QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE
Defining Disability

EMPOWERED CITIES

The word "disability" means different things to different people. To some, disability refers to individuals with severe impairments or medical conditions that qualify them for disability benefits.

At National Disability Institute (NDI), we encourage thinking about disability in a much broader sense. People with disabilities are those with different degrees of functional abilities that might prevent them from being able to access services if the services aren't designed and delivered in a way that is inclusive – meaning the services are accessible to everyone regardless of whether they have a physical, sensory, cognitive or mental health impairment that affects how they access the service.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment. The ADA is an important federal civil rights legislation passed in 1990 that provides protection to people with disabilities in employment, state and local government services, public accommodations and telecommunications for the deaf.

Different types of disabilities may include:

- Hearing
- Mobility
- Cognitive
- Visual
- Learning
- Speech / Communication
- Mental Health / Emotional
- Chronic Health Conditions

For more information about this Reference Guide, please send an email to **ask@ndi-inc.org**.

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It may be difficult to identify an individual as having a disability. While some disabilities are apparent, others such as epilepsy, debilitating pain or fatigue, brain injuries, learning differences and mental health diagnoses may not be visible. These are referred to as "hidden disabilities" or "invisible disabilities."

Many people who meet the ADA definition of disability may not think of themselves as having a disability. Or they may shy away from the term because of the stigma it may carry. Perhaps they think of people with disabilities as only those who receive disability benefits or whose conditions are more severe than their own. For whatever reason, they may not "self-identify" as having a disability.

People with disabilities have varying challenges and needs, as well as abilities and attributes, so it is critical to respond to their individual needs and to meet people where they are. Here are a few tips:

1. Provide services in spaces that are physically accessible so everyone can enter and participate, including those with mobility disabilities.

2. Make information available in **plain language*** and alternate formats so everyone can use the materials, including people with vision and hearing difficulties and those with cognitive disabilities.

3. Meet requests for reasonable accommodations or special requests. When a request for an accommodation or need is made, there is no need to guess as to how to best accommodate the individual, it's okay to ask and to work with the individual to ensure that they can fully participate in the program or service.

* plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/words/use-simple-words-phrases/

⊙ The Changing Conceptualization of Disability

The "medical model" views disability as a condition within a person and the only way to address that condition is to "fix" the person.

The disability rights movement sees disability based on the "social model" which conceptualizes disability as an interaction between the person and the environment; people are limited by barriers in society, not solely by their disability. These barriers can be physical, programmatic or attitudinal barriers.

The social model says that it is the responsibility of providers to adapt to the needs of their clients rather than requiring clients to adapt to the way services are delivered and excluding them if they are unable to do so.

Need additional guidance on serving people with disabilities?

Check out the Empowered Cities website at **empoweredcities.com** or reach out to NDI at **ask@ndi-inc.org**.

Additional Resources

ADA.gov provides information and technical assistance on ADA regulations.

ADA National Network provides information, guidance and training on how to implement the Americans with Disabilities Act through 10 Regional ADA Centers located throughout the United States. Each Regional ADA Center is a safe reliable point of contact to ask questions and receive answers that cover the federal rules and focus on the region's unique needs. For more information, visit **adata.org**.

In addition, NDI's Online Classroom offers a free self-paced training, originally developed for Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) volunteers, that contains information on increasing awareness about the disability community: **nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/classes/disability-awareness-training-for-vita/**.

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