

GUIDELINES FOR IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY

As our communities become more accessible and inclusive, we're learning to understand that the spiritual principle of diversity can release a significant energy and facilitate advancement in our communities when everyone is included. It is important to recognize that accessibility is everyone's responsibility, and everyone benefits from it. The general principle is to preserve dignity and autonomy for persons with disabilities.

The process of providing accessibility requires removing physical barriers, changing attitudes and providing relevant support, communication or technology to ensure that all persons with disabilities are part of community life. Therefore, the goal of this section is to provide practical information to guide and assist individuals and communities in their efforts to make events such as conferences, workshops, Feasts,¹ Local Spiritual Assembly meetings,² and other public functions more accessible to everyone. Since each person has diverse

1 The Nineteen Day Feast is held on the first day of every Bahá'í month, and brings together the members of the Bahá'í community for worship, consultation and fellowship.

2 Elected annually, Local Spiritual Assemblies consist of nine Bahá'ís, and govern the affairs of each local Bahá'í community.

needs, it would be best to ask directly what specific accommodations they need, and then work on a plan of action to remove the barriers. This requires consultation, sensitivity, creativity, and an openness to work out the practical solutions.

Planning Public Events

- Planning for accessibility from the beginning improves the chances for creating an event that is enjoyable for all participants.
- The hybrid model has become standard practice in the community and there is the responsibility to make sure accommodations and technology are considered.
- An effective strategy for managing accessibility efforts is to establish an advisory committee representing a range of disabilities to oversee all phases of the event, from planning to completion. This is especially important for larger events. For smaller events, invite and encourage persons with disabilities to guide and assist with the planning process of the event.
- Local and national disability groups, organizations, and social agencies are excellent resources for information and advice and can help you find a variety of services.
- Site selection may have the greatest overall impact on accessibility to an event. Check the venue for inaccessible architectural features when selecting a home, restaurant, meeting room, or other facility so wheelchair users and others with mobility limitations can participate.
- Use an accessibility checklist, which is a tool to assess the level of accessibility of public facilities such as conference centres, etc., prior to the event being held, preferably before the facility is booked.

- The registration forms should include a section to identify whether a person has special needs and what accommodations are required to participate.
- At larger events, designate someone to be responsible for accommodations as well as help with seating, ensuring captioning and other technology is working, maintaining clear pathways, and other needs.
- Maps, floor plans, pamphlets, schedules, directional signs, information sheets, etc., should be available and displayed so persons with disabilities are aware of what is accessible to them.
- For large or medium-sized gatherings, reserve the front row seats for persons with disabilities.
- Allow those with special needs to enter into the meeting rooms before others.
- Some persons with disabilities or health conditions (visual, hearing, mobility, or medical) use service dogs. Provide comfortable space for service dogs to rest during event, and do not pet the service dogs.
- Inform the public when accommodations for persons with disabilities will be available ahead of time to make them feel included. Use International Symbols of Accessibility to promote and publicize the accessibility features of the events.
- Speak directly to the person with the disability, not to a third party. Talking with persons with disabilities is like talking with any other person.
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted, then listen or ask for instructions.

Accessibility for Deaf & Hard of Hearing

- First find out the person who is deaf or hard of hearing's means of communication; speech, listening, lipreading, and/or sign language.
- Face the person directly and make eye contact.
- Speak clearly and distinctly, and do not exaggerate mouth movements. Use normal speed unless asked to slow down.
- Keep your face clear of obstacles which includes your hand, a microphone or any other object.
- If the person has difficulty understanding a particular phrase or word, try a different way of saying the same thing by rephrasing the sentence.
- Reduce background noise because many people with hearing loss have greater difficulty understanding speech. Avoid situations where there will be loud sounds when possible.
- Make sure the physical arrangements make communication more accessible such as sufficient lighting and sitting in a circle. Make sure the person who is hard of hearing has their back to the light, including the windows.
- In a group setting, repeat questions or key facts to make sure everyone understood what was being said.
- Provide pertinent information in writing, such as directions, names, phone numbers, etc.
- Use technology by typing back and forth on a computer screen, using email, instant messenger or text messaging.

- Enable captions / live transcript for Zoom meetings. (click on settings, click on 'In Meeting' (Basic), turn on 'Closed Captions' to ON). It's free and automatic.
- Turn on CC (Closed Captions) on videos, and TV screens for both online and in- person events.
- Use Otter (Otter.ai) and other programs which transcribe speech to text. This is useful for recording meetings and taking notes for both virtual and in-person meetings.
- Use a good quality microphone at workshops and meetings to assist individuals to hear better.
- Rent or provide Assistive Listening Devices such as an FM system, Infrared system, loop (audio induction), and Bluetooth systems. All can be used with or without hearing aids or a cochlear implant. Contact the agencies that serve persons who are deaf and hard of hearing for these systems.
- There are a variety of ways to use the phone – Telecommunications relay service, IP relay service, video relay service, hearing aid compatible phones, videophones, captioned or amplified phones, TTY, etc.
- Arrange for Sign Language Interpreters for individuals who use American Sign Language (ASL).
- If the person uses sign language and you know any sign language, try using it and your attempts will be appreciated.
- When planning meetings for a Feast or Assembly meeting, provide visual aids and printed materials such as letters, prayers, and Holy Writings or send them online.

Guidelines for Improving Accessibility

- Emergency alerting devices such as fire alarms should be visual (i.e. flashing lights) as well as audio.
- Inform the public when captions / live transcript and other accommodations will be available ahead of time to make everyone feel included.

Accessibility for Blind & Low Vision

- First find out what mediums a person can use; large print, screen readers, digital audio files, or Braille. Never assume that a person who is visual impaired knows Braille; many are unable to read it.
- When beginning an activity, make sure to introduce someone who is visual impaired to their surroundings. Many people who are visually impaired feel comfortable travelling independently, however there may be times when a guide may be needed. Ask them how they would like to be guided.
- Introduce yourself by name and wait for them to offer their hand to be shaken. Unexpected touches can startle or be uncomfortable for the individual.
- Speak in a normal tone, speed, and volume. Address them directly, and not to the person they are with.
- To guide a person who is blind, first ask them if they want assistance, and then let them take your arm. The individual will walk about half a step behind you, following your body motions. If you encounter steps, curbs, doors, or other obstacles, identify them in spoken language.
- When giving directions, be as clear and specific as possible and check for understanding. Make sure the person knows when you have finished and are moving away from them.
- There are a range of screen readers which transmits whatever text is displayed on the computer screen into a form that a person with vision loss can process

(speech, Braille or a combination of both). Some examples are JAWS, VoiceOver, TalkBack, Siri, Kurzweil, Alexa, Google Maps, Google Home, etc.

- Use iPhones and other tools to read menus and more complex documents. Make word documents accessible using headings, and PDF documents into searchable PDF docs as opposed to image-only.
- Printed materials, prayers and Holy Writings could be provided using the person's format of choice.
- If there are persons who are blind or have vision loss in your community; you will need to make sure that they have transportation to Feasts, public meetings, etc. Providing rides are much better since it's more convenient and supportive.
- There are transportation services such as buses, cabs, light rail transit, and mobility transport. If using these services, it may require time and money to arrange. The biggest challenge for persons who are visually impaired is to navigate around places, which requires extra planning to get around safely and independently.
- Check to see if elevators have either Braille, engraved numbers, bell signals or speech.

Accessibility for Mobility Difficulties

- Work with hosts in private homes for events to arrange what assistance they might need such as getting into the home.
- A person's mobility equipment, such as a wheelchair, scooter or cane, is part of their personal space. Therefore, do not lean against or touch the equipment.
- Do not assume a wheelchair user or person who uses a walker wants help. If you see a situation where the person could use your assistance, ask first.
- When embarking down a path with multiple obstacles, ask "What's the easiest way for you to do this?" Listen and follow their instructions carefully.
- Individuals who have difficulty with mobility may be stopped by barriers most people don't notice such as a high curb or a flight of stairs.
- Check that there are accessible parking spaces close to the entrance of the venue reserved for persons with mobility difficulties. Indicate where the parking is located in the registration material.
- Some individuals find ramps much safer and easier to use than stairs. Ensure that the main entrances have accessible ramps in identifiable locations and with a proper incline (i.e. not too steep of an incline). A ramp can be permanent or portable.
- Curb cuts into sidewalks make it easier for wheelchair and walker users to get onto or off the sidewalks easily.

- Doorways need to be wide enough for a wheelchair user to enter. The doors should not be heavy and difficult to open. Look for automatic door openers.
- It's easier if hallways have good smooth floor covering such as wood, linoleum or non-slip tiles since carpets can be difficult for wheelchair and walker users.
- Check for elevators in the building if there is more than one floor. The elevator controls need to be within the reach of a wheelchair user.
- Rest-rooms should be equipped with grab bars in key locations to increase safety and more support.
- The doorways to the rest-room need to be a minimum 32 inches wide. In tight spaces, the door should open outwards from the rest-room. Door lever handles need to be on both the inside and outside of the door.
- The sinks need to be low enough with space for wheelchair users to place their legs underneath and the pipes (hot water) are far enough back so that the person will not burn their legs. Use faucets with level handles which are easy to turn on and off.
- The toilet paper dispensers, towel machines, hand driers, soap, coat hooks and other dispensers need to be within reach of wheelchair users.
- Remove obstacles (i.e. ornamental plants) and arrange furniture to ensure clear passage so the person with mobility difficulties can move around easily.