DC Government Guide on Accessible Meetings & Conferences

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Meetings and conferences in the District of Columbia bring people together to share information, develop strategies, work toward common goals and celebrate successes at the international, national, and local levels. The level of success of these events is solely determined by the participation of the attendees. Given the time, effort and resources committed to planning events, it makes good business sense to ensure that all attendees can fully participate.

The accommodation and inclusion needs of people with disabilities are often overlooked when meetings and conferences are organized.

The *DC Government Guide on Accessible Meetings & Conferences* provides DC government agencies and officials with practical tips and recommendations to ensure the full participation of individuals with disabilities in meetings and conferences.

This guide was compiled and developed by the DC Office of Disability Rights (ODR). The guide's purpose is to assist in the planning process and reflects an optimal level of accessibility. Some facilities may not meet all of the criteria outlined in this document. If the agency is in doubt about the level of accessibility at a potential venue, the agency officials should consult the DC Office of Disability Rights.

ODR's mission is to ensure that the programs, services, benefits, activities and facilities operated or funded by the District of Columbia are fully accessible to, and useable by people with disabilities. ODR is committed to inclusion, community-based services, and self-determination for people with disabilities. ODR is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the City's obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and other disability rights laws.

For information and assistance, please contact the Office of Disability Rights.

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ODR Main Number: 202-724-5055
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                          Washington, DC 20001

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that all programs, services, and activities of DC government be accessible to people with disabilities. General requirements include:

- Physical accessibility – Individuals with disabilities must not be denied participation in programs, services and activities because of physically inaccessible facilities;

- Effective communication – DC government agencies must ensure that communication with people with disabilities is as effective as communication with nondisabled people. DC government agencies must provide auxiliary aids, such as sign language interpreters, real time captioning, and written texts for people with hearing impairments, or Braille, large print, or screen-readable electronic formats of written documents for people with vision impairments.

- Reasonable modifications – DC agencies must be prepared to reasonably modify policies, practices, and procedures to accommodate participants with disabilities. Examples include modifying a "no-pets" policy to allow a person who uses a service animal to participate.

GENERAL ACCESSIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS

- Ensure that participants on the planning committee are assigned the responsibility for making the event accessible.

- Be prepared to respond to accommodation requests in the same manner that you respond to other requests and questions about the event.

- Ensure that the invitation or notice of meeting/conference includes information about the accessibility of the event and how to request accommodations.

- Investigate what local resources are available when preparing for events (For example: interpreters, accessible transportation, restaurants, emergency services, and wheelchair repair services).

- Inquire about any accommodation needs of the participants when they register for the event. Schedule the appropriate accommodations as soon as possible after confirming the date of the event.

CHOOSING A LOCATION

Facility owners or managers often promote their sites to be accessible or at least "partially accessible." However, interpretations of accessibility vary. An accessible entrance does not necessarily mean access throughout the facility. A site visit is the most accurate way to assess whether a facility will meet the needs of all participants and minimize potential surprises on the day of the event.

The Americans with Disabilities Act Checklist for Existing Facilities should be used in the initial planning stages to conduct site assessments. An accessibility assessment should include the meeting space and the facility in general.

Examples of physical features of an accessible facility include:

- Automatic doors and obstacle-free pathways for people using mobility aids

- Tactile signage for persons with vision impairments

- Access to the outdoors to allow persons to walk their guide/service dogs during breaks

- Meeting room layout that allows ample space for participants to move around freely without running into obstacles or requiring the removal of objects during the event

- Meeting rooms that are large enough to accommodate assistive listening systems and seating for sign language interpreters

Building access standards are usually minimal standards and may not necessarily reflect the degree of access required to accommodate individual needs. Therefore, innovative solutions may be required. When a barrier is identified within a facility, advise the facilities manager. The manager may be in a position to remove the barrier.

When in doubt, consult with individuals with disabilities in the initial planning stages to ensure the access standard meets their accommodation requirements. Consultation with persons with disabilities can sometimes lead to creative solutions, based on past experiences with similar situations.

Site Accessibility Considerations for Individuals with Vision Limitations

The following accommodations should be provided for individuals who are partially sighted or blind:

- Well-lit areas, adjustable lighting.

- Obstacle-free environment (i.e., free of protruding objects that cannot be detected easily).

- Ensure that the signs are large enough and clear enough to be read by people with low vision.

- Large, tactile directions for equipment, elevators, and restrooms; elevator numbers written in Braille or raised print.
- Make sure that the elevator has an auditory signal to alert people who are blind or have low vision.

- Dog runs in the hotel or convention center (or an area near the outside entrance) for dog guide users.

- Make sure the restroom doors have a raised (tactile) male or female sign or Braille lettering.

Site Accessibility Considerations for Individuals with Hearing Limitations

The following accommodations should be provided for individuals who are hard of hearing or who are deaf:

- Rooms equipped with alternative emergency devices such as visual alarms and indicators.

- An available TDD (telecommunication device for the deaf).

- Well lit areas for placement of sign language interpreters.

- Check to see that the elevator has a visual cue system in each elevator lobby to alert people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

- Check for noise levels (ventilation systems, noise from adjacent rooms etc.) which may be distracting.

- Check to see that the meeting room has appropriate requirements (drapes, blinds, etc.) to provide reduction of light or glare from windows.

Site Accessibility Considerations for Individuals with Mobility Limitations

The following accommodations should be provided for individuals with mobility limitations, including those using wheelchairs, arm braces, canes, or walkers:

Exterior Access

Signage

- Ensure that accessible entrances are marked and that signs direct people to accessible entrances.

Parking

- Determine that there are a reasonable numbers of accessible parking spots available for the estimated number of attendees with disabilities.

- Arrangements can be made with the owners of the meeting facility to permit additional spaces to be used for designated parking close to the building for the duration of the event.

- Ensure that the designated parking spots for people with disabilities are on a firm, slip-resistant surface and located close to the entrance of the building.

- Determine whether there is a curb cut or level access provided from parking area to the main entrance.

- Ensure snow removal during winter events.

- Investigate whether accessible metered parking or public parking lots with accessible spaces are available close by the meeting facility if a large number of attendees with disabilities are expected.

Sidewalks/Path of Travel

- Determine that there is a barrier free path of travel from the parking lot, drop off area, and public transportation to the meeting entrance, avoiding stairs, sudden changes in level, slippery or unstable ground, or objects obstructing the path of travel.

- Ensure snow removal from the path of travel during winter events.

- Ramps should be gradual in slope and have handrails on both sides.

- Sidewalks should be clearly separated from the road and driveway for safety reasons.

Accessible Transit

- Make certain that the location is serviced by accessible or parallel transit services.

- Check on construction or other traffic activities and inform attendees of any possible delays that may impact their travel time to and from the event.

- Ensure there is a drop-off area available in front of the building; A covered drop-off area is preferred.

Interior Access

Entrances and Lobbies

- Make certain that an accessible entrance is available with all doorways wide enough for the passage of a person using a wheelchair or scooter. Access through the main entrance is highly desirable.

- In the case when the main entrance is NOT accessible, ensure there is a clearly visible sign at the front of the building indicating the location of the accessible entrance.

- Check that accessible entrances are well lit and not located in isolated areas.

- Ensure that accessible entrances are not locked and do not require use of buzzers or bells to permit access.

- Ensure that the door handles are easy to open with a closed fist. Ideally, doors should have lever handles and be equipped with an automatic door opener.

- Provide signs indicating the accessible route to where the meeting is taking place within the building.

- Make sure the signs are mounted at a comfortable height for both people who use wheelchairs and people with low vision.

- Arrange for staff or volunteers to be available at doorways and throughout the facility to direct or assist people with disabilities to the meeting location.

Elevators

- Determine that the elevators are located close to the meeting facilities and are large enough to hold power wheelchair and/or scooter users.

- Ensure there are enough elevators to safely and conveniently transport the number of people using mobility devices attending the session.

- Where lifts must be used, make certain they are safe and easy to operate with enough space to accommodate both wheelchair and scooter users. Lifts must not be locked.

- Verify that the elevator controls are mounted at a comfortable height for a person using a wheelchair or scooter.

Accessible Restrooms

- Ensure the location has restrooms that are large enough to accommodate scooter and power wheelchair users and are equipped with at least one accessible stall.

- Ensure the location has at least one accessible restroom on the same floor as the event. A minimum of a five-foot turning radius is needed for wheelchair users to maneuver without restriction.

- Ensure that all restroom doors can be open with 5 pounds of force or less and are easy to open with a closed fist without twisting the wrist.

- Make sure that the faucets are reachable by a person using a wheelchair or scooter and can be operated using a closed fist.

- Check to see that restroom accessories and dispensers are within easy reach of a person using a wheelchair or scooter.

Hallways and Corridors

- Check to see that major hallways and all essential doorways throughout the facility are wide enough (at least 32 inches) to permit the passage of people using wheelchairs and scooters in both directions.

- Ensure that all interior doors open with 5 pounds of force or less and are easy to open with a closed fist without twisting the wrist.

- Determine that low pile carpeting, hardwood flooring or tile has been used as the floor finish to ensure that a wheelchair or scooter user can travel easily throughout the facility.

Meeting or Conference Rooms

- It is preferable for the meeting room to be located on the building entry floor.

- Ensure that the meeting room is large enough to provide circulation and seating for an adequate or anticipated number of participants who use wheelchair, scooters, guide dogs or other mobility aids (at least 36 inches).

- Check to see that accessible seating is available throughout the meeting space.

- Determine that the reception/refreshment areas are in an area large enough to provide circulation for participants who use wheelchair, scooters, guide dogs or other mobility aids.

- Ensure that the stages and speaking areas, including lectern or podium, are accessible to wheelchair and scooter users.

- Ensure that cables, wires and microphones are well secured and do not block traffic.

Safety and Evacuation Procedures

To ensure the safety of all participants, discuss evacuation plans and procedures with the facilities manager in the early planning stages.

Invite meeting participants to identify their particular evacuation needs when they confirm attendance at the event. Provide the facilities manager with a list of participants who need assistance in the event of an emergency evacuation.

At the beginning of the event, advise participants of the emergency exits located near the meeting rooms and washrooms. At this time, invite participants to identify their requirement for assistance in the event of an emergency, and notify the facilities manager of any updates to the list.

To facilitate a coordinated and expeditious evacuation, request volunteers to assist persons who have identified a need for assistance.

MAKING THE PROGRAM ACCESSIBLE

Invitations and Promotional Materials

DC Government Guide on Accessible Meetings & Conferences

Conference/meeting planners should arrange for all promotional material to be available in alternative formats, such as Braille, large print, and/or CD-Rom. Include photographs of individuals with disabilities in the promotional material; this illustrates a commitment to assuring all participants an accessible conference.

In all event materials, make participants aware that accommodations can be made for a variety of needs. The registration form should inquire whether any reasonable accommodations are needed. Examples include statements, such as the following:

- *If you require accommodations, please inform (conference planner) by attaching your requirements to this form or call (conference planner.)*

- *If you require accommodations in order to fully participate in this event, please list the type of accommodations that you are requesting. You will be contacted by someone from our staff to discuss your specific needs.*

Designate an official on the planning committee to handle all issues concerning accommodations for participants with disabilities during the meeting. Have this individual available to assist in room registration and site orientation.
Ensure that the conference website is available in a format that is accessible to people who use screen readers.

Program

Design agendas to include regular breaks for participants, presenters, service providers and guide/service dogs (approximately 20 to 30 minute health break and a 90 minute lunch break).

Ensure the presence of interpreters to allow inclusion and participation during networking events that take place during and after hours, such as receptions, dinners or other activities.

Registration

Ensure the customer service areas (i.e., counters, display tables, etc.) are low enough for wheelchair or scooter users to see over.

Ensure that signs about the conference use large print and contrasting colors.

Handouts

Request advance copies of presentation materials from presenters to forward copies to service providers (e.g. sign and simultaneous language interpreters, interveners, note-takers and captionists) before the meeting.

Make arrangements to convert conventional handout materials to alternative formats (Braille, large print, and diskette/CD-Rom) requested by participants. If alternative formats are not available, refrain from providing conventional handouts to participants.

Prepare audiovisual aids using at least 18-point fonts in Arial font with high contrast backgrounds (black on white or white on black).

Presentations/Speeches

Investigate the availability of installed or portable Assistive Listening Systems in meeting facilities for people who have a hearing loss. (Assistive listening systems amplify sound via a transmitter used by the speaker and a receiver used by the participant.) Provide signage indicating the availability of assistive listening devices.

Be prepared to provide sign language interpretation on request. For meetings that last more than one hour, two sign language interpreters will usually be required. Usually, providers require at least 3-7 days' notice to arrange an interpreter.

Reserve seats near the sign language interpreters or real time captioning screen for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Ask presenters to introduce themselves at the outset of the meeting and to identify themselves before speaking throughout the meeting for the benefit of participants with vision impairments.

Remind participants to use microphones.

Encourage clear speech at a moderate pace by all attendees to help interpreters, note-takers, and captionists communicate with persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Briefly describe the content of the agenda and handout materials.

Clearly indicate changes in topics, health breaks and adjournments during the course of the event.

Advise participants to minimize interruptions; interpreters, captionists and note-takers are providing services that require concentration.

Advise participants that interpreters will say everything that is signed, and sign everything that is said. In other words, interpreters will not add words, edit or censor a conversation.

Ensure video material is captioned to provide access for participants who are deaf or hard of hearing and in descriptive narration format for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Remind participants that the event is scent-free.

ADDITIONAL ACCESSIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity/Environmental Illness (EI)

What is Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS)/Environmental Illness (EI)?

MCS/EI is generally an inability to tolerate an environmental chemical or class of foreign chemicals. It develops from exposure to substances in the environment and may result in intolerance to even very low level exposure to chemicals. Symptoms can occur in more than one organ system in the body, such as the nervous system, the lungs, and the vascular system (heart problems). Exposures can come through the air, from food and water, or through the skin.

Accommodations to be Taken Under Consideration

> ➢ Make certain the ventilation system is not distributing pollutants throughout the conference/meeting facility.

> ➢ Voluntarily maintain a meeting environment which is free of pollutants such as fragrances, toxic cleaning agents, pesticides, exhaust fumes, tobacco smoke, etc.

> ➢ Ask in advance that presenters and participants refrain from using perfumes, colognes and strong scented toiletries.

Personal Care Attendants

Attendant care services to people with disabilities include assistance with personal care and escorting to community outings. Generally, event participants bring their personal care attendants and the event planners should not offer or provide attendant care services. The registration form should allow participants to note that they are bringing their own personal care attendant(s). Personal care attendants should generally not be charged a registration fee to participate in the event.

Refreshments and Dietary Considerations

When planning social functions and meals, meeting planners should:

- Include personal assistants and interpreters in the estimated number of participants.

- Make adequate provisions for seating, allowing all participants to sit in the same area. Do not place persons in wheelchairs, or those who use walkers or dog guides on the fringes of the dining area.

- Provide bendable straws and lightweight cups where beverages are being served.

- Make available non-sugar (dietary) beverages, juices and water for people with dietary concerns such as diabetes.

- Be aware that self-serve meals or buffets may present obstacles for some people who are visually impaired or people with a physical disability. Well-trained catering service staff can provide assistance to participants who require additional help. If catering staff is not present, ensure that someone is assigned to assist those who need help getting food.

- Provide an opportunity for participants to indicate their dietary needs on any registration form or invitation to an event where meals are being served.

PRODUCTS AND SERVICES THAT MAXIMIZE PARTICIPATION

A variety of products and services are available to help facilitate communication and ensure individual needs are accommodated in meetings and conferences. Participants with the same disability may require different accommodations. The accommodations requested are generally based on the individuals' experiences and knowledge of the products and services. For example:

- Some individuals who are blind or visually impaired may request materials in Braille, while others may request diskettes and electronic versions of the materials.

- Some persons who are hard of hearing may request an assistive listening system, while others may request the services of a note-taker or real time captioning.

- Persons with learning disabilities may have different needs depending on the nature and severity of their disability. For example, some persons with learning disabilities may have difficulty learning a second language, and

may therefore have difficulty participating in a bilingual event. An appropriate accommodation may be simultaneous interpretation to ensure full participation and inclusion

- Persons with developmental disabilities might require documents in plain language

Computer Disks or CD ROM

These are used with computer synthetic voice technology (screen reading software) that enables people who are blind, have low vision (such as seniors) or who have learning disabilities to hear a spoken verbatim translation of what others see on the monitor. There is a growing demand for computer disks and CD ROM. The disks should be labeled in large print and Braille.

Large Print

An alternative format for people who have low vision that can be created in-house by using word processing software with a font size that is 14 points or larger or can be out sourced to a vendor.

Braille Translation

An alternative format for people who are blind or Deaf-blind produced using Braille transcription software.

Descriptive Video Services

Descriptive Video Service (DVS) provides descriptive narration of key visual elements – the action, characters, locations, costumes, and sets – without interfering with dialog or sound effects, making television programs, feature films, home videos and other visual media accessible to people who are blind or visually impaired.

Sign Language Interpreters

An Interpreter's service is necessary whenever clear communication is required between deaf and (non-signing) hearing people. It is recommended that an interpreter be available at booths at events, meetings or presentations attended by people with disabilities who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Computerized Note-takers (also known as Print Interpreters)

Computerized note-taking is a support service requested by deaf and hard of hearing consumers who prefer the print mode for their communication and participation needs. A computerized note-taker, sometimes called a print

interpreter, summarizes what is spoken while still maintaining accuracy and the spirit and intent of the speaker. Note-takers use a notebook or laptop computer with a standard keyboard and an overhead screen and/or TV. Computerized note-taking is not a verbatim print representation of the spoken material.

<u>Real-Time Note-takers/Captionists</u>

Real-time captioning is a support service requested by deaf and hard of hearing consumers who prefer the print mode for their communication and participation needs. A real-time (verbatim) captioner uses a court reporting steno machine, coded to type verbatim text with minimal keystrokes as he/she is listening.

Acknowledgements

The **DC Government Guide on Accessible Meetings & Conferences** is based on a compilation of resources by various organizations and government agencies previously dedicated to ensure that all individuals, with and without disabilities, are given the opportunity to actively engage and participate in all levels of their communities. The DC Office of Disability Rights extends our appreciation to all those individuals and entities who have previously conducted the research, development, and the availability of the following resources.

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For more information and assistance, please contact the Office of Disability Rights.

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Appendix A. ADA Checklist for Conference & Meeting Facilities