



# Tips For Interacting With People With Disabilities At The Massachusetts State House

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### Dear Park Ranger/Court Officer:

As front line staff at the State House, you have a role in ensuring that all visitors have access to government. In performing security duties, giving directions, or screening you are enabling visitors to get in and around the building and to safely participate in government activities. Your ability to effectively interact with people with disabilities will ensure that all people who enter have the same access to the building and to government.

The needs and capabilities of people with disabilities vary from person to person, even among individuals that have the same disability. Some people with disabilities will require no more assistance from you than any member of the general public, while other people with disabilities may need more individualized service than you typically provide.

The high level of customer service that you routinely provide to State House visitors is extremely valuable. It sets the tone for their experience in the building contributing to the overall goal of making government inclusive to everyone that wishes to participate.

This guide provides basic tips and communication guidelines that will assist you in interacting with visitors who have disabilities and in performing your routine security and customer service duties at the State House.

## State House Resources

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Coordinator is the employee at the State House responsible for ensuring that people with disabilities are able to participate in all programs and activities in the building. The State House ADA Coordinator is a resource to you as well as to the disability community. He is available during regular business hours to answer questions, to resolve problems, and to provide technical assistance on any disability related matter.

If at any time you are unsure of how to accommodate an individual with a disability, you should contact the State House ADA Coordinator. Similarly, if a person with a disability approached you to report a grievance in the building, you should either contact the State House ADA Coordinator or refer the individual directly to him.

Carl Richardson, State House ADA Coordinator  
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- ◀ Sign language interpreters, CART providers, Braille, and other alternative formats are available through the State House ADA Coordinator.
- ◀ Assistive Listening Devices are available in the Office of Sergeant At Arms, at 617-722-2250, Room 10.
- ◀ Wheelchairs are available by contacting the Bureau of State Office Buildings at 617-727-1100 x 0. They will arrange to have one delivered to the individual. A photo ID will be required to borrow the wheelchair.

## Reasonable Accommodation

Both state and federal laws require government and all of its programs, services, and activities to be accessible to and usable by people with disabilities. It may be necessary to modify policies and procedures that prevent people with disabilities from accessing and participating in government because of their specific limitations. This concept is referred to as “*reasonable accommodation / modification.*”

In the context of your job responsibilities, providing reasonable accommodation to a visitor with a disability will typically entail little more than taking a bit of extra time to communicate with an individual or to direct them to the appropriate place. While there is no exhaustive list of what could be considered a reasonable accommodation, possible scenarios include:

- ◀ Taking a visitor with a hearing disability to a quiet place to ask you a question.
- ◀ Notifying a legislator’s office that a constituent cannot get to them because of a broken elevator.
- ◀ Without compromising security, helping a person get to the office of the State House ADA Coordinator.
- ◀ Taking extra time to manually scan a person who cannot go through the metal detector because of their adaptive equipment or implanted medical device.

There will be instances when a person’s disability is not visible. (See Hidden Disabilities) If an individual indicates that they have a disability and needs extra assistance, you must listen to his or her request and do your best to assist them. Be advised that a person does not have to use the term reasonable accommodation in order to be qualified to receive individualized assistance.

## Proper Language

The way we express ourselves tells a great deal about our attitudes and beliefs. As people who interact with the public, it is our responsibility to make sure that everyone who enters the State House feels welcomed and valued. Therefore, it is important to know the do’s and don’ts of language when interacting with a person with a disability.

### Do Say

A person with a disability

She uses a wheelchair

He has a cognitive disability

She has a learning disability

He has autism

She has a brain injury

He has a psychiatric disability

### Don’t Say

A cripple, handicapped, special needs

She is confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair bound

He is mentally retarded

She is learning disabled

He is autistic

She is brain damaged

He is crazy

### *Always use person first*

A person who is blind

A person who is deaf

Blind person

Deaf Person

## General Do's and Don't s

- ◀ Familiarize yourself with the resources in the building such as where the accessible bathrooms are located, where equipment is stored, and how to contact the State House ADA Coordinator. Keep that information handy whenever interacting with the public.
- ◀ If prescription medication is brought out during a security check, please respect the person's need for privacy and sensitivity.
- ◀ Do not make assumptions about what a person wants or needs. Take their lead, listen, and then respond according to their instructions.
- ◀ It is always permissible to offer assistance. If the person declines, do not insist on helping.
- ◀ When speaking to a person with a disability, look at and speak directly to them rather than the person who is accompanying them, if applicable.
- ◀ Speak to adults as adults.
- ◀ Never touch a person unless they specifically instruct you to do so.
- ◀ Never lean on a person's wheelchair.
- ◀ Be flexible and responsive. You will always encounter new scenarios. If you can accommodate someone easily, you should.
- ◀ You are not required to provide personal care.
- ◀ You are not required to suspend or disregard security procedures or considerations.

## People with Service Animals

People with disabilities who use guide or service dogs can go everywhere.

- ◀ Remember – A service animal is not a pet.
- ◀ Do not touch, or give the animal treats without the permission of the owner.
- ◀ Service animals are not required to be certified. If the person tells you it is a service animal, treat it as such.
- ◀ A person is not required to carry proof of disability that requires the use of a service animal.
- ◀ A service animal must be on a leash if local ordinances require one. But a harnesses, special costume or muzzle are not required and are only present when needed for the animal to do its job.
- ◀ If the animal is out of control or presents an active threat you may require that the person with the disability remove it from the site.
- ◀ You are not required to walk or otherwise care for the animal.
- ◀ If an individual asks and it is appropriate to the situation that you hold a guide dog, hold the leash not the harness.

## People with Mobility Impairments

Don't make assumptions about a person's ability.

- ◀ Always ask the person if they need assistance and how you can be of help.
- ◀ Never lean on a person's wheelchair.
- ◀ When giving directions to a person using a wheelchair, consider physical obstacles such as stairs, curbs, and steep hills.
- ◀ When giving directions to a person using crutches or a cane, ask if they would prefer the shortest route which may include stairs or a route that uses an elevator that may be further.
- ◀ When assisting a person who uses a wheelchair into a hearing room, be prepared to inform them of the wheelchair seating location or offer to remove a chair so they can be seated with other participants.

## People with Hearing Disabilities

Communication needs for people with hearing loss vary widely. Therefore, the preferred method of communication for people with hearing loss will also vary among individuals. Some individuals may use sign language, read lips, use speech, use hearing aids, or communicate in writing. Others may just need you to speak clearly.

- ◀ Ask the person how they prefer to communicate.
- ◀ Take the time to communicate effectively. Use simple language, recognizing that some individuals may not have a good understanding of English.
- ◀ Always be prepared with a pen and paper in the event that someone must communicate with you in writing.
- ◀ Establish eye contact. If the individual is using the services of an interpreter speak directly to the person, not to the interpreter.
- ◀ If a person indicates that they speech read, make sure that you face them and that your mouth is not obstructed when you speak. Do not assume that they can read your lips.
- ◀ Make sure that the communication is understood on both sides, repeating your understanding of the discussion for verification.
- ◀ Never pretend that you understand what is being said when you do not.
- ◀ Be patient. Some individuals may need you to repeat yourself more than one time or may need to speak to you in a quieter space without background noise.
- ◀ Be flexible. Use gestures, facial expressions, etc., when attempting to communicate.

## People with Speech Impairments

People with speech impairments have a wide range of cognitive abilities. Do not assume that a person cannot understand what you are saying because they have a speech impairment.

- ◀ Give the person your full attention and attempt to understand what they are saying.
- ◀ Do not interrupt the person, attempt to finish their sentences, or ask the person they are with to tell you what they said.
- ◀ Speak in a regular tone of voice.
- ◀ Be patient and do not pretend you understand if you do not. Ask follow up questions and summarize your understanding of the conversation for verification.
- ◀ If you continue to not understand what they are saying, ask if they can say it in a different way.
- ◀ Offer a pen and paper and/or invite the person to repeat the information in a quieter area if applicable.
- ◀ If the person brings a communication device, take the necessary time to interact with the person using the device.

## People with Cognitive Disabilities

- ◀ Speak directly to the individual using simple, clear, and concrete language in a normal speaking voice. Do not use baby talk.
- ◀ Be patient and flexible. Take the time necessary to understand what is being said to you and to be understood by the person. You may need to repeat information more than once or in a different way, using different words.
- ◀ If the person brings a communication device, take the necessary time to interact with the person using the device.
- ◀ If the area is loud and has many distractions, consider moving to a quieter area.
- ◀ Some people with cognitive disabilities may not use eye contact or may be easily distracted. Do not interpret this as rude behavior.

## People with Vision Disabilities

People with different degrees of vision loss are considered visually impaired. Some people who are legally blind have some vision, while others have none. There is no obvious way to immediately determine whether or not someone is visually impaired, or to what extent, when first meeting them. People with visual impairments may or may not wear glasses, have guide dogs, or use canes.

- ◀ If you see a person using a guide dog or cane, announce your presence immediately so they know where you are. In all situations speak directly to the individual. Do not yell.
- ◀ Offer your assistance, and await instruction from the individual as to what specific help is needed. If your offer is declined; do not insist.
- ◀ Identify yourself as a law enforcement or security officer.
- ◀ Do not touch or attempt to guide an individual without first asking if they want help. If they want assistance, let them take your arm or shoulder for guidance. As you walk advise them of any upcoming obstacles or changes in level.
- ◀ If you are giving directions, give specific non-visual information.
- ◀ Speak naturally. In conversation, do not be afraid to use visual terms like, “look,” or “see” or to use words that are visually descriptive such as colors or shapes.
- ◀ Announce when you are leaving.

## People with Psychiatric Disabilities

People with psychiatric disabilities, like most people, appreciate safe environments and support their being maintained by appropriate authorities. When authorities perform their functions with appropriate sensitivity, flexibility and sophistication that is free of unrealistic fears, everyone wins. Be sensitive to the fact that not all people with psychiatric disabilities need assistance or will necessarily overreact to certain situations. Most often you will be unaware that a person has a psychiatric disability.

- ◀ If a person appears to be agitated or is having an emotionally charged experience, speak to them in a calm manner and consider moving the conversation to another location.
- ◀ He/she should be afforded the opportunity to go outside or to some other less crowded, quieter place.
- ◀ If the person is with a trusted companion, it would be ideal for that person to go along.
- ◀ As always, things will go best when security personnel stay calm and respectful.
- ◀ Be empathetic and flexible, taking the necessary time to listen to the person’s concerns.

## People with Hidden Disabilities

In many cases, you cannot identify a person with a disability just by looking at them. People who have various health conditions, learning disabilities, multiple chemical sensitivities, diabetes, and a multitude of other conditions may require some level of assistance.

If a person tells you they need assistance because of a disability, you should provide it, even if it takes extra time.

### Example:

- ◀ A person that you see walking may tell you that they have a heart condition and need a wheelchair.
  - **Contact the Bureau of State Office Buildings at 617-727-1100 x 0, which will arrange to have a wheelchair delivered. Inform the individual that a photo id will be required in order to borrow it.**
- ◀ A person notifies you that they have Multiple Chemical Sensitivity and that a chemical has been used in the hearing room that is making them sick.
  - **Ask the person how you may assist them. If necessary, contact the State House ADA Coordinator to assist them.**
- ◀ A person who does not appear to have a disability approaches you for directions. After you provide them, they tell you that they have a disability and will not be able to remember the directions.
  - **Escort the individual to the desired location or find someone to assist them.**

### For further information, contact:

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