

Special Needs

Who They Are:

Special needs people may experience any number of cognitive or physical disabilities. This could include hearing or vision loss, autism, neurological diseases, loss of limb function, or developmental delays, among many others. Because the range of needs is so broad, agencies should be aware of the myriad of ways in which people with special needs may be excluded from traditional public outreach, and how to correct for it.



Best Practices

- Physically Welcoming:** Meeting spaces should be fully ADA accessible and any materials available should be reachable and visible from a seated wheelchair position. In addition, the area surrounding the meeting area should be safe and free of debris or sidewalk cracks that could pose a danger to a person with limited mobility or vision, and ADA entrances should be clearly marked. If meeting inside a room, volunteer escorts near curbs and stairs can help participants feel welcomed.
- Visually and Audibly Accessible:** Large print and high-contrast displays and presentations and a good sound system will help ensure that all guests can see and hear as much as possible.
- Sensitive to their Needs:** Staff should be trained on how to be sensitive to the unique needs of this population. For example, when leading a blind person, staff should offer their elbow so the person can hold it in a way that they feel is comfortable. This affords a blind person greater ability to intuit their leader's movements, as well as greater dignity than being held by the hand or pushed from behind. Also, staff should ask before assisting someone and should honor their request if they deny assistance.
- Developmentally Appropriate:** Adults with only physical disabilities that have typical cognitive functioning should be spoken to at the same level as the general population. A person with a disability may forever be turned off from participation if they feel they were talked down to merely because they use a wheelchair. While some adults with cognitive disabilities will require simpler language and more personalized attention, they can still be spoken to and physically treated as adults; staff should avoid speaking in high voices or patting on the head, for example.



Recommended Strategies

- **Adapt documents for Use with Screen Readers:** A screen reader is a software program that either reads text aloud using a speech synthesizer or translates it to a refreshable braille display. Providing documents in an accessible format allows blind or visually impaired people using screen readers to read documents online, giving them full access to your content.
- **Advisory Boards/Committees for Specific Populations:** To gain more specific insight and feedback from people with special needs, consider forming an advisory board of members of that community. Generally, these advisory boards are voluntary in nature but have formal or semi-formal meetings on a monthly or bi-monthly basis.
- **Accessibility Audit Tool:** This tool is designed for mobile GIS devices and allows citizens to easily map their neighborhood streets based on their friendliness to people with disabilities.
- **Tip Sheets for Interacting with Persons with Disabilities:** Many organizations publish tips on best practices for serving the special needs community with dignity.
- **Advertise with Radio Reading Services:** These services are offered by many public radio stations, universities, or libraries that read books, news, or magazines aloud to blind or visually impaired people, and provide an opportunity for targeted advertising.
- **Offer Assistance for the Hearing Impaired:** Use TTY numbers, interpreters, and text messaging or email to keep hearing impaired residents in the know and engaged.

Example

Alameda-Contra Costa Transit (AC Transit) hosts an Accessibility Advisory Committee specifically comprised of seniors and people with disabilities. The Committee meets monthly to provide feedback of how they will be affected by proposed policies or actions. Committee members are offered free transit passes to participate, and aside from that incentive, costs of operating the Committee and staff time requirements are relatively low. AC Transit recommends keeping a mix of newer and more experienced participants on the Committee as well as setting the expectation that the Committee's role is advisory, not regulatory.

[Project Link](#)

Other Resources

[Effective Use of Citizen Advisory Committees for Transit Planning Operations](#)

[Make your Word documents accessible](#)

[Tip Sheet: Planning Inclusive Meetings](#)