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Disability Overview

Section Purpose

Provide a basic understanding of disability issues, and etiquette that should be followed in interacting with an individual with a disability

Section Contents

- A) **What Do We Mean By The Term “Disability”?:** A review of various definitions of disability and the impact disabilities can have on individual's lives
- B) **Basic Etiquette: People with Disabilities:** Basic guidelines for interacting with a person with a disability in a respectful way
- C) **Watch Your Language!:** A guide to respectful language in describing and referring to people with disabilities
- D) **Basic Facts: People with Disabilities:** A statistical overview of disability, including prevalence, employment, and other facts
- E) **Myths and Facts About People with Disabilities:** A review of typical misperceptions and beliefs about people with disabilities

What Do We Mean By the Term “Disability”?

“Disability” includes a wide range of conditions. A few examples:

- ◆ paralysis
- ◆ blindness or visual impairment
- ◆ deafness or hard of hearing
- ◆ mental retardation
- ◆ learning disabilities
- ◆ psychiatric disabilities and mental health conditions
- ◆ epilepsy
- ◆ chemical sensitivity
- ◆ head injuries
- ◆ cerebral palsy
- ◆ HIV/AIDS

and many others

Disability impacts people’s lives in a wide variety of ways, and the level of impact can range from minimal to extensive

In some cases, a person’s disability is a minor inconvenience, something that is controlled through medication, or requires some simple adaptations. In other cases, a person’s disability plays a major role in their lives, impacting their ability to earn a living, to participate in activities in the community, and to do many of the things that many non-disabled people take for granted in their daily lives.

Disabilities are often not apparent

Learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, epilepsy, and multiple sclerosis are just a few of the many disabilities that are often “hidden”. Never presume that someone doesn’t have a disability just because it is not readily apparent.

Disability is a natural part of the human existence

There has been a major shift in our society’s view of disability. Disability used to be seen as an aberration, something that had to be “fixed” before a person could fully participate in their community. A more progressive view is that disability is simply part of a person’s identity, not something to be fixed, and that people with disabilities have the same right as anyone else to full participation in society.

This manual considers only long-term disability

Oftentimes when people are injured (such as a broken leg) they temporarily leave work “on disability”, and return when they are fully recovered. However, this manual is not intended to apply to people whose disability is extremely temporary. This material focuses people whose disability has ongoing, possibly life-long, impact.

Legal definitions vary considerably.

A person may be considered “disabled” under the Americans with Disabilities Act but not by their state’s vocational rehabilitation agency. Also, particular conditions specify the criteria that a person must meet in order to have that condition. For example, not all people who wear glasses have a visual impairment. The following are some important legal definitions of “disability”:

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

- a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual;
- a record of such an impairment; or
- being regarded as having such an impairment.

Social Security

The inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment(s) which can be expected to result in death or which has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than 12 months.

Rehabilitation Act

The term “individual with a disability” means any individual who

- has a physical or mental impairment which for such individual constitutes or results in a substantial impediment to employment and
- can benefit in terms of an employment outcome from vocational rehabilitation services.

Under WIA regulations, people with disabilities are defined using the ADA definition. On a practical level, this means that there will be people who utilize One-Stop services who are considered to have a disability, but do not meet the more restrictive definition under the Rehabilitation Act, and therefore are not eligible for services from Vocational Rehabilitation as a One-Stop partner.

Basic Etiquette: People with Disabilities

1) Always Use “Person First” Language

Examples:

- ◆ “person with a disability” *not* “the disabled”
- ◆ “person who is blind” *not* “a blind person”

For more examples, consult the piece entitled “Watch Your Language” on the following pages

2) “Disability” is the most generally accepted term — not “handicap”

3) Offering Assistance

- It is okay to offer assistance
- Ask before providing assistance
- Once the offer for assistance has been accepted, ask for instructions and clarify what kind of assistance the person wants.

4) Respect all assistive devices (i.e., canes, wheelchairs, crutches, communication boards, etc.) as personal property. Unless given specific and explicit permission, do not move, play with, or use them.

5) Always direct your communication to the individual with a disability. If a person is accompanied, do not direct your comments to the companion.

6) Remember that people with disabilities are interested in the same topics of conversations as people who do not have disabilities.

7) Use a normal speaking tone and style. If someone needs you to speak in a louder voice, they will ask you to do so.

8) Remember that people with disabilities, like all people, are experts on themselves. They know what they like, what they do not like and what they can and cannot do.

9) When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)

10) Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others.

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Watch Your Language!

The words we use to describe one another can have an enormous impact on the perceptions we and others have, how we treat one another, mutual expectations, and how welcome we make people feel. The following are guidelines for talking with, and about, a person with a disability. While these guidelines can be helpful, keep in mind the following:

- > If you're unsure of the proper term or language to use, ask!
- > The best way to refer to someone with a disability is the same way we all like to be referred to: by name.

	GENERAL GUIDELINES	
OUTDATED OR OFFENSIVE	REASON(S)	CURRENTLY ACCEPTED*
<i>The anything;</i> The blind The disabled The autistic	Views people in terms of their disability; Groups people into one undifferentiated category; Condescending; Does not reflect the individuality, equality, or dignity of people with disabilities.	People with disabilities Deaf people People who are blind People who are visually impaired People with autism
Handicapped	Outdated; connotes that people with disabilities need charity. Disabilities don't handicap: attitudes and architecture handicap.	People with disabilities
The disabled	An individual is a person before one is disabled. People with disabilities are individuals who share a common condition.	People with disabilities
Admits she/he has a disability	Disability is not something people "admit" to or needs to be admitted to.	Says she/he has a disability
Normal, healthy, whole (when speaking about people without disabilities as compared to people with disabilities)	People with disabilities may also be normal, healthy and whole. Implies that the person with a disability isn't normal.	Non-disabled Person without a disability
Courageous	Implies person has courage because of having a disability.	Has overcome his/her disability Successful, productive

** All currently accepted terms should be used with "people first" language - i.e., "people with..." "person with..." the exception to this are "deaf people" and "deaf community," which are fine*

Adapted from material developed by : Mid-Hudson Library System, Outreach Services Department, 103 Market Street, Poughkeepsie, NY 12601 (914) 471-6006

	SPECIFIC DISABILITIES & CONDITIONS	
Deaf and dumb Dumb Deaf-mute	Implies mental incapacitation; Simply because someone is deaf does not mean that they cannot speak.	Deaf Non-verbal Hard of hearing Person who does not speak Unable to speak Uses synthetic speech
Hearing impaired Suffers a hearing loss	Negative connotation of “impaired”, “suffers”	Deaf Hard of hearing
Slurred speech Unintelligible speech	Stigmatizing	Person/people with a communication disability Person/people with slow speech
Confined to a wheelchair Wheelchair-bound	Wheelchairs don’t confine; they make people mobile	Uses a wheelchair Wheelchair user Person who uses a wheelchair
Cripple Crippled	From Old English, meaning “to creep”; was also used to mean “inferior”; Dehumanizing	Has a disability Physical disability Physically disabled
Deformed Freak Vegetable	Connotes repulsiveness, oddness; Dehumanizing	Multiple disabilities Severe disabilities
Crazy Insane Psycho Maniac Nut Case	Stigmatizing Considered offensive Reinforces negative stereotypes	Behavior disorder Emotional disability Person with mental illness Person with a psychiatric disability
Retarded Retardate Mentally defective Slow Simple Moron Idiot	Stigmatizing; Implies that a person cannot learn	Developmentally delayed Developmental disability (the term “mental retardation” should be used sparingly)
Mongoloid	Considered offensive	Person with Down syndrome
Stricken/ Afflicted by MS	Negative connotation of “afflicted”, “stricken”	Person who has multiple sclerosis
CP victim	Cerebral palsy does not make a person a “victim”	Person with cerebral palsy
Epileptic	Not “person first” language; Stigmatizing	Person with epilepsy Person with seizure disorder
Fit	Reinforces negative stereotypes	Seizure
Birth defect	Implies there was something wrong with the birth	Congenital disability
Deinstitutionalized	Stigmatizing; groups people into one category; not focused on the individual	Person who used to live in an institution
Midget	Outdated term; considered offensive	Person of short stature

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Basic Facts: People with Disabilities

How many people in the United States have a disability?

- An estimated 48.9 million people, or 19.4 percent of the non-institutionalized civilians, have a disability.
- An estimated 24.1 million people have a severe disability.
- An estimated 34.2 million people, or 17.5 percent, have a functional limitation.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) - 1992

As defined in the 1994 Census survey, a person with a severe disability is one who is unable to perform one or more activities of daily living; or, has one or more specific impairments; or, is a long term user of assistive devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, and walkers.

As defined in the 1994 Census survey, a person with a non-severe disability is one who has difficulty performing functional activities such as hearing, seeing, having one's speech understood, lifting, carrying, climbing stairs and walking; or, difficulty with activities of daily living.

What are the employment rates for people with disabilities?

People with disabilities of working age are employed at a rate considerably below the general population. U.S. Census Bureau information for individuals of working age (21 to 64 years old) in the United States indicates that:

- 82% of the general population are employed
- Among all people with disabilities of working age (29.4 million), 52% are employed
- Among people with severe disabilities (14.2 million), 26% are employed

Source: U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) - 1994

The more recent U.S. Current Population Survey indicates similar findings. From 1997-1999, for individuals aged 25 to 61 years old, in the United States:

- 88% of people without disabilities worked 52 hours or more in the previous year
- 34% of people with disabilities worked 52 hours or more in the previous year

Source: U.S. Current Population Survey - analysis by Cornell University RRTC; definition of disability is based on self-reporting of a health problem or disability which prevents an individual from working or which limits the kind or amount of work an individual can do

Employment and People with Disabilities

- Among adults with disabilities of working age (18 to 64 years of age), three out of ten (29%) work full- or part-time, compared to eight out of ten (79%) of those without disabilities - a gap of fifty percentage points.
- Among those with disabilities ages 16 to 64 who are not employed, seven out of ten (72%) say that they would prefer to work.
- Among adults with disabilities who work full-time, fewer than half (46%) say that their work requires them to use their full talents or abilities, compared to two out of three (66%) in 1994.

- Fully one-third (34%) of adults with disabilities lived in a household that had an annual income of less than \$15,000 in 1997, compared to only about one in eight (12%) of those without disabilities. This twenty-two percentage point gap between the percentage of disabled and non-disabled persons living in very low income households has remained virtually the same since 1986.
- Just over half (54%) of adults with disabilities have heard of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Source: 1998 National Organization on Disability/Louis Harris & Associates Survey of Americans with Disabilities

Facts About Specific Disabilities

- An estimated 2.5 million people, or 1% of the population, have mental retardation
- In any one year period, an estimated 51.3 million people, or 28% of the population, have a mental disability
- About 5 million people, or 2.8% of the adult population, have a severe mental disability

Source: National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research - 1996

Almost One-Third of All Families are Impacted by Disability

- An estimated 20.3 million families, or 29% of all families in the United States, have at least one member with a disability

Source: 1990 Family Resource Supplement to the National Health Interview Survey

Myths and Facts About People with Disabilities

Myths are roadblocks that interfere with the ability of people with disabilities to have equality in employment. These roadblocks usually result from a lack of experience and interaction with persons with disabilities. This lack of familiarity has nourished negative attitudes concerning employment of persons with disabilities. Listed below are some common myths and the facts that tell the real story.

MYTH

Hiring employees with disabilities increases workers compensation insurance rates.

FACT

Insurance rates are based solely on the relative hazards of the operation and the organization's accident experience, not on whether workers have disabilities.

MYTH

Employees with disabilities have a higher absentee rate than employees without disabilities.

FACT

Studies by firms such as DuPont show that employees with disabilities are not absent any more than employees without disabilities.

MYTH

People with disabilities are inspirational, courageous, and brave for being able to overcome their disability.

FACT

People with disabilities are simply carrying on normal activities of living when they work at their jobs, go grocery shopping, pay their bills, or compete in athletic events.

MYTH

People with disabilities need to be protected from failing.

FACT

People with disabilities have a right to participate in the full range of human experiences including success and failure. Employers should have the same expectations of, and work requirements for, all employees.

MYTH

People with disabilities have problems getting to work.

FACT

People with disabilities are capable of supplying their own transportation by choosing to walk, use a car pool, drive, take public transportation, or a cab. Their modes of transportation to work are as varied as those of other employees.

MYTH

People with disabilities are unable to meet performance standards, thus making them a bad employment risk.

FACT

In 1990, DuPont conducted a survey of 811 employees with disabilities and found 90% rated average or better in job performance compared to 95% for employees without disabilities. A similar 1981 DuPont study which involved 2,745 employees with disabilities found that 92% of employees with disabilities rated average or better in job performance compared to 90% of employees without disabilities.

MYTH

People who are deaf make ideal employees in noisy work environments.

FACT

Loud noises of a certain vibratory nature can cause further harm to the auditory system. People who are deaf should be hired for all jobs that they have the skills and talents to perform. No person with a disability should be prejudged regarding employment opportunities.

MYTH

Considerable expense is necessary to accommodate workers with disabilities.

FACT

Most workers with disabilities require no special accommodations and the cost for those who do is minimal or much lower than many employers believe. Studies by the Job Accommodation Network have shown that 15% of accommodations cost nothing, 51% cost between \$1 and \$500, 12% cost between \$501 and \$1,000, and 22% cost more than \$1,000.

MYTH

Employees with disabilities are more likely to have accidents on the job than employees without disabilities.

FACT

In the 1990 DuPont study, the safety records of both groups were identical.

*Source: President's Committee on Employment of
People With Disabilities - October, 1994*

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