



# **Tip-Sheet: Planning Friendly Meetings**

*Going Beyond the ADA to Make  
Your Meeting Place User-Friendly*

**March 2015 Update**

## Who Needs This Tip Sheet?

This Tip Sheet can assist anyone one who wants to be sure that older persons and persons with disabilities feel welcome and comfortable at their meetings. It is a supplement to the many good existing tip sheets on how to plan meetings and events that comply with ADA regulations. [Accessible Information Exchange: Meeting on a Level Playing Field](#) is a more exhaustive resource that you may want to use as companion to the Tip Sheet. (See also the Select Resources List at the end of this paper.)

Here we focus on many features that do not rise to the level of a formal ADA violation, but that can deter older persons and persons with disabilities from attending a meeting. People may hesitate to draw attention to these deterrents because they don't want to seem bothersome. Thus, planners are often unaware of their importance.

This Tip Sheet offers a short list of suggestions to consider as you begin planning a meeting. You can use as the beginning of your own checklist for assessing meeting based on your own experiences. In addition, to some short-term solutions, the Tip Sheet also encourages you to find more friendly meeting places or long-term solutions to some of the problems, (e.g., getting your local government to improve street lighting, and to make intersections more pedestrian-friendly).

### *Reminders for Planning a User-Friendly Meeting*

Plan ahead to have staff members or volunteers ready to perform the tasks necessary to enable older persons and persons with disabilities to attend the meeting, and to navigate the meeting location.

### Getting to the Meeting

#### *Streets, Intersections, and Crosswalks*

Are there intersections near the meeting place? Are they safe? A person who is able to ride a public transit bus may be uncomfortable about trying to cross the street because there is no crosswalk or because the traffic lights don't provide enough time for someone who moves slowly to cross the street.

Suggestions:

- Assign volunteer escorts to meet people at the bus stop and to assist them in crossing the street.
- Volunteer ride-sharing – Identify and share infor-

mation about people who can offer rides to other attendees who are unable or choose not to drive themselves.

### The Area Outside the Meeting Place

Remember to check the immediate surroundings of the meeting place to be sure that they too are user-friendly.

#### *Sidewalks*

Are the sidewalks in good condition? Cracked sidewalks and uneven pavement are unsafe for everyone, and especially unsafe for persons with low-vision or persons with a balance problem; and for people using walkers, wheelchairs, and scooters.

Are the sidewalks cleared? Wet leaves can be as slippery as snow and ice.

Suggestions:

- Assign volunteer escorts to accompany people as they use the sidewalks.

#### *Outdoor Lighting*

Does your meeting place have enough lighting so that it looks safe and welcoming?

Is the lighting sufficient for persons with low vision to see the steps clearly?

Is the area lighting bright enough so that there are no shadows or dark places where someone could lurk? Shadows also make it difficult for a persons with low-vision to see where they are going, especially at night.

#### *Curbs and Outside Steps*

*"I cannot tell you how many times people have said 'It's accessible, there is only one step into the building. For someone using a wheelchair, even one step makes the whole building inaccessible.'"*

Elizabeth, wheelchair user

One step or curb without a railing can also be a barrier to persons with stiff knees or weak balance. If a person needs a railing to walk up or down stairs, this person is likely to need a railing for a curb or even a few steps.

Are there railings for stairs? For curbs and steps?

Do the curbs and outside steps have contrasting colors so that a person can easily differentiate them?

## Suggestions:

- Assign volunteer escorts to accompany people as they enter or exit.
- Station volunteers at the door to alert anyone with a mobility problem about the availability of the ADA-accessible entrance. Sometimes in older buildings that have been retrofitted, the accessible entrances are not immediately visible.
- Although buildings are required to post directions to an ADA-accessible entrance, it may still be a good idea to inquire ahead of time about the location of the ADA-accessible entrance, and to include this information with directions on meeting announcements, and to alert other staff and volunteers about this entrance and its location.
- If there is a special elevator, provide instructions for operating it.

## Inside the Meeting Facility

### *Steps*

Prior to the meeting, check to see whether:

All the meeting rooms (and bathrooms with accessible stalls) are on the same level.

There are railings for steps to the speakers' platform.

If there is a ramp to the speakers' platform, that it has railings.

If all the rooms are not on the same level, check to see whether: 1. The edges of the steps are painted a contrasting color so that a person can easily differentiate them. 2. The stairs have railings and steps of a comfortable height.

If the steps between rooms are steep or lack contrasting color or lack railings, can you find alternate routes or destinations?

### Suggestions:

- Assign volunteer escorts to assist persons up and down stairs.
- Long-term Solutions: 1. Add the need for stair railings and painted steps to your list of meeting place requirements as part of your pre-meeting planning. 2. Notify the building management that unless stair railings are installed and the steps painted, your organization will be unable to use it again.

### *Elevator buttons*

Even when these buttons are located so that wheelchair users can reach them and have symbols for the visually impaired, they can still be barriers.

Do they require finger pressure? Persons with stiff or weak fingers may be unable to press them even if the buttons are located where they can reach them.

### Suggestions:

- Assign volunteer escorts to assist persons using the elevator.

### *Refreshments*

Try to keep it simple so that people can help themselves without a lot of effort.

### Suggestions:

- Serve cold bottles or cans of soda and water without ice and do not use glasses.
- Serve finger food as snacks.

### *Chairs*

Anyone with minor back or knee problems is likely to have difficulty getting in and out of chairs, and will appreciate having chairs with arms and high seats. Others with more serious back and knee problems will need them.

### Suggestions:

- Arrange to have chairs with arms and high firm seats placed in the meeting rooms.
- Have volunteers ready to assist people who appear to need assistance in sitting or in rising from a chair.

### *Pathways*

Conference rooms often have round tables and chairs set up where the chairs back into each other. Persons with impaired vision, persons with weak balance, and persons using mobility devices will likely feel uncomfortable or may even trip as they walk between the tables.

### Suggestions:

- Plan ahead of time so that there are wide paths

### *Microphones*

Persons with hearing impairments can hear only speakers who use a microphone.

## Suggestions:

- Ask your speakers to be sure to use a microphone, and explain why. Sometimes in an informal or small meeting, a speaker may be uncomfortable using a microphone and ask to speak without one. Agree to this, only if you are absolutely certain there is no one in the group with a hearing impairment. The best public address system is of no help if speakers don't use it. The loudest voice will be insufficient.

### *PowerPoint Presentations*

The presentations need to have large type and high contrast. These features are important for all viewers in a large room, but they are essential for many older adults, persons with low vision, or anyone seated in the back of the room.

## Suggestions:

- Include these requirements in your advance instructions to speakers.

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## Acknowledgements

This memo originated from telephone conversations about inclusive planning with members of the Technical Expert Panel (TEP), the advisory group for the ACL Inclusive Transportation Planning Project.

Most of the suggestions grew from their personal observations and experiences. Consumer representatives were the first to talk about architectural features that, although they were not violations of the ADA, were barriers to their attending meetings. Then other members quickly joined in with examples from their experience planning meetings and attending community meetings.

Raymona Wethington, the first person to propose these issues, deserves special acknowledgment. Without her, there would have been no Tip Sheet. Staci Forrest also made significant contributions and gave support for preparing such a memo. Bob Olsgard provided much needed encouragement as we were beginning. Maggie Nygren and Carolyn Rader were perceptive reviewers and editors of several working drafts. Pamela Friedman, CTAA, provided indispensable editorial review and recommendations for the revised version of the Tip Sheet. She also did the research on the attached Select Resources List. Marlon Powell, CTAA, provided much needed technical support.

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## Select Resource List

### *Resources about ADA Regulations*

Two comprehensive resources for information about ADA regulations are the [Americans with Disabilities Information Act](#), and the [U.S. Access Board](#),

### *Resources on ADA Accessibility Requirements for Meetings*

The Administration for Community Living's (ACL) website, [Allies in Self-Advocacy](#), is filled with great information. For instance, it has a web page devoted to accessible meetings and presentations that includes information such as [People First Language](#), [Accessibility Checklist](#), [Accessible Power Point Presentations](#): <http://alliesinselfadvocacy.org/accessible-meetings-presentations/>

It is also an excellent referral guide to other websites.

[Easter Seals Project Action](#) offers numerous useful publications designed for meetings on its website on how to follow and implement ADA accessibility requirements including on to plan inclusive meetings.

*The Transit Planning for All program is a national technical assistance project created to help communities in adopting inclusive planning practices. The project is funded through a cooperative agreement between the Administration for Community Living and the Community Transportation Association of America, and is operated through a consortium of four organizations – the Community Transportation Association of America, the Easter Seals Transportation Group, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, and Westat. Content in this document is disseminated in the interest of information exchange and none of the organizations listed above assume any liability for its contents or use.*