



# A guide to planning accessible events

At its core, accessibility is about removing barriers to participation. Accessibility planning helps you address the range of access needs your attendees might have, so everyone can participate, including those with visible or invisible disabilities. So, let's break down the essentials of planning an event that welcomes people of all sizes, types, and abilities.

## **Friendly & Accessible by Design**

Your event will be much more accessible if you include people with access needs in your planning. Below are some things to keep in mind as you establish an overarching accessibility framework for your events team:

- Recognize that people with access needs are stakeholders in your event, even if their presence may not be immediately apparent.
- Ensure the active participation of people with access needs in planning roles, scheduled speakers and panelists, and in visual representations of your event.
- Clearly outline and publicize your accessibility policy and the measures you have implemented.



- Allocate a section on your registration form for attendees to communicate their specific access requirements.
- Establish methods for receiving and addressing feedback from the disability community.
- Compensate disability consultants similarly to other professionals providing services to your event.
- Incorporate disability into your anti-harassment, anti-discrimination, and diversity policies, acknowledging disability as a social and political category.
- Create an Access Plan outlining your strategy to prevent and remove barriers, and ensure your event's disaster preparedness plans include evacuation plans for people with disabilities.

Want more help? Check out these examples of accessibility policies: [Convergence](#), [SXSW](#), [National Conference of State Legislatures website policy](#).

## Access Plan

When planning your event, it is crucial to create an access plan. It ensures everyone knows what to do to fulfill your legal requirements, adhere to your organization's vision, and most importantly, improve the event's accessibility. An access plan is your execution plan. It outlines the specific steps you will take in the lead-up to your event, and when. Consider the following when creating your event access plan.

### **BIG PICTURE**

- [Assess the suitability of your facilities](#). Make venue selections with accessibility as a key factor in your decision-making.



- Establish an access team responsible for coordinating accessibility matters throughout the planning and execution of the event. **Ensure their visibility during the event by providing recognizable markers like shirts, vests, or hats.**
- Consider ways people with invisible disabilities can identify themselves to staff. A great example is the [Hidden Disabilities Sunflower program](#), in place at [over 200 airports world-wide](#), which uses sunflower lanyards to help airport staff identify travelers who aren't easily recognizable as disabled, but need extra assistance.
- Consider how people will travel to your event as well as move between and navigate activities. If you can, keep primary activities close-together and near to elevators and entrances. This reduces fatigue for people with mobility issues and increases participation.
- Ensure the safety of all guests by learning about the weight limits of your tables and chairs, and make adjustments to plan for higher weight people.
- If there is a stage, make certain it is accessible to wheelchair users.
- Plan for service animals and designate an area for service animal relief.

## **SPECIFICS**

### **MOBILITY**

- Provide wheelchair-accessible shuttles to and from airports, hotels, and offsite event activities. Identify accessible public transit options in your event materials.



- Ensure access paths are clearly identified and free of obstacles.
- If relevant, (such as for a beach or destination event), explore the possibility of offering wheelchair or scooter rentals through a reputable third-party vendor who can assume liability.

## LARGER BODIES

- Assume people of higher weights will attend your event and **ensure seating is cushioned, sturdy, and rated for higher weights.** [See this example of an affordable, stackable event chair with an 800 lb weight capacity.](#)
- Allow ample time for moving between activities
- Ensure meeting rooms are spacious and leave adequate space between tables.
- Coordinate with hotel staff to **arrange a seamless check-in** for people of higher weights or those with mobility issues and assign these guests rooms nearest to elevators.
- Moderate temperature in meeting rooms. Keep air moving and cool.

## DEAF/HARD OF HEARING

- Ensure that all speakers, including audience members, use microphones for better audibility.
- Arrange sign language interpretation for all events.
- Consider incorporating audio assistance systems like hearing loops for individuals with hearing loss who rely on hearing aids or other assistive technologies.



- Provide Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) services to cater to [individuals with hearing loss](#) or auditory processing disorders [who may not use sign language](#).

## BLIND/LOW VISION

- Ensure event materials are available in large-print and Braille.
- Ensure the venue can provide good lighting to aid people with low vision. Provide extra lighting at tables if possible.

## SENSORY SENSITIVITY

- Implement a scent policy that encourages a scent-free environment to enhance accessibility.
- Designate a quiet space or room for individuals seeking a less stimulating environment. Make this location known in event materials and provide ample signage.

For additional help in creating an access plan, check out this [detailed checklist from the ADA](#) as well as their [guide for designing compliant events](#).

## Venue Selection

Choosing an accessible venue requires doing your homework. Your venue needs to provide seamless navigation for all your guests, offer elevators between floors, and prioritize accessibility and comfort.



- When evaluating buildings, check for doorways wide enough for wheelchair access, sufficient seating, adaptable spaces, and well-lit environments. Ask questions about temperature control and how to escalate concerns.
- Verify that restrooms can comfortably accommodate all guests, with considerations like grab bars and wider stalls; family-style or gender-neutral restrooms are a big help.
- If your venue has a parking lot, ensure it has accessible parking spaces near the entrance.
- For outdoor events, marches, and parade routes, prioritize even and smooth surfaces, adequate seating for resting, accessible parking nearby, access-friendly ground transportation options, and arrangements for shelter in case of rain.

## **Navigability**

Navigability is not just about the physical layout of the venue but also the ease with which guests can access information and services. Begin with clear, legible signage to guide guests toward entrances, exits, restrooms, and different activity areas within your event. Ensure access routes are clearly marked and that paths are wide enough to accommodate power wheelchair users.

## **Seating Arrangements**

Accessible seating is key. First, consider the space between tables and chairs. Consider flexible seating arrangements that can cater to individuals with mobility aids and people of larger body sizes. Allocate seating specifically for individuals with disabilities,



positioning them in the front or near exits, and clearly marking the area to inform other attendees not to occupy those seats.

## Event Staff Training

Staff are the backbone of your event. Ensure they're well-versed in the venue's accommodations and trained to prepare for and accommodate people with access needs. Be sure they know how to escalate concerns or inquiries regarding accessibility. Encourage them to seek feedback from patrons on their comfort.

Brief all staff on appropriate communications language

- Avoid phrases like "wheelchair-bound" or "suffers from."
- The appropriate terms are "disabled", "people with disabilities", or people with "access needs"

## Website

To properly serve people with access needs, your website must be accessible. As access to registration forms, event itineraries, and accessibility information, is typically handled via the event's website, it's critical that people with access needs be able to consume this information and use the website effectively. An accessible website conveys welcome, communicates your commitment to accessibility, and encourages guests to advocate for the services they need.

When creating an accessible website:

- Include event accessibility information prominently. [View an excellent example here.](#)
- Videos should be captioned and have accompanying transcriptions.



- Use [alt text](#) to provide additional information about images and videos.
- Avoid conveying textual information with images or animation.
- Use a website accessibility statement, like this one from [Disability Rights Washington](#),

There is a wealth of information about [creating accessible websites at WebAIM](#) and at [Section 508](#).

## Communication

Keep communication clear and considerate from the moment you start promoting your event. Make it known in your invitations and event descriptions that this is an accessible event that caters to people of all body types and abilities. Provide a way for guests to register their access needs in advance. Help guests know before they go if they can be accommodated; this reduces guests anxiety and markedly increases participation, too.

## Conclusion

Planning an event helps you remove barriers to participation, especially if you involve people with access needs. This guide can help identify and address the range of access needs your attendees could have, so you can prepare to help everyone participate safely and comfortably. Taking these steps means more than ticking off items in a checklist – it’s about advocating for accessibility for all body types and abilities, and ensuring all attendees have an unforgettable, and “Friendly” experience.

[#MakeItFriendly](#)

