

Designing Accessible Events for People with Disabilities and Deaf People

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SELECTING AN ACCESSIBLE VENUE Tip Sheet

One of the first decisions in event-planning is location. Selecting both a city and a venue requires a number of considerations: Will it be relatively easy and inexpensive for participants to travel to the area? Are there venues that are willing to work within your budget? Does the venue have the type and size of meeting space needed? It's also critical that meeting planners consider the possible access needs of participants with disabilities and Deaf attendees. If the location of the event is inaccessible, then the event itself cannot be made accessible. This tip sheet outlines a process for finding and selecting an accessible venue and hosting an accessible meeting.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires any business or organization to make all of their services available to people with disabilities. Organizations and commercial facilities must remove barriers in existing buildings where it is "readily achievable," meaning easy to do so without much difficulty or expense, given the entity's resources. Title III also specifies architectural standards for new and altered buildings.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits organizations receiving federal funding from excluding or denying individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to receive program benefits and services.

Choosing an Accessible City

The first step in selecting an accessible venue is determining the geographic location of your event. Some cities are more accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities and Deaf people than others. Consider the following when selecting an accessible city:

- Are direct flights available? Transferring between more than one flight can be difficult for people with disabilities. Additionally, many regional aircrafts are unable to fit wheelchairs in their cargo carriers.
- Is accessible transportation available in the city? Many taxi fleets do not have accessible vehicles. Those that do often have few available, making them difficult to schedule. Contact transportation companies or reach out to the visitor bureau before selecting a city to determine if there will be ample accessible transportation.
- Is there anything in the neighborhood surrounding the venue that would make it difficult to maneuver, such as large hills or lack of curb cuts? Are there accessible restaurants, shopping, or attractions in the general area?
- Is there a reason to hold the meeting in a particular location due to attendee configuration? For example, if several Deaf participants will be attending your meeting, is there a particular region of the country where you know there are qualified interpreters?

Selecting an Accessible Venue

Once you've identified potential cities in which to host the event, your next step will be to search for an event property that can meet the baseline requirements of the ADA and the accessibility needs of your participants. Even properties that identify as being ADA-compliant may still have access barriers, either because of the age of the property or because of inconsistencies in their application of ADA standards. For this reason, you should not rely on the property's self-report. Instead, conduct a thorough review by following these steps:

1. Reach out to the hotel to ask about the accessibility of the event space, the public areas, and guestrooms. Ask preliminary questions about the property's accessibility.

- Does the hotel provide an airport shuttle?
 - Is the shuttle accessible to people with disabilities?
- How many ADA-compliant guestrooms does the property have?
 - How many of these rooms have roll-in showers?
 - Are shower seats affixed to the wall?
 - How many have tubs?
 - Are tub seats available in these rooms?
- Does the hotel have rooms specifically adapted to accommodate Deaf and hard of hearing people?
 - How many Deaf kits (also known as ADA kits) does the property have?
 - If needed, can the property obtain additional Deaf kits?
- Is all the meeting space accessible for people using wheelchairs?
 - Are there accessible restrooms near the meeting space?
 - Is there an ADA-compliant ramp for the stage available?
 - Does the ramp have railings?

DEFINITIONS

A *roll-in shower* has a floor that is flat and rimless, allowing a wheelchair to maneuver into the shower stall.

A *tub chair* sits inside the tub or shower and allows the person to take a shower while in a seated position rather than standing on the slippery floor.

A room that is accessible for Deaf or hard of hearing people has permanently or temporarily installed equipment that makes auditory alerts—a fire alarm, knock at the door, or telephone ring—visual. *Deaf kits* (also known as ADA kits) contain these items.

2. If a property seems promising based on the venue's response to your preliminary questions, setup a call to discuss your needs in-depth. This will give you an opportunity to more fully discuss your access needs. It will also help you gauge the property's willingness to work with you to enhance their accessibility. For example, if the hotel indicates that their shuttle is not accessible, they may be willing to contract with a company that provides accessible transportation.

a. The best way to determine if a site you're considering is accessible is to see it for yourself. Schedule a visit to walk through the hotel with the property sales manager. Ask to review all common areas, including public restrooms and the meeting space, as well as the accessible guestrooms, to ensure they meet the ADA requirements. At a minimum, review one of each type of ADA room. If time allows, review all ADA guestrooms, because there are often inconsistencies within the same property. Vera's *Considerations for Selecting an Accessible Venue* includes measurements and considerations for assessing the accessibility of a property. Plan to spend an hour and a half at each site and bring a clipboard, the considerations form, and measuring tape. During your tour of the property, point out to hotel staff access barriers that you encounter. This may be the first time the hotel has had anyone review their property through a lens of accessibility, and it's important for them to know what barriers exist so they can create a plan to remove them.

b. Although an event property may not meet all of your access needs, some may have an accessible structure in place with inaccessible features they are able to change or remove. For example, a property may be willing to change out toilets that do not comply with ADA requirements, cover exposed hot water pipes under sinks, or move furniture around to allow for clear aisle ways.

The ADA includes minimum standards for parking and passenger drop-off areas, routes to the building entrance, routes to the event space, the meeting space itself, restrooms, and guestrooms. See the ADA Standards for Accessible Design, available at www.ada.gov/stdspdf.htm.

Working with the Hotel

Generally speaking, the property has primary legal responsibility for architectural access and the event host has primary legal responsibility for the accessibility of programming. However, because the event host is contracting with the hotel and bringing guests to that specific site, the event host shares in the responsibility of ensuring physical access. For this reason, approach your relationship with the hotel as a partnership and work together to ensure you're both meeting your legal responsibilities and are providing the best experience for your guests.

Reflect Best Practices in the Contract

Before signing the contract, ask the hotel to specify the rooms you will be using during the event. Have them create a diagram of the meeting space using your anticipated set-up and 36-inch aisle ways to accommodate people using wheelchairs. Detail the configuration requirements for the meeting space, including sufficiently wide pathways and the provision of an ADA-compliant ramp if you will be using a stage. Hold ADA rooms as part of your room block and designate the number of Deaf kits you may need for the event. Specify your expectations regarding ADA compliance. Additionally, include a relocation clause stating that, in the event the hotel is oversold, the guests requiring ADA rooms will not be relocated to another property.

Train Hotel Staff

Hotel staff can have a significant impact on any guest's experience, including those with disabilities and who are Deaf. To ensure the hotel is prepared, request that the heads of different departments are trained on how to increase staff's comfort and capacity to work with guests who have disabilities and Deaf guests. Include general tips for working with people with disabilities, such as using people-first language. Also include tips specific to each department. For example, department heads should ensure that the valet and front desk staff have pen and paper available for written communication with Deaf participants

if needed, and remind housekeeping staff to not move accessibility devices in guestrooms.

TIP!

People-first language puts the person *before* the disability, and describes what a person has, not who a person is. For example, “a person with or who has a disability” is preferable to “a disabled person.”

Accessible Rooms

Hotels are required to have accessible rooms available to guests with physical disabilities and rooms that are accessible for Deaf or hard of hearing guests. For example, doors must be at least 32 inches wide; routes within the room must be at least 36 inches wide; and toilets should be between 17 and 19 inches from the floor to the top of the seat. Hotels must offer two types of accessible guest rooms, which differ based on the design of the restroom.

- **Accessible room:** Standard accessible guestrooms generally have a tub with a seat that can be securely attached to the tub for a person who cannot stand in the tub to bathe.
- **Accessible room with roll-in shower:** The shower in these rooms has a flat, rimless floor and a seat permanently attached to one of the shower walls that a person using a wheel chair can transfer to.

Hotels must also offer rooms that are accessible to Deaf or hard of hearing guests, including devices that create visual notifications for door knocks, phone calls, and smoke alarms. This can be done through permanent modifications to a room, or through the addition of a Deaf kit, which also generally includes

TTYs (text telephones) and bed shakers that attach to the alarm clock. If a hotel doesn't have enough Deaf kits available, they can likely borrow them from other properties in the area.

Contract Language

The following sample language can be added to hotel contracts to outline your expectations regarding access.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance

Each party agrees to use good faith efforts to ensure that it complies with its obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act and the act's accompanying regulation and guidelines (collectively the "ADA"). Each party further agrees to indemnify and hold the other party harmless from and against any and all claims and expenses, including attorney's fees and litigation expenses, that may be incurred by or asserted against the other party or its officers, directors, agents, and employees on the basis of the indemnifying party's non-compliance with any of the provisions of the ADA. The Vera Institute of Justice ("Vera") agrees to provide Hotel with reasonable advance notice about the special needs of any attendees of which Vera is aware. Hotel agrees that all necessary staff will attend a training on "Disability Etiquette" that Vera will schedule and provide within one month of the program.

Additional Resources

Vera Institute of Justice > Center on Victimization and Safety > Designing Accessible Events for People with Disabilities and Deaf Individuals Tip Sheet Series > www.endabusepwd.org/publications/budgeting-for-access-tip-sheet/.

Vera Institute of Justice > Center on Victimization and Safety > End Abuse of People with Disabilities website > Creating Inclusive Movements > www.endabusepwd.org/solutions/inclusive-movement/.

United States Access Board > Guide to the ADA Standards > www.access-board.gov/.

U.S. Department of Justice > ADA Home Page > Accessible Information Exchange: Meeting on a Level Playing Field > <http://www.ada.gov/business/accessiblemtg.pdf>.

About the Center on Victimization and Safety

The Center on Victimization and Safety at the Vera Institute of Justice works with communities around the country to fashion services that reach, appeal to, and benefit all victims. Our work focuses on communities of people who are at elevated risk of harm but often marginalized from victim services and the criminal justice system. We combine research, technical assistance, and training to help policymakers and practitioners close gaps to ensure all victims have access to services and justice options designed to meet their unique needs.

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