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Center for Community Inclusion
and Disability Studies

University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities



SPEAKING UP FOR US
OF MAINE

Planning Accessible Meetings and Conferences

A Suggested Checklist and Guide

Updated November 2020



**Plan for inclusion and create a welcoming environment
with meaningful participation for everyone.**

Planning Accessible Meetings and Conferences: A Suggested Checklist and Guide

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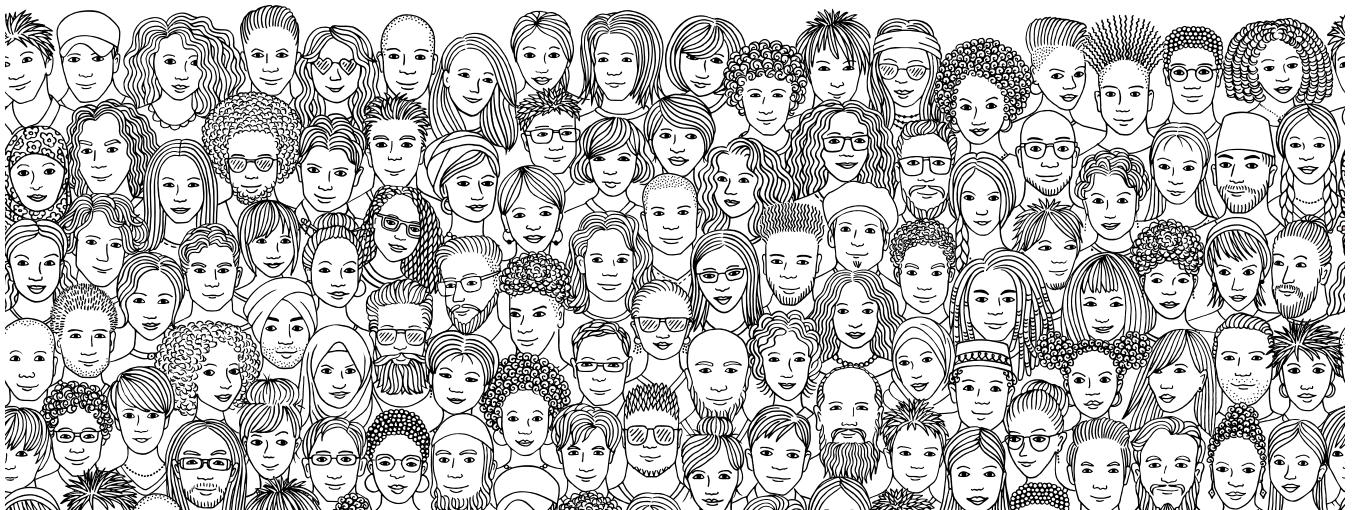
The University of Maine Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies (CCIDS), Maine's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD); and Speaking Up for Us of Maine (SUFU), a statewide organization run by and for people who live with intellectual and developmental disabilities; gratefully acknowledge the following contributors for their assistance with the development of this publication: CCIDS faculty, staff, and Community Advisory Committee members; SUFU workgroup members; Disability Rights Maine; Maine Developmental Disabilities Council; and the University of Maine Division of Marketing and Communications.

Introduction

Planning Accessible Meetings and Conferences: A Suggested Checklist and Guide is designed to help any person, group, or organization plan a meeting or conference that is inclusive and welcoming. Its purpose is to provide practical recommendations that promote meaningful participation for everyone.

The *Checklist* offers helpful suggestions in many areas of event planning, including choosing a location, using respectful language for registration questions about accommodations, and tips on refreshments and meals. It was updated in 2020 to provide guidance on additional topics such as web conferencing and video conferencing; cultural competence; conflicting accommodations; service animals, emotional support animals and the ADA; gender neutral language; exceptions to person-first language; and ethical photography.

Words or ideas that were identified as confusing or difficult by the workgroup members are provided in a glossary at the end.



Event Details

Conference, Event or Meeting: _____

Event Date: _____

Location: _____

Event Coordinator(s): _____

Important Contacts:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Pre-Planning Considerations

For Online Meetings and Trainings

Start planning early.

Practice [cultural competence](#). Include people with different views and backgrounds in the planning process. Cultures can differ in ways they communicate; interact with others; and understand time or deadlines.

Define the purpose:

- Training or class? (Webinar, online class, or professional development.)
- Interactive discussion meeting? (Peer group, team meeting, committee work or [community of practice](#).)

Choose an accessible and secure [web conferencing](#) platform that is compatible with screen readers, can integrate live captioning, and offers a 10-digit call-in number for relay service; (or)

Choose an accessible and secure [video conferencing](#) application and equipment.

Provide a brief, but detailed description of the meeting or training.

Share photos and brief biographies of the host(s) and presenter(s).

Create a system for participants to register online.

Publicize by email and on social media (if open to the public) and include a link to the registration page.

Confirm all registrations and provide instructions on how participants can log-on to the meeting.

Send email reminders the day before and the morning of the event.

Host Responsibilities (also Presenter Responsibilities if serving as the Host)

Knows the functions of the web conferencing software. (Examples: muting microphones, creating poll questions, screen sharing, assigning and managing breakout rooms.)

Has backup copies of all presentations, slideshows and visuals, just in case.

Uses a [hard-wired Internet](#) connection to avoid audio and video problems with unstable Wi-Fi connections.

Tests the Internet connection before the meeting or training begins. Encourages presenters to do the same.

Hosts the meeting from a quiet location with a plain background to minimize distractions.

Pre-Planning Considerations (b)

Host Responsibilities (also Presenter Responsibilities if serving as the Host) (b)

Uses a headset for better audio quality.

Asks a co-host or moderator to help address any technical issues and to monitor the chat box for questions and comments. A [role sheet \(PDF\)](#) can help everyone remember their part.

Starts the meeting or training 5 to 10 minutes early to give participants time to join. Uses poll questions to engage those who are already online.

Informs participants at the beginning, if:

- The training or meeting will be recorded and available afterwards.
- The presenter(s) materials will be made available during or after the meeting.
- A survey or meeting evaluation will be offered at the end.

Encourages participants to submit questions, comments, or share related resources through the chat box.

Presenter Responsibilities (if not serving as the Host)

Uses a headset for better audio quality.

Wears solid-colored clothing rather than patterns.

Closes any open documents and Internet browser windows before sharing screen.

Participates from a quiet location with a plain background to minimize distractions.

Offers a brief physical description for attendees who may be visually impaired. (Example: I am a woman with short black hair, I wear glasses and am wearing a light blue shirt and a dark blue jacket.) This guidance is optional.

Helps create ground rules for discussion meetings. (Examples: be on time; take turns talking; unmute mic only when speaking; listen to others; raise hand or use chat box to ask questions or comment.)

Ensures presentation materials are written using [plain language](#). Considers the audience's age, education level, culture and language.

Uses person-first language. Sometimes, identity language is preferred over person-first language. (Example: some individuals on the autism spectrum prefer to be called autistic and not a person with autism.)

Uses [gender neutral](#) language: avoids the use of masculine nouns and pronouns for subjects whose gender is unclear or variable. (Example: instead of congressman – uses legislator or congressional representative. Instead of freshman – uses first-year student.)

Describes all charts, graphics, images and videos used in the presentation.

Provides contact information for follow-up questions after the meeting or training.

Pre-Planning Considerations (c)

For In-Person Meetings and Events

Practice cultural competence. Include people with different views and backgrounds in the planning process. Cultures can differ in ways they communicate; interact with others; and understand time or deadlines.

Add the costs of providing [accommodations](#) and [communication support services](#) to the expense of hosting the event (for example, American Sign Language interpreter; [C-Print captioning](#) or [CART captioning](#)).

Find out how long it will take to obtain a captioning service or an interpreter, **before** choosing a final date for the event. It may take several weeks to secure these accommodations (if requested), depending on your location.

Choosing a Location

Tip: When possible, conduct an on-site visit! Is the facility truly accessible? Check corridors and aisles; dining rooms; doorways (entrance and inside); elevators, fitness center or health club; light controls; meeting rooms; parking lots; restrooms; signs; sleeping rooms; stairways; telephones; temperature controls; transportation services; and water fountains.

Are there accessible transportation choices to this location (air and ground)?

Ask about planned remodeling or current construction that might impact accessibility during the event.

Arrange meetings and overnight accommodations at the same hotel, whenever possible.

Outside Access

What is the availability of accessible parking close to the main entrance? Can more spaces be added temporarily, if needed?

If reserving a parking lot for a meeting or conference, don't include the accessible parking area. It may be needed by employees or visitors.

Are there accessible routes from a car or taxi to the meeting site entrance ([curb cuts](#) or level access)? A covered or sheltered drop-off area in front of the building is preferred.

Can you see the name and street address of the meeting or conference location from the outside? Include a photograph of the building or facility for participants when possible.

Is the outside walkway stable, firm and made with a safe surface that's not slippery when wet or humid?

Pre-Planning Considerations (b)

Inside Access

Does the meeting or conference location use international [symbols of accessibility](#), such as a wheelchair?

Do the floors have either low carpeting or a non-slip hard surface?

Do the meeting rooms have comfortable chairs or seating?

Are the elevators accessible? (Braille labels on elevator buttons; voice output announcing floor number on arrival.)

Is there at least one fully accessible male and female restroom near the meeting rooms? Are the hand dryers, soap, lotion, and towel dispensers accessible to everyone, including a person using a wheelchair or scooter?

Is there a family restroom available for caregiver and child, a person with a disability, or others living with special health care needs?

Is there a private space for breast-feeding mothers? This space should have a door with a lock, an electrical outlet and hand-washing facilities.

Do the staff at the meeting or conference facility understand that [service animals](#) must be permitted to enter the building and remain with their owners, per the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)? [Emotional support animals](#) do not qualify as service animals under the ADA.

Is access to a telephone, videophone, and/or text telephone ([TTY](#)) centrally located?

Is wireless Internet available?

Is there a thermostat in each meeting room?

Are the heating and air-conditioning systems quiet while operating and not a distraction?

Is there a sensory-friendly (quiet) area or lounge near the conference or meeting rooms to accommodate and respect everyone's sensory preferences?



Access to Low
Vision



Accessibility
Symbol



Braille
Symbol



Service Animal



Telephone
Typewriter (TTY)



The Information
Symbol



Visually
Impaired



Volume Control
Telephone

Event Preparations

Registration Forms, Promotional Materials, and Program Materials

Use plain language. Write for your audience. Consider age, education level, culture and language. Help readers locate the important information, understand it and use it. Organize the information in a logical way. Be brief, but clear. Use helpful headings and bullets. Choose common words. Write in short sentences and short paragraphs.

Create meeting or conference materials with [accessible document design](#) in mind. Use a clean and simple layout with graphics and text and provide ample white space. Use [non-decorative fonts](#) (no handwriting fonts) with a minimum font size of 12-point. Use upper-case letters and italics sparingly. Choose light-colored paper and high contrast colors for text and background. An 18-point font is recommended for large print materials.

Use respectful language for registration questions regarding accommodations. For example: “I will need the following accommodations to fully [participate](#).” Provide participants with some examples of accommodations and a checklist.

Remind attendees that the federal law regulating the use and admissibility of service animals applies only to dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability. An emotional support animal, one that provides comfort or emotional support only, does not qualify as a service animal under the ADA.

Create an organized system for processing requests for accommodations. A [sample tracking form \(PDF\)](#) can be downloaded here.

Be aware of any conflicting accommodation requests (for example, a person who is allergic to dogs may be attending along with a person who uses a service dog). Work with each person to accommodate their request.

Include all menu options that will be available (vegetarian, gluten-free, diabetic, etc.).

Provide a variety of ways to register: mail, email, website or fax. Include the 711 number for [Telecommunications Relay Services](#). Sample language: TTY Users Call Maine Relay 711.

Include a registration deadline to allow enough time to respond to participants’ or presenters’ requests for accommodations.

Provide an agenda in advance whenever possible, to help everyone, including people who are non-readers, to understand the purpose of the meeting.

Request workshop or session preferences.

Register the participant and the person who supports them.

Include a map and directions for the meeting location. Be sure to include the physical address for those using navigation apps or [GPS](#) devices. Provide contact information for the meeting or conference coordinator.

Event Preparations (b)

Registration Forms, Promotional Materials, and Program Materials (b)

Confirm all registrations. Include helpful information about where the meeting or event will take place (provide a photo, if possible). Include details about the location, and the availability of transportation, parking, and Internet access. Provide notice of any special policies like a [fragrance-free environment](#).

Provide fully accessible materials ahead of time when possible. Remember that an individual might be using a computer, cell phone, tablet, or some type of assistive technology such as a screen reader or text-to-speech software to access the information.

Accommodation Considerations

Tip: Many of these services must be booked well in advance of your event. Providers of accommodations and communication supports need to be included in the event planning and may have modest support needs of their own. Examples: an extra screen to display captioning, a reliable Internet connection, a specific area near the [podium](#) or stage, and a staff contact person. C-Print and C.A.R.T. captioners often request advance electronic copies of welcoming remarks, [keynote](#) speeches, and workshop or conference presentations. As your budget allows, you may wish to include your interpreter, captioner, or note-taker as your guest for event refreshments and meals.

American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter

C-Print Captioning

Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART)

[FM Loop](#)

Note-taking services



Accessible
Print



Assistive Listening
Systems



Audio
Description



Closed Captioning
(CC)



Sign Language
Interpretation

Signs for the Event

Create or request signs to identify the following key areas: parking, registration, meeting or conference rooms, dining locations, restrooms, and elevators. The most helpful signs are large, clearly printed and mounted at a comfortable height for everyone, including people who use wheelchairs, motorized scooters or have [low vision](#).

Event Preparations (c)

Meeting and Conference Rooms

Tip: Plan for extra space when meeting or conference participants will be using wheelchairs or motorized scooters.

Is there an accessible ramp to the podium and/or stage area?

Is the stage well-lighted and possibly raised? (An interpreter can be seen more clearly from a stage or raised platform.)

Can the room be arranged so that sunlight or artificial lighting behind the presenter or interpreter won't blind participants? This can make [speechreading](#) difficult.

If a podium is used, is it accessible to all speakers and presenters, including those using wheelchairs or motorized scooters?

If a podium is not accessible to all speakers and presenters: do not use one at all. Another option is to use a [head table](#) instead with different types of microphones, such as a tabletop, handheld and/or [lapel](#) microphone.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) recommends that all aisles and pathways are a minimum of 36 inches wide. Measure aisle width with chairs pulled away from the table as they would be if occupied. Wheelchairs and motorized scooters need at least a 60-inch circle to turn around.

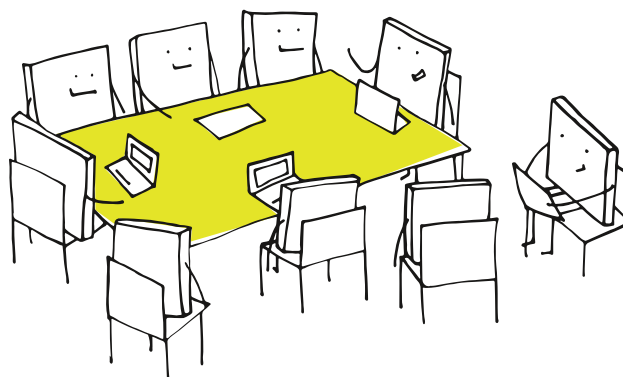
For wheelchair access, a minimum of 30 inches is recommended between the bottom of the tabletop and the floor.

Are electrical outlets conveniently located?

Use microphones for all sessions.

Coat racks and hangers should be accessible to everyone, including people using wheelchairs or motorized scooters.

Think about the quality of your accommodations. For example: do participants who use wheelchairs, motorized scooters or service animals have the same choices as everyone else?



Supports for Attendees

Workshop Packets

- Provide meeting materials in advance whenever possible.
- Provide an organized schedule of workshops or sessions.
- Provide clear, understandable maps of the meeting and meeting room locations.
- Provide handouts in different [formats](#) (Examples: large print, CD, flash drive, download from a designated website, etc.).
- Use string-style nametags or badges.

Workshop Sessions

- Have volunteers on hand who can give information and help participants get to where they need to go.
- Train staff and volunteers to speak directly to a person with a disability and not to his or her support person.
- Arrange the room in a way that best suits the purpose of the meeting or workshop. For example: to promote conversation, arrange the chairs in a circle; if participants will be taking notes, provide tables and chairs.
- Build in short breaks for sessions or workshops that last longer than 90 minutes to help prevent participants from becoming mentally and physically tired.
- Plan workshop activities in ways that everyone can take part.
- Allow enough time for participants to transition between workshops or sessions.
- Tape down all wires, cables, and cords.

Moderator Responsibilities

- Acts as host: welcomes participants and introduces speakers or presenters.
- Reminds participants to silence their cell phones and limit their laptop use.
- Asks participants to avoid side conversations: these can be distracting to others.
- Urges everyone to protect the well-being of others by practicing [ethical photography](#). Obtain permission before taking or posting photos of another person. Members of vulnerable populations may not be able to provide informed consent (examples: some individuals with disabilities; individuals from ethnically or culturally diverse communities; and all minors under the age of 18).

Supports for Attendees (b)

Presenter Responsibilities

Uses person-first language in presentation and materials (for example, “people with disabilities” or “a person who is blind or visually impaired” instead of “the disabled” or “the blind”). Sometimes identity language is preferred over person-first language: for example, some individuals on the autism spectrum prefer to be identified as autistic and not a person with autism.

Ensures presentation and materials provided to the participants are written using plain language. Considers the audience’s age, education level, culture and language.

Recognizes [gender identity](#) diversity. Honors how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves.

Is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning ([LGBTQ](#)) [inclusive](#): creates an opportunity to ask for or offer personal pronoun(s) during the introduction process. For example: “Please say your name, where you’re from and, if you want, your personal pronouns.”

Uses gender neutral language: avoids the use of masculine nouns and pronouns for subjects whose gender is unclear or variable. Example: instead of congressman – uses legislator or congressional representative. Instead of freshman – uses first-year student.

Uses a microphone at all times.

Asks that participants speak one at a time and identify themselves, so everyone knows who is speaking.

Uses captioned films, videos or slideshows in their presentation. At the time of this publication (November 2020), none of the popular streaming services have players that allow for [audio description](#).

Makes eye contact with the audience.

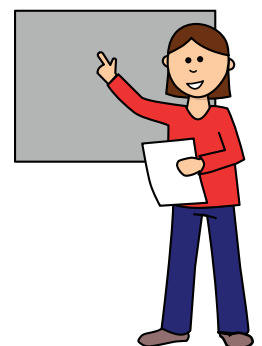
Remembers to speak at a normal pace and avoid using words that are not understandable to everyone.

Explains the meaning of any [acronym](#), abbreviations, or jargon used in the presentation or discussion.

Assures that the key points from the presentation are written on a [whiteboard](#) or chart paper to help everyone follow the discussion.

Describes all charts, graphics, images and videos used in the presentation.

Plans for online or other ways of distributing session materials.



Supports for Attendees (c)

Refreshments and Meals

Tip: Working lunches are not a good option for everyone.

Reception and refreshment areas are large enough to include all participants, including those with service animals, and individuals using powered wheelchairs or scooters.

Served meals are preferable to buffet lines: buffets can be challenging for everyone, including people with mobility or visual impairments.

If a buffet line is offered, provide catering attendants to assist everyone. Provide trays to carry plates and bowls.

Practice [cultural awareness](#) and sensitivity when choosing food for the menu. Offer diabetic, vegetarian, gluten-free, non-dairy and other alternatives.

When using wine or champagne glasses, provide standard drinking glasses as well.

Use light, but sturdy plates and cups when possible.

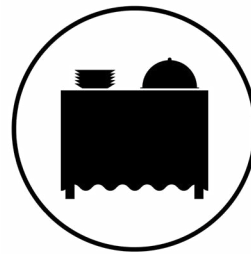
Keep food, plates, glassware and silverware within easy reach.

Provide biodegradable bendable straws.

Include extra napkins.

Offer sugar substitutes.

As your budget allows, include your interpreter, captioner, or note-taker as your guest(s) for event refreshments and meals.



Signature of lead event planner

(Date)

Glossary



accessible document design – documents that are designed to be used by the largest number of possible users: the text is large enough to read easily; images or pictures have alternative text or captions to describe them; and lines of text are spaced for easy reading.

accommodation – to provide an adjustment or a modification to a place or activity so a person can participate more fully (example: providing an interpreter for a person who is hard of hearing or deaf).

acronym – a word formed by using the first letter of other words (example: ADA is an acronym for Americans with Disabilities Act).

audio description – (also known as video description or described video) narration added to the soundtrack of visual media (theater, movies, TV) to describe important details about visual content (actions, characters, scene changes, etc.) essential for comprehension by individuals who are blind or who have low vision. Audio description supplements the regular audio track of a program.

communication support services – providing a sign language interpreter, a captioner, or listening devices for people who may be hard of hearing.

community of practice – a group of people who share an interest or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better. Members meet regularly, participate in activities and discussions, and share information.

C.A.R.T. – a form of captioning called communication access real-time translation or computer-aided real-time translation.

C-Print captioning – computer-aided speech-to-print captioning service.

cultural awareness – understanding, accepting and appreciating the differences of cultures other than your own (different attitudes, traditions and values).

cultural competence – to be aware of one's own world view. The ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures.

curb cuts – a ramp cut into a street curb at a corner to allow easy access for a wheelchair, stroller, or bike.

emotional support animal – provides companionship, relieves loneliness, and sometimes helps with depression, anxiety, and certain phobias, but does not have special training to perform tasks that assist people with disabilities.

ethical photography – considering the well-being of a person or community before taking a photograph. Will the photo intrude on someone's privacy? Will the photo cause harm, embarrassment or distress? Does it misrepresent a person's identity, experience or circumstances?

FM Loop – a headset and a receiver worn to help hear a presenter or other speaker in a large room.

Glossary (b)

formats – the form of how information is presented. Common formats include regular size print, large print, audio recordings, video or film, and DVD or CD.

fragrance-free environment (or scent-free environment) – a meeting or gathering area where people are asked to avoid using scented personal care products (shampoo, aftershave, deodorant, lotion, perfume or cologne) which may cause health problems for others. Scented magic markers, air fresheners and cleaning products should also not be used in an area designated as fragrance-free.

gender expression – the outward physical and behavioral appearances of one's gender identity.

gender identity – one's internal sense of being male, female, neither of these, both, or other gender(s).

gender neutral – avoiding the use of masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to subject(s) whose gender is unclear or variable. Example: Congressman – (gender neutral alternative): legislator or congressional representative. Example: Freshman – (gender neutral alternative) first-year student.

GPS – Global Positioning System. A satellite-based navigation system.

hard-wired – a device (like a laptop computer) is directly connected to a network (like the Internet) using a cable. This direct connection provides greater security and reliability.

head table – a table set up in the front of the room where the presenters are seated.

Internet – information found on the world wide web (also called the Internet) using a computer or other device such as an iPod, iPad, tablet or phone.

keynote – the keynote address or speech identifies the message or main idea/reason for a gathering, meeting, workshop and to get the audience excited about the event.

lapel – the area of a jacket, shirt or blouse near the collar that folds back against the piece of clothing where a microphone can be attached to allow people to hear what the speaker is saying.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ) inclusive – to respect a person's internal gender identity by using their chosen name and desired personal pronoun(s) instead of interpreting their gender based on outward physical appearance and expression.

low vision – loss of eyesight that makes everyday tasks difficult. This can include losing straight ahead (or central) vision, or not being able to see things off to the sides (called peripheral vision). Low vision may not always be corrected by wearing eyeglasses.

non-decorative fonts – fonts of type that do not have fancy curves at the ends of the letters.

participate – to join an activity or share with other people (example: join a group of people in a workshop or share work at a job).

Glossary (c)

plain language – a form of communication where the wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended audience can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information to meet their needs.

podium – a tall stand, often with a microphone, used by speakers in front of an audience.

service animal – any dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of an individual with a disability, including a physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or other mental disability. (Per Title II and Title III of the ADA.)

speechreading – also known as lip-reading: this is done when a person looks at a speaker's mouth and face to determine what he or she is saying.

symbols of accessibility – a series of black and white pictures used to indicate the accessibility of places, programs and other activities. For example: a common symbol of accessibility is the wheelchair symbol.

TDD/TTY (Telecommunications Device for the Deaf/TeleTYpewriter) – a user terminal with keyboard input and a printer or display, used over a standard analog phone line, by individuals who are Deaf, hard of hearing, and/or speech impaired.

Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) – is a telephone service that allows persons with hearing or speech disabilities to place and receive telephone calls. TRS is available in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. territories for local and/or long distance calls. There is no cost to the TRS user. Source: <http://www.fcc.gov/guides/telecommunications-relay-service-trs>

video conferencing – requires specially equipped rooms. Video conferencing rooms can be at more than one location. An example of video conferencing equipment: Polycom.

web conferencing – can be originated from any computer and received on any computer. Example: Zoom.

whiteboard – a white, glossy board that uses dry-erase markers instead of chalk. Whiteboards have replaced chalkboards in many places.

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