2016).

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Bias and the Disability Community

What is bias?

The act of possessing attitudes and prejudices against a certain group is called bias. Often, it is unconscious, and people are unaware they possess it (ABA Commission on Disability Rights, 2019).

How does bias impact the disability community?

- Multiple studies have shown there are many negative attitudes and stereotypes associated with people with disabilities, including that they are dependent, incompetent, unemployable, passive and weak (Rohmer & Louvet, 2016).
- This creates significant disadvantages regarding full and active participation within the community.
- These negative attitudes and prejudice often result in public transportation workers generalizing people with disabilities as "difficult" and refraining from interaction with them (Bezyak et al., 2017).

Before continuing, take the Implicit Association Test located here: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/

- The Disability Implicit Association Test is a tool that helps individuals identify any personal bias they hold towards people with disabilities. It takes approximately 10 minutes to complete.
- It is important to recognize and become consciously aware of personal biases, then self-reflect on steps to address these biases and prevent discriminatory behavior.
- The following guide will provide strategies and tips on how to properly address biases towards the disability community and better their experience using public transportation, enabling participation within the community.

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Common Barriers in Transportation

1. Drivers not calling out stops

- It is useful for individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or have a cognitive disability to be informed of the bus's route, and it is a basic travel necessity for many (Bezyak et al, 2017).

2. Drivers refusing to stop

- Some individuals with a visual impairment are unable to see a bus approaching and are unable to flag the driver to stop (Park & Chowdhury, 2018).

3. Inappropriate driver attitude

- Negativity and prejudice creates a hostile environment for the disability community (Bezyak et al, 2017).

4. Drivers' lack of knowledge

- Drivers lack training in disability etiquette, communication strategies, and proper use of equipment for people with disabilities, and are therefore less likely to support them (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2016).

5. Service animal problems

- Many individuals with disabilities are questioned about the legitimacy of their service animal before riding public transportation, which is not allowed under the Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).

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What You Can Do: General Tips

Be patient.

- Regarding communication and transportation, be patient with people with disabilities. They know their strengths and limitations (United Spinal Association, 2021).

Ask before you help.

- It is important to not assume someone needs help. Offer your assistance if it appears the person requires it, and if so, ask how to help (Association of University Centers on Disabilities, 2010).

Do not make assumptions.

- Do not judge what someone with a disability can or cannot do (United Spinal Association, 2021).

Never ask questions about a person's disability.

- Respect people's privacy by not asking about their disability unless the individual brings up the subject (United Spinal Association, 2021).

Offer accessibility features.

- Offer patrons features including lifts, ramps, priority seating and communication devices to aid their travel (ADA National Network, 2021).

Allow adequate time to board and exit the bus.

- Some people with disabilities require additional time to board and exit the vehicles (ADA National Network, 2021).

Use person-first or identity-first language.

- When referring to a person with a disability, know the preferences of the individual before deciding to put either the person or identity first (Dunn & Andrews, 2015).

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Disability Considerations

The following resource will provide specific tips and strategies to use while communicating with someone with a disability.

The tips are separated by disability, and feature:
- Mobility-related disabilities
- Visual-related disabilities
- Hearing-related disabilities
- Speech-related disabilities
- Intellectual and cognitive disabilities
- Developmental disabilities
- Service animals

Disclaimer: It is important to remember each person is different and might require other accommodations that are not listed. These are general strategies that are important to consider when communicating with a certain population.

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Mobility Related Disabilities

1. • A wheelchair is a part of an individual's personal space and property (Association of University Centers on Disabilities, 2010).

2. • Never touch or move a mobility device without explicit permission from the person (Association of University Centers on Disabilities, 2010).

3. • Be aware how far an individual can reach. Place any necessities within their reach (United Spinal Association, 2021).

4. • Do not pass by people who use mobility devices at stops. Make all stops along the route (Bezyak et al., 2017).

5. • Make sure any bus accessibility features are available and unblocked for a passenger who might require it to board (Maryland Department of Transportation, 2021).

6. • Make priority seating available if requested by a person with a disability (Maryland Department of Transportation, 2021).

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Visual-related Disabilities

1. **Ask before you help.**

If you believe a person who is blind or visually impaired requires assistance, ask them first and allow them to accept or decline the help. Do not grab or pull randomly, because it can be jarring (Perkins School for the Blind, 2021).

2. **Identify yourself to the person before making contact.**

Before starting a conversation or entering a room, identify yourself. For example, say "Hi, it is…" to announce your presence to the person (National Federation of the Blind, 2019).

3. **Speak directly to the person in a normal tone.**

Rather than speaking to a companion, face the person and use a clear,normal speaking voice, just as you would with any other person (National Federation of the Blind, 2019).

4. **Give specific, non-visual directions if asked.**

If asked to assist the person in their travels, make sure you give specific and non-visual directions. For example, use "turn to your left," or "directly behind you." (Perkins School for the Blind, 2021).

5. **Announce important parts of the route loudly and clearly.**

Announce stop requests at transfer points, major intersections and destination points to ensure each individual is aware of their location along the route (ADA National Network, 2021).

Hearing-related Disabilities

Follow the person's cues to learn their preferred communication style. For example, they may prefer to speak, sign or write. Even if they have an interpreter, speak directly to the person (Hearing, Speech & Deaf Center, 2021).

Make sure to get the person's attention before speaking. This can be done through a wave or a tap on the shoulder (Bronski, 2015).

When communicating, speak clearly and directly to the person, but do not shout. Often, loudness will not help people understand you better (Hearing, Speech & Deaf Center, 2021).

If the person does not understand what you have said, repeat and rephrase the statement. If they are still unclear, write the message down on your phone or on a piece of paper (Hearing, Speech & Deaf Center, 2021).

Consider using body language and gestures when communicating with someone who is Deaf or hard of hearing to help them better understand (Bronski, 2015).

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Speech-related Disabilities

Give the person your full attention.

- To lessen the chance of communication difficulties, face the person directly, provide your undivided attention and eliminate any background noise or distractions (United Spinal Association, 2021).

Speak clearly to the person.

- When speaking to someone with a speech disability, be sure to speak clearly while using your regular tone of voice, and not shout (Advancing Care Excellance for Persons with Disabilities, 2017).

Ask for clarification.

- If you do not understand what the person is saying, ask them for clarification or to repeat the question or statement. If there is further miscommunication, ask the person to write their question or statement (United Spinal Association, 2021).

Repeat what you understand.

- After receiving the clarification, repeating what you now understand ensures there is no further miscommunication (Advancing Care Excellance for Persons with Disabilities, 2017).

Do not speak for the person.

- When communicating, do not speak for the person or try and finish their sentences. It may require extra time to communicate, but that does not make anything they say less important (Advancing Care Excellance for Persons with Disabilities, 2017).

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Intellectual and Cognitive Disabilities

Some disabilities are invisible.

- Because some disabilities are invisible, you may not realize a person has a disability from looking at them (United Spinal Association, 2021).

Limit distractions.

- Minimize any background noise or possible distractions when communicating to allow for the individual to focus (Advancing Care Excellance for Persons with Disabilities, 2017).

Provide information in the person's desired form of communication.

- You may be asked to provide information, such as directions, verbally or written. Do your best to accommodate their needs (Advancing Care Excellance for Persons with Disabilities, 2017).

Use simple language.

- Make your sentences clear, concise and concrete. Consider using gestures, diagrams or demonstrations to make your point (Advancing Care Excellance for Persons with Disabilities, 2017).

Be patient.

- Allow time for the person to process information before expecting a response (United Spinal Association, 2021).

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Developmental Disabilities

Use clear, consistent and simple wording when communicating with the person. If needed, break down an idea or concept into smaller parts to make it easier to understand (United Spinal Association, 2021).

Be direct with any questions you have. If you are asked to repeat a question or statement, try to explain it in a new way to aid their comprehension (Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, 2013).

Avoid using "baby talk" and talking down to the person. When considering how to effectively communicate, match the level of language they are using. Consider pace, level of vocabulary and overall complexity (United Spinal Association, 2021).

People with developmental disabilities might require additional time to communicate. Allow them enough time to process information and formulate a response (Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, 2013).

People with this type of disability may be anxious to please others. To ensure what they are saying is what they want, consider framing questions neutrally, and verify the response by asking it in a different way (United Spinal Association, 2021).

Communicate directly to the person with the developmental disability, even if they have a helper or caretaker present. If you are having difficulties, consider using visual aids or demonstrate if possible (United Spinal Association, 2021).

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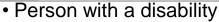*Building Partnerships. Changing Lives.*

Service Animals

- A service animal is defined as an animal trained to perform tasks to assist an individual with a disability. It is not required for the animal to be licensed or certified by the government, or for the animal to wear an identifier (ADA National Network, 2021).

- Unless the animal poses a safety threat or is not under the control of the individual, they are allowed to assist an individual on all public transportation vehicles (United Spinal Association, 2021).

- You cannot ask an individual about their specific disability, require documentation for the service animal, or require the animal to demonstrate proof of its training (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).

- You are allowed to ask the individual:
  - Is this dog a service animal required because of a disability?
  - What work or task has this dog been trained to perform?

- Do not touch, feed or become a distraction for the service animal. If the service animal is trying to get your attention, do not ignore it, and try to ascertain the problem (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).

See Animal-assisted Interventions Resource Guide for more information.

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Disability Etiquette 101

Do's & ✓

- Person with a disability
- Person without a disability
- Person who has (or has been diagnosed with...)

- Person who has Down syndrome
- Person who has autism
- Person with quadriplegia, person with paraplegia, person diagnosed with a physical disability

- Person with a physical disability
- Person of short stature, little person
- Person who is unable to speak, person who uses a communication device

- Person with a learning disability
- Person diagnosed with a cognitive, intellectual or developmental disability

- Person who uses a wheelchair or mobility chair
- Accessible parking, bathrooms, etc.

Don'ts ✗

- The disabled, handicapped or abnormal person
- Normal, healthy, whole or typical person, able-bodied
- Person afflicted with, suffers from, is a victim of

- Downs person, downy, mongoloid, mongol
- The autistic, aspy/aspie
- A quadriplegic, a paraplegic

- A cripple, crip, gimp(y), lame, spastic
- A dwarf, a midget

- Dumb, mute, deaf-mute

- Learning disabled, mental handicap, slow
- Mentally retarded, retarded, slow, idiot, moron, special, imbecile, cretin

- Confined/restricted to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound
- Handicapped parking, bathrooms, etc.

Source: (Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, 2021; PWDA, 2018)

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Person-first & Identity-first Language

What is person-first language?

- Person-first language uses language where the person or group is put before the disability. This ensures the person's identity is emphasized, rather than their disability (Dunn & Andrews, 2015).
- An example of this is: "person with quadriplegia," rather than "quadriplegic."

What is identity-first language?

- Many people within the disability community embrace identity-first language and prefer to be called such. For some, it promotes a feeling of connection and shared purpose as they are embracing their disability as a part of their identity (Dunn & Andrews, 2015).
- An example of this is: "disabled person" or "autistic person."

When should I use person-first versus identity-first language?

- People outside of the disability community should respect each indvidual's preferences regarding their choice of language.
- When the preferences are unknown and you are unable to ask, it is recommended to use person-first language (Dunn & Andrews, 2015).

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Guidelines for Plain Language

What is plain language?

- Plain language is clear, concise and well-organized communication your audience can understand. The type of language you use to communicate will vary depending on the particular audience (Plain Language Action and Information Network, 2011).

Why is plain language important?

- Using plain language:
  - Ensures the audience will understand your message.
  - Gaurantees each person has equal access to necessary information within their community (Plain Language Action and Information Network, 2011).

What are the guidelines for plain language?

- Consider your audience when choosing your language.
- Use active voice to eliminate ambiguity.
  - "The company polluted the lake," rather than: "The lake was polluted by the company."
- Use shorter sentences to break up information into smaller pieces.
- Use familiar, simple wording others are likely to know.
- Be concise and eliminate uncessary words or phrases (Plain Language Action and Information Network, 2011).

View this resource for more information.

- plainlanguage.gov/media/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf

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Twelve Ways to be an Ally

1. Educate yourself on topics related to the disability community.

2. Increase awareness of current disability-rights issues.

3. Recognize possible internal biases and make efforts to break from them.

4. Ask about and respect others' language and terminology preferences.

5. Recognize ableism in your community and the mainstream media.

6. Seek out the perspectives of all people in the disability community to further your understanding.

7. Develop skills to address both structural and attitudinal barriers in your community.

8. Support individuals with disabilities in leadership roles.

9. Support local disability organizations.

10. Offer help when appropriate.

11. Advocate and act on an organizational or policy level for the rights and for equal access for people with disabilities.

12. Be willing to learn and grow.

(Ostrove et al., 2019)

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Helpful Resources

- **What is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)?**
  A resource with additional information on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

- **Animal-assisted Interventions Resource Guide**
  A resource on animal-assisted interventions that provides definitions, frequently asked questions and additional resources.

- **Disability Etiquette for Bus Operators (Video)**
  An educational video from New York City Transit on disability etiquette for bus operators.

- **Disability Sensitivity Training (Video)**
  In this video, the D.C. government provides tips on disability sensitivity in the workplace.

- **Disability Implicit Association Test**
  The Disability Implicit Association Test is a tool that helps individuals identify any personal bias they hold towards people with disabilities.

- **Reducing Communication Barriers for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Patients**
  A resource that provides tips and strategies for effective communication for deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

- **Federal Plain Language Guidelines**
  The following resource guide provides the federal guidelines for plain language, including how to organize and write information for an audience.

- **Effective Interaction with Individuals with Disabilities (Video)**
  This video provides additional tips on effective communication with individuals with disabilities.

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