

# How to be Welcoming to Patients with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act ensure that individuals with disabilities receive full and equal access to medical services. Section 504 applies to recipients of federal funds such as Medicare/Medicaid or research grants from a federal agency. Title II of the ADA covers state/local government and related entities such as county hospitals, city clinics, and public health programs. Title III of the ADA applies to privately owned and operated medical providers such as private hospitals or group and individual physician offices.

**Here are some questions to think through when considering how welcoming your organization may or may not be to patients with disabilities.**

**Are you welcoming on first contact?** A patient's first experience with a health care provider could be with a website, front office staff, or word of mouth. A welcoming approach begins with communication that is inclusive. Staff must be respectful and empathetic to all people that contact a provider. For example, all patients, with and without disabilities, should be asked upon initial contact if they need any accommodations; it should not just be a wait and see approach. Furthermore, websites and forms should be usable for individuals who use assistive technology as well as for those who do not. With ever increasing electronic communication and interaction, a welcoming approach demands web accessibility for as many people as possible.

**Are you physically accessible?** A patient must be able to access a building. From accessible parking, to a path of travel from parking to and into an entrance, to a waiting room, to a bathroom, to accessing patient and exam rooms and related exam tables and diagnostic equipment, an individual with a disability should be able to travel independently to all areas of a facility where the public goes. This may mean that barriers need to be removed. Careful attention must be given to looking at a facility's physical environment to see what obstacles might exist, even if your building pre-dates the ADA.

**Are you communicating equally and effectively?** The ADA and Section 504 require communication to be equally effective for people with disabilities as for those without disabilities. This may mean providing a sign language interpreter for someone who comes for an exam and is Deaf. For someone with a visual disability, a qualified reader or large print or electronic document may need to be provided.

**Are you ensuring that the information you provide to patients is readily accessible?** The Department of Health and Human Services Section 504 regulations require that documents regarding benefits, services, waivers, and consents to treatment be accessible. This may mean providing a large print format, assistive technology friendly electronic form, or a qualified reader to a patient with a print related disability. The ADA requires effective communication through provision of auxiliary aids or services. Providing information that is accessible to your patients is part of this requirement.

**Are you ensuring all staff are educated about interacting with people with disabilities?** A welcoming approach to patients with disabilities must be organization wide. A patient interacts with front office staff, doctors, nurses, other support staff, and through the electronic communications of a health care provider. This means that all staff should be trained on an organizations disability related policies and procedures. They should be aware of how to communicate respectfully with a person with a disability and be flexible in understanding how to respond to individual requests.

**Do you want to know more about creating an inclusive and welcoming health care practice? For more ideas or to explore these questions further, contact the Northeast ADA Center at 1.800.949.4232 or email us at [northeastada@cornell.edu](mailto:northeastada@cornell.edu).**

**Learn More About the ADA: [www.NortheastADA.org](http://www.NortheastADA.org) | 1.800.949.4232 | [NortheastADA@Cornell.edu](mailto:NortheastADA@Cornell.edu)**

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