



LIBRARIES  
**TRANSFORMING**  
COMMUNITIES

ACCESSIBLE SMALL AND  
RURAL COMMUNITIES

# SERVING PATRONS WITH DISABILITIES

IN SMALL AND RURAL LIBRARIES

PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE



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# I. Introduction



For many rural communities, the local library is an invaluable resource.

It may be one of the few spaces, or the only space, within miles where someone can access the internet, get after-school help, gather information on local resources, pursue social services, or connect with other people in their community.

As a critical community hub, it is imperative that we investigate any obstacles that prevent people from accessing our libraries or being included in our program and service offerings. For people with disabilities, the library may have barriers that prevent it from being a usable resource. These can include facility barriers (e.g. no automatic door openers), communication barriers, (e.g. no information readily available about accessibility features), or barriers related to perceptions or unintentional stereotyping.

How can you make your library more accessible? This guide is designed to help you begin the work of improving your library's accessibility and inclusion practices for people with disabilities. In the first section, we provide some preliminary information for getting started with this work. The next three sections offer tips and best practices for increasing the accessibility of your library's services, programs, and facilities. The final section provides additional recommended resources to help you dive further into this work.

## II. About This Guide



The American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office, working with knowledgeable thought leaders from ALA's Accessibility Assembly, Access Living, ALA's Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services, and Knology, has created the *Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC): Serving Patrons with Disabilities in Small and Rural Libraries Practitioner's Guide* to help small and rural libraries better serve people with disabilities in their communities. In this document, we have included best practices, tips, and resources that we believe are the most useful for helping small and rural libraries increase their accessibility.

This guide has been created for grantees of the LTC: Accessible Small and Rural Communities project. A project of ALA, supported by a private funder, and offered in partnership with the Association for Rural & Small Libraries (ARSL) and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), LTC: Accessible Small and Rural Communities is the newest phase of Libraries Transforming Communities, ALA's long standing community engagement initiative.

The content contained in this guide primarily focuses on resources for small and rural libraries seeking to elevate the accessibility of three primary areas: services, programs, and facilities. While the information is geared towards small and rural libraries, the approaches and best practices explored are equally appropriate for larger libraries in more urbanized areas. It should also be noted that the best practices and resources contained in the guide are a small part of the broader picture of what is needed to make a library truly accessible for everyone. Libraries should also consider how the various intersections of identity, like language, gender, sexuality, housing, wealth, etc., also play into a person's ability to access its resources. With this in mind, we encourage you to also explore the variety of resources and best practices to help you elevate the accessibility of your library available at [ala.org/advocacy/diversity/accessibility](https://ala.org/advocacy/diversity/accessibility).

We welcome your feedback and questions at [publicprograms@ala.org](mailto:publicprograms@ala.org).

# III. Getting Started: What You Need to Know



People with disabilities make up the single largest minority group in the world that anyone can join at any time. In fact most of us will either experience, or know someone with, a disability at some point in our lifetime. For that reason, you will likely work with a number of disabled people in a library setting. This section sets the stage for the interactions you'll have by providing background on:

- Rural communities and disability
- Definitions of disability in legal, education, social, and political contexts
- Disability awareness basics and inclusive behaviors

## Rural Communities and Disability

The American Journal of Preventive Medicine published a 2016 report comparing the percentage of adults with disabilities living in urban versus rural U.S counties, and found that:

- About one in three adults in rural communities live with a disability
- One in twelve adults in rural counties report having three or more disabilities
- **Rural counties have higher rates of adults living with disabilities than urban counties**, and as population size decreases, the percentage of adults living with disabilities increases steadily
- **Children in rural areas are more likely to have developmental disabilities and mental health issues**, and are less likely to receive support, services, or treatment

Since the publication of this report, the **number of disabled people in the US has continued to grow**, as the combination of COVID-19, medical advancements, and increases in the share of the population aged 65 or older has created a situation where more and more people are living with disabilities.

More than 61 million people in the United States have disabilities, and they live in every community and neighborhood. To help ensure that disabled people in your community can benefit from your library's services, this guide is a tool to help you jumpstart, improve, and maintain your accessibility and inclusion efforts.

## Definitions and Laws

Disability is defined differently by different groups. The diagram on the next page details the most commonly understood definitions of disability and their intent. It's important to understand how and why disability is defined for both legal and social reasons.

When considering disability, remember that some disabilities are not easily noticed by others. These are known as non-apparent, hidden, or invisible disabilities. The Centers for Disease Control says **invisible disabilities are medical conditions that impact daily life but are not immediately obvious**. These include conditions such as multiple sclerosis, diabetes, autism, epilepsy, arthritis, deafness or difficulty hearing, mental illnesses, learning disabilities, ADHD, and more.

# Defining Disability

It's important to understand the different ways disability is defined—and why—for both legal and social reasons.

## Overarching Legal Definition

*As defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act*

Disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. This includes people who have a record of such an impairment, even if they do not currently have a disability. It also includes those who are perceived by others as having a disability. Under the ADA, it is unlawful to discriminate against a person because of disability.

## Education Law Definition

*As defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act*

The IDEA and Section 504 govern accommodations in public schools. The IDEA creates 13 disability categories. Section 504 uses the ADA definition of disability. Typically, students receive services from the IDEA through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) if their disability requires curriculum modifications, whereas a 504 Plan offers accommodations to ensure equal access to educational settings.

## Employment Law Definition

*As defined by the Social Security Act*

Disability is the inability to do any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for at least a year.



## Human Rights Definition

*As defined by the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*

Persons with disabilities include ‘those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full, equal, and effective participation in society.

## Disability Justice Definition

*As defined by community organizers and Sins Invalid in Skin, Tooth, and Bone*

Disability is a word that links people of common overlapping related experiences of oppression based in navigating a world designed and defined by “able-bodied” people. This term has been reclaimed by people whose bodyminds have been medicalized and pathologized, working from an empowered perspective.

## Overarching Medical Definition

*As defined by the medical community*

Disability is a disease, disorder, or injury identified by a doctor or other medical personnel. This also includes psychiatric conditions.

## Public Health Definition

*As defined by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

A disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions).



## Disability Inclusion and Accessibility is the Law

The **Americans with Disabilities Act** (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. It guarantees access to government programs, public places, public transportation, employment, communications, and more.

Additionally, the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** (IDEA) and **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act** govern accommodations in public schools. The IDEA addresses 13 disability categories and Section 504 uses the ADA definition of disability. **Per the ADA**, “a person with a disability is someone who:

- Has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities,
- Has a history or record of such an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission), or
- Is perceived by others as having such an impairment (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn)”

Typically, students receive services from the IDEA through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) if their disability requires curriculum modifications, whereas accommodations are provided via a 504 Plan to offer equal access to educational settings. While Section 504 guarantees access to schools, the IDEA governs what goes on within the classroom.

The following links provide expert overviews of these key laws, so that you can better understand them and their impact on your work. (If you have a specific situation to consider in relation to any of these laws, please consult your legal counsel directly.)

- **ADA Overview:** [equipforequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/02\\_ADA\\_Overview\\_02.pdf](http://equipforequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/02_ADA_Overview_02.pdf)
- **ADA specifics:** [equipforequality.org/learn/rights-information-by-topic-area/resources-discriminationada-rights/](http://equipforequality.org/learn/rights-information-by-topic-area/resources-discriminationada-rights/)
- **Section 504 and IDEA:** [understood.org/en/articles/the-difference-between-ieps-and-504-plans](http://understood.org/en/articles/the-difference-between-ieps-and-504-plans)

# Disability Awareness and Inclusive Behaviors

## Be mindful of your disability language

People living with disabilities identify themselves in different ways. For some members of the community, person-first language (i.e. person with a disability, person with autism) is extremely important; for others, identity-first language (i.e. disabled person, Deaf person, Autistic person) is preferred. In recognition of the fact that language preferences vary within the disability community, this guide makes use of both person-first and identity-first disability language. While there are no hard and fast rules around disability language, here are some best practices from disability advocates:

- Disability is not a bad word. Say it, and avoid using outdated language like “handicapped” or “crippled.” Also avoid using terms like “special needs,” “physically challenged,” or “differently abled.” Using the word disability shows that you understand that disabled people are a protected class with rights
- Avoid saying able-bodied—say non-disabled or person without a disability instead
- Take your cue from the disabled person you’re talking to, and refer to them as they refer to themselves
- Either person-first or identity-first language is okay, but when in doubt, use person-first language (i.e. “person with a disability”)
- Avoid saying things like “wheelchair-bound” or “suffers from.” Accessibility devices like wheelchairs typically mean more freedom for their users and are not necessarily confining. Disability is not something suffered; rather, it is a natural part of the human experience, and disabled people don’t have “special needs.” Instead, they require equal access

For a deep dive on disability language, check out [\*\*Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally\*\*](#) by Emily Ladau.

## Disability Etiquette—Basic Rules of Thumb

- If you would like to help someone with a disability, ask if they need it, then listen to and honor what they say
- Be considerate of the extra time it might take a person with a disability to get things done or said
- Treat adults accordingly; for example, don't speak to a disabled adult like a child
- Avoid infantilizing or condescending the person with the disability. Call a person by their first name only when you extend this familiarity to everyone present
- Don't patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head
- Unless they are in immediate danger, don't ever push or touch a person with a disability to guide them without asking first
- Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions that seem to relate to the person's disability such as "See you later" or "I've got to run"
- Try to plan for people with disabilities rather than having to change things. If potential barriers are unavoidable, reach out and discuss the situation in advance
- If you have a question about access, always ask it and don't assume you already know the answer

## Avoid Ableism

Ableism is social prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities, and is based on the belief that having a disability makes one inferior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require "fixing." It defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, **ableism classifies entire groups of people as "less than,"** and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of people with disabilities. Some of the most visible forms of ableism include:

- Lack of compliance with disability rights laws like the ADA
- Segregating students with disabilities into separate educational settings
- The use of **restraint or seclusion** as a means of controlling students with disabilities

- **Segregating** adults and children with disabilities in institutions
- Failing to incorporate accessibility into building design plans
- Buildings without braille on signs, elevator buttons, etc
- Building inaccessible websites
- The assumption that people with disabilities want or need to be “fixed”
- Using disability as a punchline, or mocking people with disabilities
- Refusing to provide reasonable accommodations
- The **eugenics** movement of the early 1900s
- The **mass murder** of disabled people in Nazi Germany

Along with these examples, there are also many different forms of less obvious, everyday ableism. These would include:

- Seeing someone who has a disability as extraordinary for doing typical things
- Choosing an inaccessible venue for a meeting or event, thereby excluding some participants
- Using someone else’s mobility device as a hand or foot rest
- Framing disability as either tragic or **inspirational** in news stories, movies, and other popular forms of media
- **Casting a non-disabled actor** to play a disabled character in a play, movie, TV show, or commercial
- Making a movie without an audio description or closed captioning
- Using an accessible bathroom stall when you are able to use another stall without pain or risk of injury
- Wearing scented products in a scent-free environment
- Talking to a person with a disability like they are a child, talking about them instead of directly to them, or **speaking for them**
- **Asking invasive questions** about the medical history or personal life of someone with a disability
- Assuming people have to have a visible disability to actually be disabled
- Questioning if someone is “actually” disabled, or “how much” they are disabled

## What are ableist microaggressions?

Most people have good intentions, and don't mean to be insulting. But even well-meant comments and actions can take a serious toll on their recipients. This includes micro-aggressions, which are everyday verbal or behavioral expressions that communicate a negative slight or insult in relation to someone's gender identity, race, sex, disability, etc.

Consider the following **ableist microaggressions**:

- "That's so lame"
- "You are so retarded"
- "That guy is crazy"
- "You're acting so bi-polar today"
- "Are you off your meds?"
- "It's like the blind leading the blind"
- "My ideas fell on deaf ears"
- "She's such a psycho"
- "I'm super OCD about how I clean my apartment"
- "Can I pray for you?"
- "I don't even think of you as disabled"

Phrases like this imply that a disability makes a person less than, and that disability is bad, negative, and a problem to be fixed, rather than a normal, inevitable part of the human experience.

## What can we do to recognize and avert ableism?

To prevent and push back against ableism, the most important thing to do is to **make sure people with disabilities and/or primary caregivers are at the table where decisions are being made**. In addition to this, some other guidelines include:

- Believe people when they disclose a disability
- Similarly, don't accuse people of "faking" their disability
- Listen to people when they request an accommodation
- Don't assume you know what someone needs

- Never touch a person with a disability or their mobility equipment without consent
- Never touch a person's service animal; remember that they are working
- Keep invasive questions to yourself
- Don't speak on behalf of someone with a disability unless they explicitly ask you to
- Talk about disability with [children and young people](#)
- Incorporate accessibility into your [event planning](#)
- Learn more about being a [good disability ally](#)

## Engage People with Disabilities

Following the accessibility requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act is a bare minimum, not a gold standard of accessibility. For true accessibility, it is best to adhere to the motto “nothing about us without us,” which is a guiding principle of the disability rights movement. [First used in South Africa in the 1990s](#), and then in the United States, it remains the rallying cry of activists organizing against systemic oppression with the goal of people with disabilities taking control over decisions affecting their lives.

As this motto makes clear, the best way to create accessible libraries is to proactively include people with disabilities in discussions about the design of facilities, programs, and service offerings. Disabled people should be engaged in both the planning and implementation stages of any efforts you take on, as they have vital information about how to make accessibility really work. Drawing upon their lived experiences will make your facilities, processes, services, and programming more accessible to everyone. To do this, engage your community members who have disabilities, and fully compensate them for their work. Compensation can also be offered through other means if paying community members for their time is currently a barrier for your library. Perhaps by volunteering their time the member receives access to special events throughout the year or priority access to popular library programming. Perhaps they can receive access to training or professional development opportunities through your library or partners offer as well. If you need help identifying community members, there are organizations that can provide perspectives on and connections to populations your library is looking to serve better. Start

the conversation with your [Regional ADA Center](#), or reach out to the closest [Center for Independent Living](#). Also, look for vendors who have experience with disability and employ disabled people for a living wage.

Direct engagement with disabled people is an essential part of disability inclusion work, but in order to be effective, this work needs to take into account some of the foundational principles of the [Disability Justice movement](#). Launched in 2005 by a cohort of activists, this growing movement centers the priorities and approaches of historically excluded groups, such as disabled women, disabled people of color, disabled immigrants, and disabled people who identify as LGBTQ+. As this list of groups should remind us, people with disabilities are diverse. Their identities reflect not just their disabilities, but also, other demographic variables like sex, race, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality. Intersectionality is in fact one of the 10 foundational principles of the Disability Justice movement. The other nine are leadership of the most impacted, anti-capitalistic politics, cross-movement solidarity, sustainability, cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation. [Learn more about each principle](#) and how they work together to blaze a path toward a world that is more inclusive and equitable for all disabled people and how these principles may inform your work.

One of the things that the Disability Justice movement reminds us is that when working with disabled people, remember that your goal is to improve collective accessibility. Instead of helping a specific group do specific things in a specific part of the library, accessibility is about making all parts of the library accessible to everyone. Therefore, when considering ways to improve accessibility, ask questions of disabled people that apply to the work you want to accomplish, not about disability in general.

As a library worker, you're likely to encounter people with a wide array of disabilities. Remember, no two disability experiences are alike. If you know a person with a disability, you simply know one person with a disability. It's inaccurate to think that a disability will always present in the same way, or even that all disabilities can be seen. It is also inaccurate to think that all disabled people are alike or even agree. People with disabilities make up the largest most diverse minority group in the world that anyone can join at any time. One in four people in the US report having a disability, and the numbers of disabled people are growing as we age, and medical advancements improve.



Disability is a rich, complex, and personal experience. Disability can also be traumatic, and it can be greeted with varying levels of acceptance and discrimination even within the disability community. Working alongside disabled people can help you be more mindful and help you steer clear of biases and stereotypes.

## **Participate in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Training**

Disability work is everyone's responsibility—not simply a Human Resources function. One important way to ensure that everyone contributes to these efforts is through staff-wide disability inclusion training, which should be conducted by and in collaboration with people with disabilities. Consider as well the perspective of disability community members that have high support needs who may not be able to contribute to the creation of training materials and how their needs and rights are represented in accessibility training. For recommendations on training, see the following:

- [Access Living's Disability Inclusion Institute](#)
- [Disability Rights Training](#)
- [Job Accommodation Network Disability Awareness/ Etiquette Training](#)
- [Project ENABLE](#)
- [ADA National Network and Regional ADA Centers](#)
- [Library Accessibility Alliance](#)

## **Developing a Disability Inclusion Mindset Using Concepts of Universal Design**

Many library professionals today are familiar with design thinking, or the concept of human-centered design, which focuses on a set way to approach or solve complex issues and get better, more long-lasting results. But to be truly inclusive of disabled people, the principles of design thinking need to be merged with those of Universal Design.

Universal Design is the design of an environment so it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability, or disability. An environment (or any building, product, or service in that environment) should be designed

to meet the needs of all people who wish to use it. This is not a special requirement, for the benefit of only a minority of the population. It is a fundamental condition of good design. If an environment is accessible, usable, convenient, and a pleasure to use, everyone benefits. The article “Equal Access: Universal Design for Libraries” by Sheryl Burgstahler offers some great tips for getting started with UD.

See the next page to learn the 7 principles of universal design.

# 7 Principles of Universal Design







## IV. Services

Many of the services libraries provide will work for people with or without disabilities. Some people with disabilities may require no accommodations or adaptations to use the library. Others may need assistance retrieving materials or accessible programming, access to speech recognition software, etc. Every day, library staff engage with patrons with a variety of needs whether for information, materials, or connection with community organizations. The sections below will address communication, web design, and collection development that may help make the library and its materials more accessible for everyone, including those patrons with disabilities.

Common services or devices a library might provide patrons with disabilities include: curbside pickup, books and materials in alternate formats (eBooks, audiobooks, large print, and giant print), computers or tablets with accessibility software such as Dragonware (a speech recognition software), and screen magnifiers. Your library may also provide noise-canceling headphones for checkout or in-library use.

### Communicating About Services

If your library uses social media, posting about services for people with disabilities is a good idea. If you create a video or include images in your post, make sure these are closed captioned, and that you include alt text so they can be read by a screen reader. For more on social media posts related to accessibility and disability see: [Creating Accessible Social Media Content - Disability:IN](#) and [Accessible Social](#).

It is important to survey your patrons and ask what they would like to see. Many of the services you provide to non-disabled people may also be useful to disabled people, and vice versa.

If a patron needs assistance that is outside the scope of library service, (e.g. job coaching, housing, help with food insecurity, etc.) refer to a community agency or [State Vocational Rehabilitation Office](#) or [Center for Independent Living](#).

**In school or academic libraries,** work with school counselors or student services to provide additional information about resources available at school or on campus. If you have a student who needs assistive technology to function in the library as part of their Individualized Education Plan (IEP), work with the principal or the classroom teacher to make sure it's available. Knowing where to send students for help with accommodations or counseling is a good start. Work with your campus accessible technology office to host an event allowing students to try assistive technologies. Partner with any campus food banks to have an outpost in the library.



## Effective Communication

The ADA requires non-profit organizations and other institutions that serve the public to provide for the needs of those who require alternative methods of communication. The ADA refers to these alternative methods as effective communication. As the ADA website states, “The goal is to ensure that communication with people with these disabilities is equally effective as communication with people without disabilities.” Below, we discuss several examples of these alternative communication methods.

### Alternative Text (or Alt Text)

Alternative text provides a description of an online image when that image cannot be viewed, or when the user is using a screen reader to access content. This can be helpful to many users, including those who are blind or have low-vision. [Harvard’s Digital Accessibility page](#) recommends the following when using alt text:

- Add alt text to all non-decorative images
- Keep it short and descriptive, like a tweet
- Don’t include “image of” or “photo of”
- Leave alt text blank if the image is purely decorative
- It’s not necessary to add text in the Title field



## Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ACC)

According to the [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association](#), ACC “includes all the ways a person could communicate besides talking.”

Some examples include:

- Gestures and facial expressions
- American Sign Language
- Writing
- Drawing
- Spelling words by pointing to letters
- Picture Exchange Communication (PECS) allows pictures to stand for common words or phrases such as “hello,” “I need,” “I am looking for,” and “Can you help me?” For more on this, see the [Picture Exchange Communication System](#) (PECS).

High-tech options include things like:

- Using an app on an iPad or tablet to communicate
- Using a computer with a “voice,” sometimes called a speech-generating device

A person may use different types of AAC because there are many ways that we all communicate. [An AAC system refers to all of the tools of this type that a person uses.](#)

A patron may come to the library with their own AAC device, or you may use an AAC technique when communicating with a patron (for example, exchanging written notes with a patron who is hard of hearing or Deaf). A good thing to keep in mind is that English may not be the first language for someone who is Deaf. They may have also learned sign language first. Sign language and English don't always have one-to-one equivalents, which means that some words in English may be absent when someone who is Deaf is communicating with you in writing. In addition, the grammar is completely different.

## Assistive Technology/Sensory Tools

**Assistive technology** (AT) are products, equipment, and systems that enhance learning, working, and daily living for persons with disabilities.

Below are some AT and sensory tools you may want to consider adding to your library:

- **Noise-canceling headphones**
- **Screen Readers or other magnification devices**
- **Assistive Listening Devices**
- **Sensory Toys** (e.g. fidget spinners, kinetic sand, etc.)
- **The Ultimate List of Sensory Products for Adults** (for more examples of sensory tools, see the programming section of this guide, p. 32).

## Closed Captioning

Closed Captions help those who are Deaf or hard of hearing access audio-visual content. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) provides guidelines for closed captioning that could be applied to videos, tutorials, or other resources the library provides. It is a good idea to use closed captions on any videos your library creates, and during virtual programs. According to the **FCC's guidelines**, closed captions are required to be:

- **Accurate:** Captions must match the spoken words in the dialogue and convey background noises and other sounds to the fullest extent possible
- **Synchronous:** Captions must coincide with their corresponding spoken words and sounds to the greatest extent possible and must be displayed on the screen at a speed that can be read by viewers
- **Complete:** Captions must run from the beginning to the end of the program to the fullest extent possible
- **Properly placed:** Captions should not block other important visual content on the screen, overlap one another or run off the edge of the video screen

## Plain Language or Plain English

According to the Plain Language Action and Information Network, plain language or plain English is “communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.” Some plain language guidelines include:

- Formatting documents so readers understand how they are organized
- Using “you” and other pronouns
- Using the active voice instead of the passive voice
- Writing short sentences and paragraphs
- Using common, everyday words
- Creating easy-to-follow design features (lists, headers, tables)

For more on plain language see [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov).

## Collection Assessment & Development

Collections assessment and development are both incredibly important aspects of disability inclusion work. Many older texts discussing disabilities contain inappropriate language, inaccurate medical information, or stories that reduce individuals to their disabilities (instead of simply making it a part of a character’s story). Given this, a good rule of thumb here is that all current books and resources should have been published within the last five years.

When collecting books that feature characters with disabilities, it is also important to consider both the author’s background and the material’s contents. Ask yourself: Does the author have lived experience with the disability they are writing about? (i.e. are they a person with a disability themselves? Are they the parent or caregiver for a child with this disability? Do they explain in their author’s note research they may have done for their story?)

If you are a school librarian or a public librarian who provides children’s or teen services, one way to find books by and about people with disabilities is to search websites like [We Need Diverse Books](#) or [Disability in Kidlit](#). When collecting, be sure to search for books about various disabilities, including physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities or autism. Another good rule of thumb is to include books at all levels—picture books, and texts

for both middle grade students and young adults. The lists above include all three categories.

Many books for adults featuring people with disabilities will be **memoirs**. Prizes highlighting the work of authors with disabilities who write for adults include the **Barbellion Prize** and the **ADCI (Authors with Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses) Literary Prize**. (For more on this topic, see the book club section, p. 37.)

Collections assessment can be done through your electronic catalog. Using this, you should be able to determine things like the number of large print books in your collection or how many audiobooks your library owns. If you keep track of your books manually, you may want to shelve large print in its own section so you can quickly assess the number of titles you have.

It is important to update materials if you can afford to do so. Be sure to include a variety of formats such as hi interest/low level books—often called **hi/lo books**. Kids, teens, or adults with lower reading levels may appreciate this effort. Most of the major publishers' websites will include a list of hi/lo books. You may also want to consider audiobooks, large print books, books in braille, or eBooks. Audiobooks can benefit disabled and non-disabled patrons. Some people just prefer an audio format, those with and without disabilities could listen to an audiobook on a commute to work or while traveling. People with dyslexia or speech language processing disorders may understand the content better in an audio form, those who are blind or have low vision may enjoy listening to a text. eBooks may be a preferred format for those with screen readers or someone who needs a large print format. Fonts can usually be adjusted in eBook formats and some are audio enabled. Some patrons will prefer print over e-format, and large print to help with readability is a good option, especially with older populations.

If budget is an issue, try adding a few titles a year in a format you know will be needed by your community. You may want to add these alternative format options for your most popular titles. You may also want to consider a purchase-on-demand model. If a patron who needs large print requests a book, order it that way. Make sure that any book or material request forms, in print or online, include options for ordering in various formats.

Materials for English Language Learners may also work as hi/lo materials. Patrons who are blind, have low vision, are print disabled, or who cannot hold a book may benefit from the **National Library Service for the**

**Blind and Print Disabled** (NLS). This free service provides books and audiobooks free of charge to qualified individuals who are residents of the United States. Once an individual has signed up, they can access materials through an app or have materials mailed to their homes.

## Resources for Patrons with Disabilities

Creating a LibGuide or a webpage that connects patrons with disabilities to community resources is a good idea. You may want to think about including links for the following:

- **Assistive Technology (AT) centers:** All states have at least one AT center, which may make assistive technology and devices available for short-term loan to people with disabilities. Examples of these include **Oklahoma Able Tech**, **Nebraska’s Assistive Technology Partnership**, **Assistive Technology for Kansans**, and the **Texas Technology Access Program**. Googling the name of your state with the words “assistive technology” should yield a result. For more information about these programs, **find your state’s AT center**.
- **Office of Vocational Rehabilitation:** This agency provides job training and placement for people with disabilities. They may help with obtaining a driver’s license, paying for college or vo-tech training, or with jobs and other employment-related needs.
- **Job Access Network:** This is an invaluable source for ideas about getting rid of the barriers people with disabilities encounter at work and in the world in general.
- **Centers for independent Living:** These centers provide resources and help for people with disabilities, including help with housing costs, job searches, and other needs.
- **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP):** SNAP offers nutritional assistance for people who meet certain income requirements—disabled or not. Special rules govern assistance for people with disabilities.

## Other Resources

Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) provide information and support for youth up to the age of 22 who have disabilities, their families, and other caring adults. Each state has at least one PTI which you can find through the national directory.

## Accessible Websites and Other Electronic Documents

Accessibility online is as important as accessibility in physical spaces. Library websites are often the first point of contact for patrons. Everything from library hours to eBooks and audiobooks are available online. Making sure the website is accessible is one more way to make patrons feel welcome in the library. This section will address the guidelines to keep in mind when designing a website or creating an e-document.

### Websites

Accessibility statements allow patrons to see what accessibility services are provided and demonstrate a commitment to serving everyone according to their needs. They also allow for a discussion of current service limitations, of plans for addressing these, and include contact information for the employee responsible for handling accommodations and accessibility requests. If you need guidance for crafting an accessibility statement see [the Web Accessibility Initiative's Developing an Accessibility Statement website](#).

#### Examples of Accessibility Statements

[The Library of Congress](#)

[Elk Grove Village Public Library](#)

[Schaumburg Township District Library](#)



Accessibility statements should be informed by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These stipulate that all web content must be:

- 1. Perceivable:** Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive. Users must be able to perceive the information being presented (it can't be imperceivable to all of their senses).
- 2. Operable:** User interface components and navigation must be operable. Users must be able to operate the interface (the interface cannot require interaction that a user cannot perform).
- 3. Understandable:** Information and the operation of the user interface must be understandable. Users must be able to understand the information as well as the operation of the user interface (the content or operation cannot be beyond their understanding).
- 4. Robust:** Content must be robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies. Users must be able to access the content as technologies advance (as technologies and user agents evolve, the content should remain accessible).

If any of these are not true, users with disabilities may not be able to use the Web.

If you are responsible for keeping Libguides or your website up to date, check this content every few months. Address broken links immediately, update events, and remove or archive older pages. This helps all patrons, not just those with disabilities.



## Electronic Documents

In general, when creating an electronic document or resource, like PDFs, Google Documents, Word Documents, etc. you should:

- Use a readable, sans serif 12 or 14 point font
- Use color sparingly
- Make sure the file format is accessible
- Use built-in accessibility checkers in Word or Google Docs
- Limit effects in PowerPoint and other similar programs
- Choose one font and stick with it
- Use plain language as much as possible
- Define any acronyms
- Include alt text for all images (unless they are merely decorative)
- Make sure all videos include closed captioning

For more information on creating accessible documents, see [\*\*Section508.gov: Create Accessible Digital Products.\*\*](https://www.section508.gov/)

# Notes

Use this space to take notes, write down reflections, and list new ideas.

Prompts:

1. Accessibility cannot be just one person’s responsibility; it takes collective energy and accountability! How does accessibility play a role in your specific job at the library? What services do you provide already that are inclusive of people with disabilities in your community? Can you suggest one action to make your service more accessible?
2. Think about your collection of books in alternative formats or books about disability. Does the collection represent diverse subjects and include works written by authors with disabilities? What is the demand in your community for books in alternative formats? Using the “Collection Assessment & Development” guidance and resources found on Page 24, can you identify a new book that would be a great addition to your collection?
3. Can you identify one way to improve each of your communication channels—from social media or your website, to print, to in-person—to make them more accessible to people with disabilities? How can your library start building sustainable communication practices?

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# V. Programs



Instead of making accommodations at the last minute, design programs that are suitable for everyone. This section discusses how we can use **Universal Design** (UD) and **Universal Design for Learning** (UDL) principles to create barrier-free programs. Using that framework, we will look at:

- The space
- In-person programs
- Virtual programs
- Passive programs
- Sensory strategies
- Publicity

We will also offer some examples of accessible programs. Library programs are an invitation extended to the whole community to use the library. Together we can make sure that everyone feels included and welcome.

Accessible programming starts with the Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning frameworks, as described in Section III. We look to UD for the physical aspects of programming such as spaces, tools, materials, and promotion. UDL guides us on content, presentation, and format. Universal Design has three basic principles:

- Multiple means of presentation
- Multiple means of engagements
- Multiple means of actions and expression

Using these techniques together allow us to plan programs that appeal to and meet the needs of audience members with and without disabilities.

Designing accessible programs starts with **involving community members** in planning. In addition to incorporating the feedback you receive from them, when determining programming content, style, and format, also

consider potential audience members' ages, interests, and abilities. Doing this allows you to meet their needs and gets them invested in attending.

Let's look at a program to see how UDL works, starting with multiple means of presentation. As an example of how this has been implemented, consider a hypothetical program celebrating the beginning of the football season—and in particular, the Pittsburgh Steelers. This program could start with a lecture covering the team's numerous past Super Bowl wins, their importance to the western Pennsylvania area, the current team's members, and their prospects for the upcoming season. This could be followed by a presentation introducing pictures of team members and the stadium, video clips of game play, the tactile experience of holding a "terrible towel," and listening to a recording of "Here We Go" (the Steelers' fight song). The program could then conclude by offering handouts and books in plain English (as well as traditional print formats). You can add captioning by projecting a blank PowerPoint slide in slideshow mode with captioning enabled.

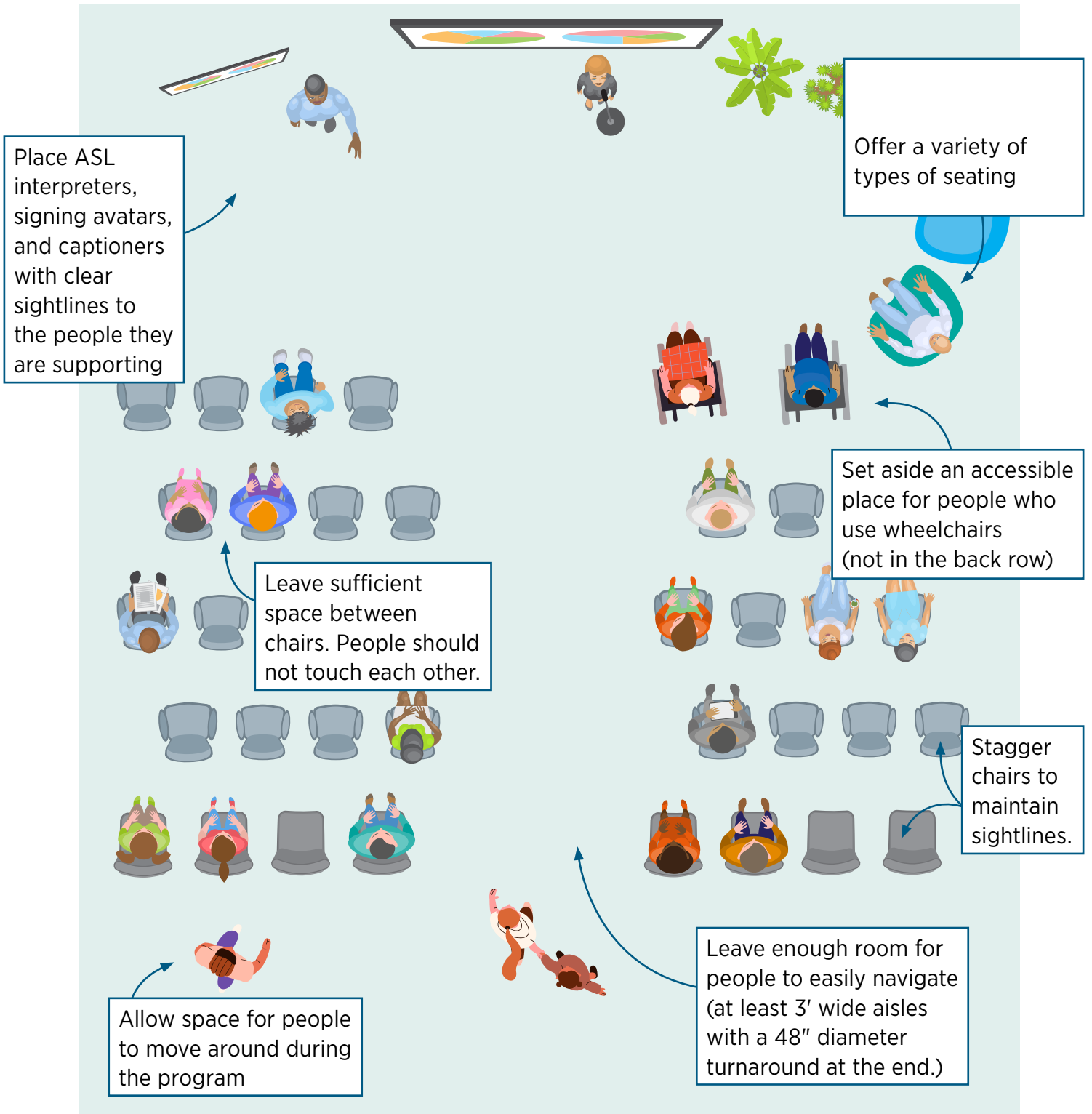
Throughout this program, audience members would be encouraged to interact in whatever ways are most comfortable for them by using multiple means of action and expression. For example, creating opportunities for written and oral interaction throughout and inviting small group discussions and captions in any presentations. By building in these program elements, we could meet the requirements of multiple means of action and expression.

## **Programming Spaces**

When we set up a program, we are essentially creating a new space in the library. Whether it be on the open floor, in a separate room, or in the basement, this space needs to be accessible physically and sensorially.

While the specific setup depends on the type of program, the following general guidelines establish a baseline of accessibility.

# Physical Considerations



## Sensory Considerations

- Pass around a basket of fidgets, which can help people self regulate and maintain focus. Examples include stress balls, rubber bands, stretchy bands stretched across the legs of a chair, knitting, matchbox cars, chenille sticks, or chewing gum
- Always use microphones to support audience members who are hard of hearing or who have attention issues
- Display an agenda (preferably a visual schedule) where the audience can see it. Sharing this in advance will help audiences mentally prepare for a program's various events, and knowing what will happen next can ease anxiety for neurodivergent people such as those with autism, mental health issues, or ADHD, making it easier for them to pay attention
- Use captions to make audio visible
  - For slide presentations, turn on captions or other voice-to-text functions
  - For other types of presentations, project an empty power point slide in slide show mode and turn on captions
- Make the visible audible by describing actions and pictures
- Mute or silence mechanical and electronic noises. For example, turn off the hand dryer in the bathroom and the self-check machine
- Offer ball caps for audience members to wear in order to block glare and flickering lights
- Offer noise-canceling headphones
- Offer a tour of the library in advance of a program

### A note on microphones

Lapel mics are the most flexible option particularly for performers who move around and performers who have difficulty holding things. If microphones are not available, try downloading a free app.



Once you have incorporated these guidelines, there is very little else to do. The last details will depend on the type of program.

## **Performances**

- Make sure performers can get to the performance area comfortably and can reach any microphones or podiums. Raised daises can be problematic for performers with mobility issues and those who are short
- Reserve seating in the front for people with low vision, those who are hard of hearing, and people with ADHD

## **Craft or Book Discussion Programs**

- Try circles or U-shaped set-ups instead of rows, to encourage social interactions
- Place supplies where everyone can reach them. Have two sets of supplies for easy access if necessary

## **Technology Programs**

- Know the accessibility features of your operating system and technology
- Make these features evident to users
- Plan for wheelchair clearance under tables or desks
- Allow equipment to be moved around
- Buy the largest monitor that you can afford and is practical for your space
- Provide noise-canceling headphones with a microphone to support videoconferencing and text-to-voice output



# Creating Accessible In-Person Programs

By applying UDL principles and the above guidelines, many aspects of in-person programs will be accessible, welcoming, and non-stigmatizing to patrons with or without disabilities. What counts for accessibility, however, will vary from program to program. Here are some guidelines for making different program types accessible.

## Books Clubs

Offering material in the format, complexity, and reading level of participants is key to creating a barrier free book-related program. Materials should be appropriate for the age level of the audience, and participants must be able to read the book. Hi/lo books, material written for new adult readers, audio books, and books written for English Language learners can work well for these programs, and can also fill other collection needs. By offering multiple formats or multiple means of presentation, you expand your potential audience.

Books should be chosen by the participants, but staff can offer a short list for consideration. While it can be tempting to avoid controversial books and those with potentially triggering content, it is not up to us to make these decisions. When controversial or triggering materials are offered, they should be presented and explained to the group so individuals can make informed decisions about their own participation.

Consider the following when making suggestions:

- Availability of the title in a variety of formats such as:
  - Print
  - Paperback
  - Large print
  - Graphic
  - Audio
  - Braille
  - Hi/lo
  - Video
- Length and complexity of the material. People with ADHD may prefer poetry, magazine articles, or short stories to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*
- Interests of your audience

For example, there are multiple formats available to tell the story of Temple Grandin including the YA graphic format *Brazen: Rebel Ladies who Rocked the World*, the children's book *The Girl who Thought in Pictures*, and the adult autobiography *Thinking in Pictures*.

Shakespeare's plays, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Parable of the Sower*, and the U.S. Constitution are examples of titles available in multiple formats. Connect your patrons to the [\*\*National Library Service with the Blind and Print Disabled\*\*](#) to get to the formats they need. Make sure to allow enough lead time before the program if the books have to be mailed.

Braille and audio books are available to registered users of the [\*\*National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled\*\*](#).

[\*\*Next Chapter Book Club\*\*](#) is a good example of a book club geared specifically to meet the needs of participants with developmental disabilities. In this model, the book club is organized by a trained volunteer, and books are selected from a list provided by a national organization. Participants read the books aloud and discuss them together. The only disadvantage is that this is a licensed product, and there are fees.

Another popular book club model allows readers to pick their own books and come together to discuss them. Some libraries following this model suggest a theme for materials, while others give participants free rein to pick whatever they want. A third model, the silent book club, allows people to come together to read material of their own choice, with or without discussion.

## Performances

The general guidelines for accessible programs apply to movie screenings, theatrical performances, dance, music, and other related programs. The sensory environment (also known as "sensory scapes") and letting the audience know what to expect are critical here. Make sure that performers are aware that you welcome people with disabilities to all of your programs. If a program is for a focused audience (for example, autistic people), share this information with performers and tell them about the features that make the program work for its intended audience.

When planning the setup for a performance, take steps to protect the performers and the audience. Keeping these two groups separated is particularly important, and there are a variety of ways to erect barriers between them (for example, a raised stage, a rope across the front of the stage, or strategically placed chairs). Another option is to have volunteers stand discreetly by the performance area, which Music for Autism does for its concerts at the Brooklyn Public Library. Volunteers prevent participants from grabbing instruments during performances, and also encourage participation like dancing and using rhythm instruments at designated times.

Performers should be given microphones and asked to use them, even in “small spaces.” Projecting and speaking loudly can distort phonemes, making it difficult for people who are hard of hearing to understand. Using assistive listening devices such as microphones, an FM system, or small portable transmitter and receiver can also help people with ADHD or sensory issues to focus. FM systems have come down in price considerably. A transmitter with five receivers can be purchased for under \$100. Some downloadable microphones are free.

Offering ASL interpretation or live captioning when requested is important, but it can be expensive. Less expensive (or free!) alternatives include:

- Enable automatic captions on video platforms and when using presentation software such as PowerPoint. Captions should always be enabled
- Open a blank PowerPoint slide, and enable the narrator function, which can be used as live captioning
- Remote, AI signing avatars
- Community or family volunteers

Remember, using community or family volunteers is a last resort, and covering costs for providing access is never the patron’s responsibility. Like library staff, ASL interpreters are professionals, so please budget for them where possible.

Lectures, films, or other video programs can be problematic for people who are blind or have low vision, people who are Deaf, the hard of hearing, and the neurodiverse community. To make these programs more accessible:

- Always enable captioning
- When choosing films or videos, give priority to those that are audio-described for people who are blind. These can be available on a secondary audio channel made available to patrons who need it via FM system
- Make sure that visuals used in lectures are adequately described to support people who are blind or have low vision and to help those who are neurodiverse make sense of the context

For more detail on accessible performances, refer to the excellent guide from [The Kennedy Center](#).

Sometimes it can be difficult to juggle accessibility needs. The features that make movies accessible to some can be challenging for others. For example, captions allow people who are Deaf or hard of hearing to access dialogue. However, they can be distracting for people with ADHD or mental health issues. If you cannot resolve the contradiction, try offering the program twice, one with and once without the accommodations. If that is not possible, alternate programs accessible to one group with programs accessible to others. Make it clear in promotional materials which accessibility features will be available at any given program.

## Maker Programs

Making things like art, food, or a bird house requires the correct tools, materials, and techniques. Understandable instructions are important, too.

Tools are important, and adaptive tools can sometimes be expensive. But inexpensive versions of these can often be made by combining basic tools with common items like duct tape, paper tape, and polyester or cotton padding. Unfortunately, [scissors](#) are one tool that is difficult to adapt. At the very least, offer:

- Ambidextrous scissors (or a separate right and left handed scissors)
- Loop scissors

Budget permitting, also consider:

- Spring assist scissors
- Rolling scissors

You can find all of these options on Amazon.

Other tools like colored pencils, pens, paintbrushes, gardening trowels, and spoons can be easily adapted by building up the part you grip. Try wrapping some batting, cotton balls, or cloth scraps around the part you grip and securing it with duct tape. Adding a layer of paper tape (painter's tape) on top of the duct tape can make the object more sensory-friendly. Electric tools like nail guns or immersion mixers can also sometimes be substituted for manual adaptive tools. If unavailable, ask a volunteer to provide these for your program.

For more ideas about how to create adaptive equipment, browse catalogs from organizations like Flaghouse or Independent Living Aids. The Activities of Daily Living and Recreation categories in these catalogs will be the most helpful. Providing a variety of materials broadens the appeal of the program. Are you offering bold colors at your landscape painting class for people who are blind or have low vision? What about collage materials for people with motor skill issues? While accessibility is the goal, the expanded creative possibilities are a bonus.

Techniques are equally important. For example, if you are using glue, have different delivery methods available (such as glue in paper cups with craft sticks to spread, glue in a squeeze bottle, and stick glue). This is another example of multiple means of action and expression. This flexibility will be welcoming to people with fine motor or sensory issues.

Other tips for ensuring smooth programming include:

- Having multiple sets of supplies, so everyone can easily reach them
- Showing a variety of models of what you are making (or no model at all)
- Remembering there is no right way to create!

# Creating Accessible Virtual Programs

The principles for content and design discussed above apply to virtual programs as well as to in-person programs. But as virtual programs utilize a different format, ensuring accessibility often requires use of tools designed specifically for this.

Most virtual platforms have basic accessibility features such as automatic captioning, the ability to change preferences, and text-to-voice generators. While developed for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, captions also support many neurodivergent users, such as those with learning, processing, and attention difficulties. There is no downside to enabling captions, as this allows the viewer to turn them on or keep them off as they see fit.

Information about accessibility features should be provided in publicity materials, at registration, and at the beginning of the program. Before this begins, it's also important to describe any visuals and movement, and provide a mechanism for patrons to request additional support. Once a program has concluded, **ask for feedback and suggestions for next time**. Specific considerations will depend on whether your program is live or recorded.

## Live Programs

In addition to the basics above:

- Enable chat, including private chat. For many patrons, the social aspect of a program or meeting is the most important. If you have a participant who is using text-to-voice support, keep chat off during the presentation but open it up at predetermined sections
- Use as many options for interacting as you can, including:
  - Chat
  - Private chat
  - Q&A features
  - Asking questions with hand raised
  - Asking for questions during the registration process

- Avoid using computer-generated backgrounds or blurred backgrounds, as these can be difficult to process or distracting for some people with mental health difficulties and/or autism

If you are sharing a slide presentation, remember:

- Use a serif-free font
- Separate text and graphics
- Describe any visuals such as pictures and graphs

## Recorded Programs

- Once a presentation has been uploaded, edit the captions so they are more accurate
- Choose a platform that allows for pausing

Check out RUSA's [Virtual Programming Tool Kit](#) for more ideas and details.

## Creating Accessible Passive Programs

The accessibility of passive programs depends on the availability of options. A general rule of thumb here is to provide multiple ways of completing activities, at different levels of difficulty. For example, for a puzzle program, offer puzzles of different sizes and with a varied complexity of pieces. Give patrons the option to choose between a 1,000-piece puzzle of a race at the Talladega SuperSpeedway, a 60-piece Ravensburger race puzzle, a 5-piece wooden car cut out puzzle, and a car puzzle on a puzzle app. Alternatively, you can design your own puzzle by gluing a relevant picture to cardboard and cutting it into pieces. Having a QR code with a link to a YouTube video of Talladega Nights adds another layer of presentation to this passive program. In addition to making programs accessible to people with disabilities, this design allows programs to be multigenerational. When you are done, try trading the puzzles online or hosting a puzzle swap at the library!

Another basic principle for passive programs is to provide descriptions for all items or objects displayed in an exhibition (for example, an art exhibit whose paintings are clearly labeled and described).

## **Passive Making**

During maker activities, it is important to provide a variety of tools, and to offer options at different levels of complexity for Craft Boxes, Grab and Go, and Coloring Sheets.

## **Creating Sensory Friendly/Relaxed Programs**

Sensory friendly programs can serve the neurodiverse community well. Sensory friendly programs plan for neurodivergent patrons such as those with ADHD, Sensory Integration Disorder and mental health issues, as well as others. When planning them, remember that some people are sensory seekers and so crave stimulation, while others are sensory avoiders and prefer less sensory input. The goal is to help your group to be comfortable and regulated. When our bodies are regulated, otherwise known as in balance or a state of homeostasis, we can focus on the outside world better. Think of it this way, if you are very hungry and your stomach is growling, you can't really pay attention to a concert. In addition to using the tips provided the Programming Spaces section of this guide (p. 33), other suggestions for creating sensory friendly programs include:

- Hold the program in a well defined space
- Limit the audience size
- Keep the lights on low for performances
- Remove distractions from the space, and orient the setup so the audience knows where to focus their attention
- Share a detailed agenda/picture schedule in advance. This can act like a SocialStory™
- Share the sensory tools discussed in the Services section



The Bloomfield Township library hosts an **adult sensory storytime**, as Barbara Klipper and Carrie Scott Banks explain in **Library Programming for Adults with Developmental Disabilities**, that is a good model of this type of program. It features:

- Age-appropriate themes
- Picture books with appeal to adults, especially nonfiction
- Stories that include music, rhymes, and adaptive yoga
- A sensory/craft activity
- Social time

Sensory friendly gardens are another popular sensory friendly program. One example of this is the Brooklyn Public Library’s “Our Garden Club,” an Inclusive Services space designed in accordance with Universal Design principles. This space includes features such as:

- Garden beds at five different heights (from ground level to a 36” tall container)
- Hanging plants
- A 36”-wide concrete path that is easy for people who use wheelchairs (or have difficulties with mobility and balance) to navigate
- Places to rest

“Our Garden Club” engages a variety of different sensory phenomena. Library staff use plantings with a variety of textures and flavors for people who want to sample the herbs and vegetables, while also using wind chimes and recycled CDs (along with wind moving through grass) to provide sound. In addition to engaging with the five basic senses, the garden also activates visitors’ tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive senses. Sunny and shady areas address body heat (a proprioceptive and tactile experience), while both the smooth surface of the path and the sides of the planters help with balance. All of these sensory opportunities are offered in a space less than 12 feet long and 8 feet wide.

For gardening itself, it is important to provide program attendees with a variety of different tools (and tool types), and to demonstrate that there are always at least two ways of doing anything.

There is no need to restrict attendance at these programs to autistic people, or people with sensory or mental health difficulties. Most audience members can benefit from these techniques.

## Promotion

Promoting your programs starts with planning them. When you involve the community in creating the programs, you have a built-in audience and a megaphone for promoting them.

Be sure to use accessible material in your advertising. See section IV for some ideas on accessible digital communication. For print communication follow the guidelines on plain English in section IV. Other things to consider are layout, font size, and use of white space.

Clean layout is key for people with developmental disabilities, LD, ADHD, and who have low vision. To create a clean layout:

- Double space text
- Use at least a 14 point font
- Make sure there is a high contrast between the print and background
- Do not superimpose print on graphics
- Do not use script or italics
- Minimize the use of underlining and bolding
- Do not use color to convey information

These guidelines will also serve you well in signage. If you are interested in more information on this topic, the New York City Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities has an excellent [Accessible Document Guide](#).

There is no clear consensus on appropriate disability terminology for marketing materials. Often, it is best to be direct, using language such as “This program is for people with and without disabilities.” If you have designed a program around a specific set of needs, one workable option is to say something like “This program is accessible to people who are blind or have low vision.” Listing provided accessibility tools (for example, “ASL interpretation provided”) can also work.

Whatever language you decide on, avoid euphemisms and other language that is derogatory, dated, or otherwise offensive. Examples of terms NOT to use include:

- Special or **special needs**
- Differently abled
- Challenged

For a quick reference to appropriate terminology developed by people with disabilities, try the [\*\*New York City Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities Guide\*\*](#).





# VI. Facilities



The intentional planning of your library's built environment is key to ensuring that all users are able to move in and through spaces as independently as possible. By auditing your facility to identify barriers, working with outside experts and forging local partnerships, and using the resources in this next section to help guide action items, library staff can make immediate impacts that create spaces that are navigable, thoughtful, and accessible to all visitors regardless of budget size.

## Assessing the Accessibility of Library Facilities

It is important to note that not all facilities are the same, nor does every library system have access to the same level of resources. When assessing your library space, it is critical to first perform a physical audit of your space to identify the priority barriers that may need to be addressed. With this initial audit, consider asking a community member with a disability to help. Use the **[common features of an accessible library](#)** as a starting point when reviewing all spaces in your facility. It is also recommended to work with a local architect or accessibility consultant familiar with building codes when assessing your venue's physical accessibility. Your regional ADA center may also be able to visit your library and perform an accessibility audit, providing a report with findings and recommendations. Building opportunities for transparency as to why the changes are being made and how processes were approached will allow for more visitors to feel included. When approaching changes in the library space, be sure to communicate this information out to your patron-base and keep them informed of decisions while providing opportunities for feedback.

# Increasing Facility Accessibility

Since ADA accessibility of facilities is very case-specific, experts recommend following ADA checklists like the examples provided below.

- [ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities PDF](#)
- [ADA Checklist for Existing Facilities Survey](#)
- [Safe Housing Partnerships Self Assessment Tool](#)
- [Project Enable ADA Library Accessibility Checklist](#)

Other useful resources include regional ADA centers and [architects with accessibility specialties](#).

## Increasing Facility Accessibility on a Budget

- Plan budgeting with accessibility in mind at the foundation and identify what can be done now, in a year, in five years, etc.
- Research funding opportunities at the state, private, grass-roots, and national levels
- Identify the “low hanging fruit” (actions that can be made with no cost or very limited cost, and that will have immediate impact)
- Partner on a local level to allow for resource-sharing opportunities

## The Library Building

Below are a few broad areas of focus that can be used when auditing your library’s parking, approach, entrance, and interior spaces. These items are pulled directly from the checklists found in the former section as examples, and are not to be taken as the only things to assess in your unique library space. As noted earlier, each facility layout and resources are different, and it is important to identify both the barriers of space and pathways to improvements.

## Parking

- If parking is provided for the public, ensure an adequate allotment of clearly marked accessible parking spaces
- Confirm that the path from parking spaces to the facility is free of barriers that would impact the route, such as landscaping protruding into pathways, uneven sidewalks, lack of a curb cut-out
- Be sure to communicate with your patrons about the distance from the parking area to entrances, and if there are any changes with access

## Approach and Entrance

- Have at least one clearly marked route to an entry point that does not require the use of stairs and is stable, firm, and resistant to slips
- Make sure that the entrance to the facility includes either automatic doors or a push button, to allow for independent access
- To ensure that all public aisles and areas within the venue are accessible, design interior spaces that have at least 36" wide hallways. Include elevators or lifts to (with control buttons at proper heights) to ensure independent access to different levels of facility
- Create service counters (or portions of counters) that are no higher than 36" above the floor and at least 36" long

## Restrooms

- Make sure your facility has at least one accessible public restroom, and that there is clear signage and an accessible route to this
- Create a path to at least one of each type of restroom fixture that is 36" inches wide, with clear floor space for a person in a wheelchair or using a mobility device to turn around
- Ensure that grab bars are installed appropriately



## Signage

- Create clear signage indicating where the ramp and front entrance is, and make this signage easily visible from the street. A clear path to entry is simpler and more welcoming to people with all kinds of disabilities, allowing them to more easily navigate the space independently
- Use bold, contrasting colors (i.e. black and white) for all signage, and print this without gloss or lamination to ensure maximum readability
- Avoid signage that is text-heavy, and mount this at an accessible height

## Furniture

- Have a variety of tables and chairs that fit into your decor
- Have a variety of chair and table types to accommodate ability level and/or need. For example, you may have some chairs with arms, some that are wider, and some that are higher. When selecting chairs, have a group of people with several different body types and folks who use mobility devices try them out.
- Shelving units should have at least 36" space between them and no dead-end aisles that are less than 60" wide, with adequate space for mobility device users to turn around or into a new aisle

## Group Spaces / Communal Areas

- Add signage/labels to appliances throughout the building to make them tactile
- Add tactile indicators and visual indicators to the area with a step in certain spots
- Label contents of cabinets
- Consider sliding doors on bathrooms instead of swinging doors to allow for better accessibility when a full accessibility renovation isn't possible
- Ensure that items that protrude into pathways (such as door stops and drinking fountains) are noted and checked for impact on accessible routes
- Consider the setup of your computer space or computer lab. Use the [\*\*DO IT Checklist on Universal Design of Computer Labs\*\*](#) as guidance

## Accessibility Devices

- Consider tools for making the library, kitchens, lounges, etc. more accessible
- Provide access to devices like magnifiers, accessible appliances, labels, accessible listening devices and audiobooks, and sensory tools throughout the building space, to encourage independence regarding activities of daily living

## Communicate Changes in Your Facility

- Communication about your library's physical accessibility is key. If you are changing anything about your building's layout, be it updating furniture, stacks, or updating your physical entrance, be sure to share this information via your newsletter, website, word of mouth, or through community partners to help ensure that people with disabilities are aware of changes to physical spaces and how these will impact them. Doing some experimental prototyping, such as map or image sharing, before finalizing your plans can educate your patrons as well as elicit valuable input.

## Healthy Inclusive Environments

The environment of your library space goes beyond the physical, and efforts must be made to ensure the health and safety of users with disabilities is considered in the current public health climate and when planning for emergency scenarios. Make sure people with disabilities are included in library policies ([see reference from above](#)) as well as staff preparedness training.

Note that masks can be worn as an accommodation, and this should always be allowed and supported. Also, good ventilation and filtration of indoor air (along with regular maintenance and improvements) are encouraged to help all maintain good health in library spaces. Consider advocating for a scent free environment in your library space, to create more welcome spaces for patrons with allergies, asthma, or other conditions that fragrances adversely impact.

## Plan for Emergency Evacuation

- It's important to have an emergency evacuation plan for people with disabilities at all locations, and for staff to practice the established procedure regularly. We recommend looking into the purchase of [Evac Chairs](#) for people who can't use the stairs.
- Libraries are also often designated as emergency shelters or areas of safe refuge in an emergency, so it's important to be thinking about how people are able to safely interact with your environment from arrival through departure.
- Ensure emergency alarms have both auditory and visual indicators to accommodate those with various disabilities.
- Invite your local emergency responders to conduct a walkthrough of your facility and note your plans for all emergency scenarios and ensure they have access to your floor plans and evacuation/shelter in place procedures.

## Emergency Planning Resources

- Emergency Planning Resource: [dPlan/Arts Ready](#)
- [Office of Disability Employment Policy](#)
- [Ready.Gov Emergency Planning Resources](#)





# VII. Additional Resources

Below are additional resources you may find helpful when working to increase the accessibility of your library's facilities, programs, or services.

- [Access to Libraries for Persons with Disabilities: Checklist](#), International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
- [Accessible Digital Marketing](#), Access Living
- [ADA Accessibility Guidelines](#), United States Access Board
- [Disability Language Style Guide](#), National Center on Disability Journalism
- [Remodeling and Expanding Carnegie-Era Library Buildings](#)

## Books and Other Media

Below are books, documentaries, and other media that are useful for staff professional development.

- [Creating Inclusive Library Environments: A Planning Guide for Serving Patrons with Disabilities](#) by Michelle Kowalsky and John Woodruff
- [Demystifying Disability](#) by Emily Ladau
- [Disabilities and the Library: Fostering Equity for Patrons and Staff with Differing Abilities](#) Clayton A. Copeland, editor
- [Disability Visibility: First Person Stories from the Twenty-first Century](#) by Alice Wong
- [Engaging Disability: Social Science Perspectives on Information and Inclusion](#), International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion
- [Including Families of Children with Special Needs: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians, Revised Edition](#) by Carrie Scott Banks, Sandra Feinberg, Barbara Jordan, Kathleen Deerr, and Michelle Langa
- [Library Programming for Adults with Developmental Disabilities](#) by Carrie Scott Banks and Barbara Klipper
- [Library Programming for Autistic Children and Teens, Second Edition](#) by Amelia Anderson

- [\*\*\*Library Services for Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders\*\*\*](#)  
by Lesley S. J. Farmer
- [\*\*\*Library Signage and Wayfinding Design: Communicating Effectively with Your Users\*\*\*](#) by Mark Aaron Polger
- [\*\*\*Read This to Get Smarter\*\*\*](#) by Blair Imani
- [\*\*\*Reference and Instructional Services to Postsecondary Education Students with Intellectual Disabilities\*\*\*](#) by Mirah Dow, Bobbie Sartin Long, and Brady D. Lund
- [\*\*\*Serving Patrons with Disabilities: Perspectives and Insights from People with Disabilities\*\*\*](#) by Kodi Laskin
- [\*\*\*Supporting People to Live Well with Dementia: A Guide for Library Services\*\*\*](#) by Sarah McNicol
- To Watch: [\*\*Crip Camp\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Access and Equity Webinars\*\*](#), Web Junction

## Library Admin Resources

Below are resources you can use to increase the accessibility of various aspects of your library's administration practices (e.g. policies, hiring, etc.).

- [\*\*Job Accommodation Network Resource Page\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Library Accessibility: What You Need to Know\*\*](#), Reference & User Services Association
- [\*\*Project Enable\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Special Needs Awareness\*\*](#), Association for Library Services to Children Blog
- [\*\*Targeting Autism\*\*](#), Illinois State Library







# VIII. Acknowledgements

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## ABOUT the American Library Association

The American Library Association (ALA) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 140 years, the ALA has been the trusted voice for academic, public, school, government, and special libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all. Learn more at [ala.org](http://ala.org).

## ABOUT ALA'S Accessibility Assembly

To advance ALA's continuing commitment to diversity and to accessibility of library and information services for all, including people... [with all types of] disabilities, as reflected in the ALA policy on library services to people with disabilities. Learn more at [ala.org/rusa/accessibility-assembly](http://ala.org/rusa/accessibility-assembly)

## ABOUT ALA PPO

The ALA Public Programs Office (PPO) empowers libraries to create vibrant hubs of learning, conversation and connection in communities of all types. Learn more at [ala.org/ppo](http://ala.org/ppo).

## ABOUT ALA ODLOS

The ALA Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services (ODLOS) supports library and information science workers in creating responsible and all-inclusive

spaces that serve and represent the entire community. Learn more [atala.org/aboutala/offices/diversity](http://atala.org/aboutala/offices/diversity).

## ABOUT Access Living

Access Living is a service and advocacy center for disabled people run and led by disabled people in Chicago. Part of a network of Centers for Independent Living, which has offices in both rural and urban areas nationwide, Access Living has challenged disability stereotypes, protected civil rights, and championed social reforms for more than 40 years. It offers vital services, supports, and advocacy for people with disabilities, and consulting services to companies and nonprofits to help make their business practices more inclusive of people with disabilities. Look for a Center for Independent Living near you at [ilru.org/projects/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory](http://ilru.org/projects/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory).

## ABOUT Knology

Knology is a non-profit research organization that produces practical social science for a better world. The organization pursues this goal to help professionals in a variety of sectors build inclusive, informed, and cooperative societies that can thrive together with the natural systems on which we all depend. As a transdisciplinary collective of over 20 social scientists, writers, and educators, the organization's work process is built on equity, transparency, and deliberation.



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