Social Etiquette

Tips for Firefighters Who work with People with Disabilities

Provided by
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About This Guide

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for fire department personnel and others who are participating in the Fire Safety Solutions for Oklahomans with Disabilities project. As a participant in this project, you will work with people with disabilities.

Who are people with disabilities?

According to the 2000 United States Census, 32.6% of Oklahomans reported having a disability. Of that total, 16% have some form of sensory disability and 30% have some physical disability.

Persons with disabilities are also more likely to be in low-income and low-education brackets, so their chances of dying or being injured in a fire may be even more compounded.

Having a disability does not automatically mean that the person is blind, deaf, or in a wheelchair. Disabilities encompass a wide range of impairments. It may not be apparent to you that some people have disabilities. People with disabilities may include people like the following:

- A construction worker who is becoming increasingly hard of hearing because he works around loud machinery every day
- A young woman with cerebral palsy
- A senior citizen who wears hearing aids
- A senior citizen who has rheumatoid arthritis and can't get around as well as he used to

What is this guide for?

This guide gives you guidelines on how to interact with people with disabilities. This guide helps you to know what to expect when you visit the home of a person with a disability, how to communicate effectively with a person with a disability, and how to react to situations you may encounter.

How do I use this guide?

You should read this guide from cover to cover because you cannot be certain that you will only work with people who are blind or with people who are deaf or with people with mobility impairments.

Why should I read this guide?

Social etiquette and working with people may seem like common sense. But working with people with disabilities introduces many new environmental variables, such as service dogs and interpreters. You may find that when you work with people with disabilities you feel uncertain of acceptable social etiquette because the situation is new to you.

By reading this guide you can be prepared to work with interpreters and to respect the work of a service animal. The working experience can be positive for everyone.

In addition, you need to learn the terms considered improper, discriminatory, and out-of-date so you can avoid insulting people with disabilities. If you use these terms you are demonstrating a lack of respect because such terms cause hurt feelings. As in any working relationship, hurt feelings can lead to a lack of cooperation, which could lead to the failure of this program. Remember, you need to be respectful of people with disabilities even if you do not believe that such terms are unacceptable. Simply put: The use of such terms IS unacceptable.

What will be covered in this guide?

This guide covers basic social etiquette, greetings, providing information, requesting information, working with service animals, and working with an interpreter.

General Tips for Social Etiquette

Social etiquette remains, in many ways, the same across cultures. You should be polite and courteous just as you would with anyone in which you interact; however, you need to make a few adjustments when greeting, assisting, and communicating with people with disabilities. Here are a few tips you should consider when communicating with people with disabilities, no matter what disability the person has.

Use "people first" language.

For example, do not say "deaf person." Instead, say, "a person who is deaf." The easiest way to avoid insulting people with disabilities is to learn their names and directly refer to them.

Never say "handicapped" or "special."

Both words are insulting and unacceptable.

Never touch or distract a service animal without prior permission.

Remember, the service animal is on-duty, just as you are.

Avoid making assumptions.

Assumptions are typically incorrect and only create more difficulty in the communication process. Do not assume you know what people with disabilities can and cannot do. Typically, what you think people with disabilities can do is far less than what people with disabilities can actually do.

Try to give People with disabilities options.

Rather than telling people with disabilities what to do, you should try to give people with disabilities options. People with disabilities can determine which option or options best meet their needs.

Disregard the idea that you are saving People with disabilities.

Simply put: you are not. People with disabilities, such as hearing loss, certain mobility loss, and seeing loss, retain the ability to save themselves. You need to encourage people with disabilities to be self-reliant and to be independent in the decision-making process.

Follow a few simple guidelines when greeting people with disabilities.

Treat adults as adults. Address people with disabilities by first name if you are addressing everyone by first name.

Don't be embarrassed if you use common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to the person's disability.

Don't be afraid to ask questions when you are unsure of what to do.

General Terms and Definitions

Before you begin to read this guide, you need to know and understand the correct terms to use when working with people with disabilities.

Visually Impaired

People with visual impairment have a medical condition or impairment that impedes their ability to have aided or unaided vision. They may have one of the following:

- astigmatisms in one or both eyes
- low vision with unaided or aided with corrective lenses
- tunnel vision
- night blindness
- non-peripheral vision

Blind

People who are blind have a medical condition or impairment that completely impedes their ability to have aided or unaided vision. They may have:

- light blindness
- total blindness

Mobility Impaired

People with mobility impairments have a disability or medical condition that impedes their ability to stand aided or unaided without support of an assistive device. The device may be:

- wheelchair (powered or non-powered)
- walker
- cane
- leg braces with crutches
- forearm cuffs (Canadian Cuffs)
- crutches
- electric scooter

Deaf

People who are deaf may have either a medical condition or impairment that impedes their ability to hear. Not all people who are deaf can read lips.

Hard of Hearing

People who are hard of hearing may have been born hard of hearing or have lost their ability to hear later in life. They may use one of the following assistive devices:

- cochlear implant
- hearing aid

However, when they take out these assistive devices they are deaf.

Interacting with People who are visually impaired or blind

Approximately 70% of people with severe visual impairments are over the age of 65. Only a small number of people with visual impairments are completely blind. Visual impairments include: cataracts, partial sight, and tunnel vision. People with visual impairments must rely on their other senses to obtain information about their environment. Thus, it is very important for you to give people with visual impairments directions that do not rely on sight but other senses.

Social Etiquette

Tell people with visual impairments when you leave, if even for a minute. Also identify how long you will be gone.

Identify to whom you are speaking if there is a group of people present. That way people with visual impairments know to whom you are speaking.

Explain to people with visual impairments where you will place tools and other objects that you bring with you for the installation process. Remember, their surroundings need to remain as consistent as possible to help avoid injury.

Do not move items without telling people with visual impairments. Moving items can be dangerous.

Try to give people with visual impairments options. Rather than telling people with visual impairments what to do, you should try to give them choices.

When working with people with visual impairments who use a service animal, walk on the side opposite the animal.

If people with visual impairments use a cane and have set it down, do not move it. Instead, ask them to move it themselves. Moving the cane may present a hazard to them if they need to move from one place to another.

Greetings

When you approach people with visual impairments, state clearly who you are in a normal tone of voice.

When extending a handshake, say "shall we shake hands?" so people with visual impairments know what you are doing.

Touch people with visual impairments lightly on the arm to indicate exactly where you are located. Sometimes it is difficult for people with visual impairments to determine exactly where you are because the acoustics of rooms vary.

Look directly at people with visual impairments. This may feel awkward at first because you are used to having direct eye contact with the person with whom you are speaking. People with visual impairments may not be used to looking directly at you, but you should still practice direct eye contact. If you keep direct eye contact, you help people with visual impairments stay focused on where you are in the room. In addition, if you

keep direct eye contact, you ensure that you will be more easily heard because you are speaking directly to them.

Providing directions

Provide people with visual impairments verbal directions. Do not grab their arm and attempt to guide them.

When giving directions, be specific. For example, if you are approaching steps, state how many steps and if the steps go up or down.

Avoid giving directions that are clarified through body language. For example, if you say "Over there," you mean "look at where I am pointing." If you say "by the green dumpster," you are giving a visual clue. Instead, say "Take twelve steps forward, turn to your right, and take six steps forward" or "Just to the right of the dumpster which is twelve steps from your back exit." You can use shape descriptions if doing so will assist people with visual impairment in understanding the size of an object.

Interacting with People who are Mobility impaired

Mobility impairments are often difficult to detect. A person with mobility impairments may be in a wheelchair, or may not use any type of mobility device but may have difficulty standing up for long periods of time. Mobility impairments impair a person's range of movements, or the amount of time a person is able to move.

Social Etiquette

If possible, place yourself at eye level with people with mobility impairments. This prevents people with mobility impairments from getting a kink in their neck. If you cannot lower yourself to eye level, you need to allow enough distance between yourself and people with mobility impairments so as not to force their head into an awkward position.

The taller you are, the more distance you should allow. If the conversation will take awhile, find a chair.

When talking to people with mobility impairments, sit directly in front of them. Sometimes it is difficult for people with mobility impairments to turn their body in the wheelchair to see you.

Never pat them on the head or shoulder. You would never pat anyone else on the head; it is degrading.

Do not lean on the wheelchair, or any other assistive devices (canes, walkers, etc.). Assistive devices are an extension of their personal space.

Try to give people with mobility impairments options. Rather than telling people with mobility impairments what to do, you should try to give him or her options so they can adapt to fit their needs and abilities.

Do not assume all exits work with all types of mobility devices. Wheelchairs vary in size and functionality. Make certain you develop exit routes with assistive devices in mind. If people with mobility impairments indicate that a pathway is not accessible, respect their authority on the matter. People with mobility impairments have accurate knowledge about how his or her assistive technology functions in their own home.

Do not place any items on the desktop of people with mobility impairments, if they have one attached to the wheelchair. This is considered very inconsiderate unless they offer first.

Greetings

Extend your hand for the usual handshake greeting. Let people with mobility impairments decide how long and the strength of the handshake. It may seem awkward at first. Remember, shaking hands indicates that you respect people with mobility impairments.

Providing Directions

Do not assume that people with mobility impairments want you to push their wheelchair. Ask first.

Interacting with People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Although people who are deaf or hard of hearing may not be able to hear you, it is important that you speak clearly and face people with hearing impairments when you are speaking with them.

People who are deaf often communicate through American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is a unique language, just like Spanish or Russian. You will not be able to intuitively translate because ASL has a unique syntax (the ordering of words is not the same as in English). You may have to work with an interpreter. When you speak, the interpreter will translate what you say to the person who is deaf. *Therefore, you should expect your interactions to take twice as long.*

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Ask people who are deaf or hard of hearing what their preferred method of communication is, if they do not tell you. There are three methods by which people who are deaf or hard of hearing may want to communicate: lip reading, sign language, and written language. People who are deaf or hard of hearing should decide which communication method to use and should reserve the right to change communication methods during your visit. Lip reading is fatiguing for those who are deaf or hard of hearing so you should keep the conversation short and concise. Remember, a person who is lip reading may only get 30 to 50% of what you say. Be patient and understanding.

Tap people who are deaf or hard of hearing on the arm before speaking. This alerts them that you wish to speak with them.

Remember, literacy is not a good gauge of intelligence. English is the second language of people with hearing impairments. People who are deaf or hard of hearing may have difficulty reading and writing in English because American Sign Language has a different structure and set of rules.

Do not write in the air. No one, hearing or otherwise, can remember air-written letters and words. Use paper and pencil in such cases.

Do not walk between people who are deaf or hard of hearing and the interpreter. If you do this, you are interrupting the conversation, which is rude.

If people who are deaf or hard of hearing use a hearing aid, ask them if there are any background noise distractions. They may request that you minimize these noises. For example, if you are wearing a radio, the static noise may create too much background noise.

Try to give people who are deaf or hard of hearing options. Rather than telling them what to do, you should try to give them options.

Avoid showing impatience because less assertive people who are deaf or hard of hearing may indicate they understand concepts that they do not understand. Why? They say they understand to avoid conflict.

Explain any interruption before attending to it. For example, if your cell phone rings, excuse yourself first.

Avoid saying "Never mind" or "It's not important" when people who are deaf or hard of hearing do not understand. This is insulting because it is often seen as an indication that people who are deaf or hard of hearing do not deserve the patience involved in repeated communication processes.

Greetings

Look directly at the person who is deaf or hard of hearing. This may feel awkward at first because you are used to having direct eye contact with the person with whom you are speaking.

Speak clearly in a normal tone of voice. Do not exaggerate your lip movements.

Remember not all people who are deaf or hard of hearing can read lips. If people who are deaf or hard of hearing do read lips, they will struggle to understand how you articulate your words. Still, do not exaggerate or change the way you speak.

Do not chew gum or tobacco. Remove your sunglasses so people who are deaf or hard of hearing can see your eyes.

Avoid touching your face while speaking. This prevents people who are deaf or hard of hearing from seeing your mouth.

Requesting Information

Use short simple sentences.

Do not fluctuate the volume of your speech.

When you seek a lot of information, ask for feedback to make sure you are understood. You may have to repeat your request verbatim several times. When you request something complex, give people who are deaf or hard of hearing examples.

Giving directions

Use short simple sentences.

Do not fluctuate the volume of your speech. When you have a lot of information to convey, ask people who are deaf or hard of hearing for feedback to make sure they understand. You may have to repeat information verbatim several times. When you talk about something complex, give examples.

Try to give the person who is deaf or hard of hearing options. Rather than telling people who are deaf or hard of hearing what to do, you should try to give them options.

Working with an Interpreter

Speak directly to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, not the interpreter. Remember, the people who are deaf or hard of hearing are the people with whom you are speaking.

Do not fluctuate the volume of your speech.

When you have a lot of information to convey, ask people who are deaf or hard of hearing for feedback to make sure they understand. Sometimes information is lost during the interpretation process. You may have to repeat information verbatim several times. When you talk about something complex, give people with hearing impairments examples.

Plan for frequent breaks. Interpreting is physically and mentally demanding. The interpreter translates the information into another language.

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