



**A Guide to Disability  
Awareness and Communication**

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## Acknowledgment

*The communication component of this guide is based on information from the San Antonio Disability Etiquette Handbook.*

## Understanding Disability

How would you face the challenge of not being able to carry out basic everyday living tasks?

We all have days where nothing seems to go right, where barriers obstruct even simple activities. For people with a disability, they face barriers every day, in accessing facilities and services such as shopping, transport and entertainment.

- It is estimated that 16.9% of the Australian population has a disability, which restricts them in carrying out basic everyday living tasks (Disability, Ageing and Carers, 1998 – ABS). In the City of Lake Macquarie, approximately 30,927 people are affected.
- The incidence of disability also increases with age. In the City of Lake Macquarie 25.44% of the population are aged 55 years and over (ABS Census 2001).

As people with a disability make up a significant proportion of our population, there is a need for Council staff to understand how to relate to people with a range of disabilities. Council will also need to modify some of its delivered services, and provide additional infrastructure to meet the needs of an ageing population.

The following information on types of disability and the communication guides should assist you not only to provide services to Council's customers, but will also assist you to interact with friends, family members and people generally.

## Disability Discrimination

The Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) provides protection for everyone in Australia against discrimination based on disability. The Act also means meeting responsibilities that many people may not be aware of. It encourages everyone to be involved in implementing the Act and to share in the benefits people with a disability can make to the community and the economy.

Disability discrimination happens when people with a disability, are treated less fairly than people without a disability. It also occurs when people are treated less fairly because they are relatives, friends, carers, co workers or associates of a person with a disability. Types of disabilities covered under the DDA include physical, intellectual, psychiatric, sensory, neurological and learning disabilities as well as physical disfigurement and the presence in the body of disease causing organisms.

The DDA makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person with a disability in the following areas of life:

- employment and/or education
- access to premises/places used by the public eg public footpaths, theatres, libraries, restaurants, swimming pools
- provision of goods, services and facilities eg public transport, sporting facilities
- buying land or providing accommodation
- sport and/or activities of clubs and associations
- administration of Commonwealth Government laws and programs.

Further information on the DDA is available:

- by telephoning the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission – 1300 369 711
- or at [www.hreoc.gov.au/disability\\_rights/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disability_rights/index.html)

## **Guide to Communicating with People who have a Disability**

### **General Information:**

- First and foremost, people with a disability, are people. Treat everyone the way you would wish to be treated.
- Secondly, people with a disability have a condition, which may limit their mobility, hearing, vision, speech or mental function. They may also use mobility, communication and other aids to assist them carry out every day living tasks.
- People with a disability are not conditions or diseases. Rather than, "he is an epileptic", "he is a person with epilepsy".
- 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. If a person indicates that they are unable to shake hands a verbal acknowledge should be given to acknowledge their presence.
- When talking to a person with a disability use a normal tone of voice, look at and speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or aide who may be with them.
- It is important to be relaxed and open in your communication. Don't be embarrassed, treat a person with a disability as you would any other customer.
- Relax, don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "see you later" or "got to be running along", that seem to relate to a person's disability
- Never assume a person needs assistance. You may offer assistance with dignity and respect, but be prepared to have your offer declined.
- Understand that access to the services at Council includes not only physical access. It could also include making written, tactile, or audio materials accessible to people with visual or cognitive disabilities and making visual materials or other signals accessible to people with hearing impairment.
- Be aware that often people may have hidden disabilities, such as people with acquired brain injury, learning difficulties or other forms of cognitive impairment. Other disabilities such as back injuries, respiratory/cardiac diseases are also not always obvious.
- Children are naturally curious, so allow them to ask questions about a person with a disability, or a person's wheelchair or other aids. Open communication helps overcome fearful or negative attitudes.

### **People with a Vision Impairment**

- When greeting a person with a severe loss of vision, always identify yourself and others who may be with you eg "my name is John Smith and on my right is Mary Jones."
- When conversing in a group, give a vocal cue by announcing the name of the person to whom you are speaking eg "Mary, what do you think about the process."
- Speak in a normal tone of voice, indicate in advance when you will be moving from one place to another and let it be known when the conversation is at an end.
- Offer a person with visual impairment the opportunity to take your arm (at or about

the elbow), this enables you to guide them rather than propel or lead them.

### **People with a Hearing Impairment**

- When communicating with a person with a hearing impairment, look directly at the person and speak clearly, naturally and slowly.
- Not all people with a hearing impairment can lip read. People, who can lip read, will rely on facial expression and other body language to help in understanding.
- Do not shout at a person with a hearing impairment. Shouting distorts sounds accepted through hearing aids and inhibits lip reading.
- Show consideration by placing yourself facing the light source and keeping your hands, cigarettes and food away from your mouth when speaking.
- Written notes may aid conversations with person with a hearing impairment.
- To facilitate conversation, be prepared to offer a visual cue to a person with a hearing impairment.

### **People who use Mobility Aids:**

- When addressing a person who uses a wheelchair, don't lean on it, rock or move their chair. The wheelchair is part of their personal body space.
- If a person has transferred out of their chair, do not move it out of reach.
- People who use canes, crutches or other mobility aids may also regard them as part of their personal space, so unless the individual requests your assistance, do not offer to hand cane or crutches.
- Offer a person who uses mobility aids such as walkers or crutches a seat if you are going to be speaking to them for more than a minute.
- When talking with a person in a wheelchair for more than a few minutes, use a chair, whenever possible, in order to place yourself at the person's eye level to facilitate conversation.
- Never patronise people using wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.

### **People with a Speech Impairment**

- Listen attentively when you're talking to a person who has a speech impairment. Keep your manner encouraging rather than correcting.
- Exercise patience rather than attempting to speak for a person with speech difficulty. When necessary, ask short questions that require short answers or a nod or a shake of the head.
- Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Repeat what you understand, or incorporate the statements into each of your following questions. The person's reactions will clue you in and guide you to understanding.
- If you have difficulty communicating, be willing to repeat or rephrase a question.

### **People with a Cognitive or Mental Health Disability**

- You can't tell by looking at someone if they have a mental health disability.
- 1 in 5 Australians have had, or will have a mental health disability in their life time. Mental health conditions include depression, anxiety, psychosis and dementia.
- Cognitive disabilities can be caused by a stroke or degenerative diseases.
- People with cognitive or mental health disabilities frequently find it difficult to ask for assistance. They may sometimes present with a minor request that is not their major issue of concern.
- Be attentive and show respect. Don't draw attention to unusual behaviour in front of others.
- Make sure that your verbal and non verbal communications are consistent.

More information available at [www.mentalhealth.gov.au](http://www.mentalhealth.gov.au)

### **Telephone technique for dealing with a person with a disability**

When dealing with a person over the telephone there are no non verbal communication clues. Barriers to communication, not obvious at your end of the conversation, may also be present.

Therefore, it is not possible to know if a person has a disability unless they tell you.

General communication principles apply:

- Listen carefully to the request or complaint
- If you don't understand what the customer has said, don't pretend to understand.
- Ask questions to clarify your understanding of the information provided by the customer.
- Affirm what you have heard.
- Provide information in response to the request or complaint.
- Clarify the customer's understanding of the information you have provided.
- Never record information about a person's disability unless they have given you permission to do so, and it relates directly to their request or service provision.

## **Information on Aids to Assist People with a Hearing Impairment.**

### **Telephone Typewriters (TTY's)**

TTY's enable text communication over the telephone line between two people, one or both of whom may be deaf. The typed message appears on a display panel and, on some machines, as a printed message.

### **Telephone Aids**

Many of the newest telephones, including Telstra's Touchtone 400, have a built in hearing aid coupler and, when used with a "T" switch of a hearing aid, will reduce background noise.

Some telephone aids such as visual signalling devices, tone ringers and gliding tone callers are available to eligible persons, from Telstra, free of charge. For further information contact your nearest Telstra office. External couplers are also available.

### **National Relay Service (NRS)**

The NRS is available to people who are deaf or have a hearing loss, and those people who have a speech impairment. The service facilitates telephone conversation between a person with a TTY or computer modem, and a person using an ordinary telephone.

The NRS number is 133 677 and the service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

For more information: Freecall TTY: 1800 555 630 or Freecall voice: 1800 555 660 or Fax: 1800 555 690.

### **Assistive Listening Systems**

Devices to aid listening operate by excluding background noise and providing individual volume control. They are helpful in listening to the radio or television, and in public buildings where public address systems are installed.

Some public buildings such as churches, theatres, concert halls etc. have assistive listening systems. The following systems are available:

**Audio Loop:** People wearing hearing aids with a "T" switch can tune into the electromagnetic field generated by an audio loop that is attached to a microphone or sound source.

**Infra Red System:** Sound can be transmitted as infra red light waves. A transmitter is attached to the sound source and a receiver worn to pick up the sound.

**FM System:** Sound is transmitted as FM radio waves from a speaker, using a transmitter, to the listener wearing a receiver. This system is used in classrooms and for lecture tours.

There are many other aids and devices available including:

**Flashing Lights** - these can be attached to your door bell, telephone, alarm clock or baby cry alarm.

**Vibrating Alarm Clocks and Discs** - these are placed under the pillow and vibrate rather than give out an audible sound.

**Hearing Dogs** – these specially trained dogs alert their owners to a variety of sounds including a baby's cry, a door bell or to warn of danger.