

# Disability Etiquette



How to Engage  
with People  
with Disabilities

NORTH  
**Dakota**  
Be Legendary.

Vocational Rehabilitation  
HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

# General Interaction Tips

These are some general etiquette guidelines when interacting with people with disabilities.

1

When speaking, speak directly to the person, not just the people accompanying them.

2

Be patient, people with disabilities might require more time to process and express themselves. Listen to them.

3

Never pretend to understand what a person is saying. Ask the person to repeat or rephrase.

4

Do not make assumptions about a person's disability or limitations. Ask questions if you are unsure.

5

If you think someone may need assistance, offer to assist but wait for them to respond and respect their decision.

## Blind or Low Vision

**Greetings** When meeting the person, identify yourself and others who may be present.

**Departing** Don't leave without excusing yourself first.

**Guiding** When asked to guide someone, never push or pull them. Offer your arm or elbow and walk slightly ahead of them while pointing out locations of doorways, curbs or stairs. Describe basic layout and be specific.

**Guide Dogs** Don't pet or distract them while they are working.

## Deaf and/or Hearing Loss

**Get the person's attention** before speaking. Maintain eye contact.

**Reduce noise** if possible.

**Speak louder** if necessary.

**Face the person** when talking and don't cover your mouth.

**Speak** at a reasonable speed.

**Keep communication simple.** It may help to simplify your sentences.

A sign language interpreter may be needed.

If they have an interpreter, talk to the person, not the interpreter.

## Difficulty with Speech

**Pay attention,** be patient and wait for the person to finish what they are saying. Do not finish for the person.

**It is ok to ask people to repeat** if you do not understand. Tell them what you did understand.

**Be patient** and allow a person who uses assistive technology time to communicate.

# Interacting with a Wheelchair User

**Personal space** Don't push, lean on, or hold onto a wheelchair unless you ask. Give them room when you are communicating with them.

**Eye-to-eye contact** Try to put yourself at eye level when you interact.

**Don't assume** they need assistance, ask them first.

**Be aware** of the distance to accessible restrooms, elevators, curb cuts, and other obstacles such as stairs and hills.



## Cognitive Impairments

**Keep communication simple.**

Speak in concrete terms and short sentences.

**Complete 1-step instructions** and focus on one topic at a time.

**Allow the person time to respond,** ask questions to clarify.

**Focus on the person** and pay attention to body language.

# Using Respectful Language

**Do say:** *people with disabilities*

Don't say: the handicapped or disabled

**Do say:** *a wheelchair user*

Don't say: wheelchair-bound

**Do say:** *congenital disability*

Don't say: birth defect

**Do say:** *He/she has Down Syndrome*

Don't say: He/she is a Down's kid

**Do say:** *He/she has an intellectual or developmental disability*

Don't say: mentally retarded, a retard, slow or special

**Do say:** *people who have mental illness, person with a mental or emotional disability*

Don't say: the mentally ill, crazy, psycho, mental case

**Do say:** *people who are blind or low vision*

Don't say: the blind or blind as a bat

**Do say:** *person who is hard of hearing, Deaf, a person who is deaf*

Don't say: hearing-impaired, deaf-mute, deaf and dumb

**Don't refer to a person's disability unless it is relevant....Remember, people are people first, disability second!**



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Funding for this was provided through a combination of Federal funds awarded by the U.S. Department of Education under the State Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VR) program and State appropriated funds. Federal funds pay for 78.7% of the program costs. For FFY 2019, the VR agency was awarded \$10,868,755 in Federal VR funds. The remaining 21.3% of funding of \$2,941,607 was provided by State appropriated funds.