

Disability Etiquette and Hospitality

Physical/Mobility

- Ask about preferred location for seating.
- Don't push or touch a person's wheelchair without their permission.
- Don't assume people with canes or crutches prefer to use a ramp over stairs.
- Don't grab people's arms who use canes/crutches. They need their arms to balance themselves.
- Speak to the person in the wheelchair and not to the person that may be accompanying them.
- Be eye level with person in wheel chair when talking to them.
- Always ask before offering help. Don't be offended if the person says no.
- Never pet anyone on the head.
- A person with respiratory or heart condition may have difficulty walking long distances. Offer a place to rest before ushering to seat.

Intellectual Disabilities

- Greet person normally with age appropriate language. Don't baby talk.
- Repeat information about yourself if necessary.
- Rephrase, rather than repeat, sentences that the person doesn't understand.
- Treat people equally.
- Even if person doesn't read, offer reading materials.



Deaf/Hard of Hearing

- Using someone who knows sign-language is not an adequate replacement for an interpreter.
- Does the individual prefer to use sign language, writing, gesturing, speaking or a combination of all to communicate.
- To get the attention of a person who is deaf/HOH you can tap them on their shoulder, wave you hand or flicker the lights.
- Do not shout to a person who is wearing a hearing aid. Your shouting will be more distorted. Move closer to the individual.
- Face person directly when speaking and do not obscure your mouth when communicating.
- When using a sign-language interpreter, look directly at the person who is Deaf, and maintain eye contact.
- Talk directly to the person who is Deaf.
- Background noises are a problem for people who are HOH. May need to turn off radios and air conditioners.
- Don't be afraid of interaction. There is nothing worse than being left out and ignored.
- Offer assisted listening devices if available; have a note pad and pen available.

Speech Disabilities

- Ask person to repeat themselves if you can't understand.
- Wait for the person to finish then restate to be sure you understand.
- Suggest another way of facilitating communication.
- Don't nod to a person you can't understand.
- Don't interrupt or finish a person's sentence.



Blindness/Partially Sighted

- Prearrange tour of church with audio description.
- Identify yourself and your role (I am the greeter/usher).
- Ask person "Would you like assistance?" Offer your arm. Describe the scene.
- Walk on the opposite side of a guide dog.
- Don't touch person's cane or guide dog.
- Give verbal cues - "there is a step coming up..."
- Give verbal cues that are specific (e.g. Don't say "watch out", say "there is a trash can in front of you...")
- Guide an individual's hand to a banister or the back of a chair to help direct him to a stairway or seat.
- Inform person who is blind and attends church regularly of any physical changes.
- Offer large-print or brailled bulletins and large-print prayer books and hymnals.
- Establish before Mass if person would like accommodations for Communion (e.g. Eucharistic Minister to come to them, sighted guide).

Mental Health

- Be sure to greet.
- Give your name and ask theirs but respect boundaries.
- Offer to sit with or near but respect wishes to be alone.



Behavioral Needs

- Create a space parishioners can go to in order to de-escalate challenging behaviors.
- Don't force conversation.
- Don't argue. Wait for rational moments.
- Ask how you can help, find out if there is a support person who can be sent for.
- Ask what will make him/her most comfortable and respect his/her needs to the maximum extent possible.
- Remember that these behaviors are just as stressful for parents and family members. Engage family in conversations related to best strategies and natural supports at a time and manor that conveys empathy and understanding.

Other Tips

- Gestures often convey acceptance. Sit next to person with disability but respect boundaries.
- If a person has a seizure, you cannot do anything to stop it. Be sure head is protected.
- As an usher or greeter, please respect person's needs and request whenever possible.
- Don't make decisions for people with disabilities about what they can or can't do.
- A person who may appear drunk or sick may have a disability or medical emergency.
- Ask a person with a disability to take up the offertory gifts or serve in other roles of ministry.
- Ask a person with a disability to be an usher.



Sometimes, the disability isn't obvious, as in the case of some intellectual/developmental disabilities or mental illnesses.

If you observe behavior that you don't understand, it is good to remain aware for possible need of assistance and be nonjudgmental.

These tips have been provided using resources from:

National Catholic Partnership on Disability
Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Administration
National Pastoral Life Center / Diocese of Wichita / Diocese of Boston /
Liberty Resources, Inc.

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Contact OPDDA Staff to set up a workshop to train your staff, hospitality team and ushers. Consider members of your parish who may have first-hand experience with disabilities as presenters who can assist in training your staff and volunteers.

