Victoria Disability
Resource Centre
Promoting a new perspective on disability

Disability Awareness Summary – Supporting Patrons with Disabilities

What is a Disability?

Disability has no 'official' definition and is a broad and complex issue.

From *Federal Disability Reference Guide* by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada:

Disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and mind and features of the society in which they live. A disability can occur at any time in a person's life; some people are born with a disability, while others develop a disability later in life. It can be permanent, temporary or episodic. Disability can steadily worsen, remain the same, or improve. It can be very mild to very severe. It can be the cause, as well as the result, of disease, illness, injury or substance abuse. Because of its complexity, there is no single, harmonized 'operational' definition of disability across federal programs.

Disabilities can impact mobility, mental processing, vision and hearing, neurological processes, and more.

Disabilities can be visible or invisible, episodic or chronic, short-term or permanent.

Being mindful of 'invisible' disabilities is important – it is easy to subconsciously judge a person's abilities and behaviour without understanding their history.

There are two common perspectives surrounding disability issues:

The **medical model** focuses on the disability as a problem belonging to that individual that needs to be fixed. This is traditionally how we view disability.

The **social model** focuses on the person's experiences and interactions within society and sees barriers as societal and attitudinal.

We want to strive towards using the social model as our primary lens.

Language Use and Behaviour

Language is a powerful tool that can shape others attitudes and perceptions. Use person-first language when discussing persons with disabilities. Put the person before the condition.

It can be awkward to get used to using 'person-first' language initially, it takes practice, but if you're unsure – just ask! Some people aren't bothered by these differences in language use, but some people are.

General Guidelines When Serving a Person with a Disability

- Relax!
- Address everyone directly – not the interpreter, attendant or companion.
- Treat a person with a disability the same as a person without a disability as much as possible.
- Offer your help, but don't insist.
- Ask HOW to help and WHAT to do.
- Respect the person's determination of their own needs and level of autonomy. It's OK if they decline your help.
- Try to convey the message that you are comfortable and not anxious when helping.
- Avoid making assumptions – ask!
- Don't be afraid to ask someone to repeat something you didn't understand.
- Ask questions about the disability only if you *really* need to know in order to help the individual.
- Be prepared to provide information in alternative formats (ex: writing down info vs verbal).
- Don't touch anything – equipment, dogs, wheelchair, etc. without asking first.

REMEMBER: We are talking about people who are individuals, who come with the same variety of attitudes, interests and personalities as the general population. Don't embarrass anyone by making assumptions.

General Language Guidelines

- Stop using the term 'handicap'. Handicap has historically never been the correct term to refer to a person with a disability. It originally referred to an act of equalizing contests and games to make them fairer. Replace the word 'handicap' with 'accessible'. E.g. accessible washrooms, accessible parking, accessible parking placard.

- Similarly, avoid using the language 'special needs'. There is nothing special about having your basic needs for eating, washroom use, learning, and so on met. They are just needs. A person may need accommodations in order to get their needs met, but that still doesn't make them special.

- Use person first language, language that puts the person before the disability. E.g. person with a disability, person who has cerebral palsy, person who uses a walker. If someone is uncomfortable with that language, ask them what language they would like you to use instead and follow the person's lead.

- Avoid negative language such as **<u>suffers</u>** from multiple sclerosis, stroke **<u>victim</u>**, **<u>confined</u>** to a wheelchair, and visually **<u>impaired</u>**. Disabilities have traditionally been viewed as a negative thing, but they're not negative. They're just part of a person's life. Try and avoid using negative or deficit language when referring to disability-related things to help stop spreading stereotypes.

- Likewise, the term 'impairment' should be avoided as much as possible because for many people they don't feel that their disability is an impairment. Instead of saying: "that person has a visual impairment," try saying, "that person has a visual disability." Sometimes the words 'limitation' or 'barrier' can be utilized instead of 'disability' as well (i.e. "my friend uses accessible parking because they have mobility limitations".)

- Do not avoid common language such as, "do you want to go for a walk?", "did you see that movie?", "did you hear about the newest celebrity scandal?". Doing so draws unnecessary attention to their disability.

- Call the disability what it is. By using the actual terms for disabilities, you help normalize them. They're not "a person with a lame leg" they're "a person with cerebral palsy". They're not 'schizophrenic' or 'autistic' they're 'a person with schizophrenia' or 'a person with autism [spectrum disorder]'.

- Talk and describe the environment, not the disability. It is not a space for people who use wheelchairs, it is a wheelchair accessible space.

Quick Reference Table

DO NOT USE…	USE INSTEAD…	WHY?
The aged, elderly, frail, feeble, etc.	Older adult	Adjectives like frail or feeble suggest a negative image and should not be used.
(The) Disabled, Disabled person	People with disabilities, person with a disability	'Disabled' implies the person is broken in some way.
Birth defect	Person with a disability	Avoid using the term "defect".
Congenital defect	Person born with a disability, person who has a congenital disability	Avoid using the term "defect".
Blind (The)	Person who is blind	Each is an individual.
Visually impaired (The)	Person who is partially sighted	Each one is an individual, with their own barriers and needs.
Confined to a wheelchair or wheelchair bound	Person who uses a wheelchair	For some individuals with mobility disabilities, a wheelchair is how they get around - it is not confining or restricting.
Suffers from, Afflicted by, Victim of	Lives with, Has, Survived (in the case of a heart attack, stroke or illness)	Avoid terms that imply victimization or helplessness.
Cripple	Person with a disability, Person with a mobility disability [limitation]	"Cripple" is an offensive term.
Lame	Person who has arthritis, a spinal cord injury [call it what it is]	"Lame" is an offensive term.
Deaf and Dumb, Deaf-mute, Dummy, Hearing impaired (The)	Person who is deaf, or hard-of-hearing	Only when referring to the entire deaf population and their culture is it acceptable to use *the Deaf*. The other words are extremely offensive.
Epileptic (The)	Person who has epilepsy	Avoid referring to anyone as an object.
Fit (attack/spell)	Seizure	Inaccurate and offensive.
Handicapped (The)	Person with a disability, accessible [washroom, parking]	This is an outdated term that actually refers to an act of equalizing contests and games to make them fairer.
Midget, dwarf	Little person, person of short stature	Midget and dwarf are considered derogatory terms by Little People
Insane, Crazy, Deviant, Nuts	Person with a mental health or psychiatric disability	Derogatory terms do not help normalize mental health conditions.