

# **‘Physical Accessibility in Theater’**

Presented by

The Alliance for Disability Awareness,

The Hoosier Alliance for Neurodiversity at BSU, and

Dr. Evette Simmons-Reed

## **ADA Title III**

Access to visual and performing arts is a right, not a privilege. As such, accommodations should be a natural part of the environment for anyone who needs them - rather than just on certain days or times.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title III, 28 CFR, Part 36 prohibited discrimination against the disabled in shops open to the public. Title III states that non-governmental entities open to the public must follow guidelines for accommodations. Some of these spaces include lecture halls, galleries, zoos, parks, colleges, concert halls, museums, and theaters.

## **The Importance of Accessible Language**

Language is constantly evolving and the terms used by the disability community are ever-changing.

“Disabled” has become the usage of choice, replacing “handicapped” in recent years...The "differently abled," the "handi-capable,"...are almost universally dismissed as too gimmicky and too inclusive. " -Shapiro, Joseph P. (1993). *No Pity* (p. 33). Crown. Kindle Edition.

For others, the term dis/ability is preferred as it separates the normal and abnormal.

## Identifying Diversity (Accessible Language cnt'd)

- “I have diabetes” VS “I am diabetic”:  
Some individuals prefer person-first language and others prefer identity-first language due to the nature of their disabilities, beliefs, or upbringing.
- Avoid “wheelchair-bound” - Try “Wheelchair User” instead:  
For Many, a Wheelchair provides freedom; it is an extension of one’s body.
- “Accessible” rather than “Handicap” when referring to entrances, parking spots, bathroom stalls is more inclusive and sounds more professional.

When in doubt - just ask!

## **Accommodations for Deaf/Hard of Hearing**

- Captioning for individuals who do not use Sign Language or an interpreter. Live captions, created by an individual off-stage, are often more efficient than automated captions. Devices with Captions may be a personal device provided by the venue or captions may appear on a large caption box near the stage. Interpreters for Sign Language- reliant individuals. (Including Deaf/HoH, Autistic individuals, or those with Language Delays, Auditory Processing Disorders, etc.)
- Performances that have Deaf actors would be accessible for everyone and it would be welcoming and encouraging for many people.
- Consider providing transcripts of spoken dialogue.

## **Accommodations for Visually Impaired**

Offering Tactile/Touch tours prior to performances allow members of the blind community to gain greater access to imagery being created.

## **Accommodations for the Visually Impaired / Blind**

Audio Description is a Key Aspect of Accessibility for the Blind and Visually Impaired:

- Good audio description is the act of describing the events on stage between characters' dialogue.
  - Often a radio-like device with headphones is provided upon request. Audience members tune into the proper station and the describer narrates the actions of the performance when there is no spoken dialogue.
- Lower/Dim Lights if needed
- Are there any banners/signs or text in brochures that may be unreadable to the colorblind? If so, consider how this can be re-designed.

## **A Short Video About Accessibility for the Deaf and Blind in Theater**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Az3RtN0ExMY>

### **Accommodations for Physical Impairments**

- Option to Purchase or be Moved to Different or More Convenient Seating
- Allowing Space for Mobility Aids to be Nearby
- Do not Isolate Person by Separating Them from Family/Friend Groups
- Inclusive Seating that Does not Cost Extra
- Snack & Drink Exceptions for Diabetics & People with Severe Allergies

## **Accommodations for the Neurodivergent**

- The option to choose Aisle seats for individuals with anxiety or sensory issues
- Additional showings for Autistic people (including Autistic adults)
- Decompression rooms for Sensory/Anxiety issues
- Consistent Sound Level and Dim/Lower Lights

## **Being Aware of Alternative Communications**

Not everyone communicates the same; there are many individuals that communicate non-verbally. With this in mind, staff must be trained to offer support to individuals with alternative styles of communicating.



## **Providing Access to Assistive Tools and Technology**

Consider the Following:

- Are the assistive technologies accessible to all or do these technologies require a device that some individuals may not own?
- Are there any costs for patrons to use the assistive technology? If so, is it affordable?
- If special showings are performed for target groups, are the showings at a convenient time?
- Move towards integrating accommodations into regular performances rather than specific days in order to eliminate isolation.

## **Providing Access to Other Accommodations**

- Content and Trigger Warnings provided in program or at time of ticket purchase
- Providing pictures or open house tours of venue so accessibility may be determined
- Specifying if a venue is accessible and to what extent
- (EX: is the accessible entrance on the opposite side of the building?)
- Providing Access to Aisle Seats for People w/ Anxiety, Incontinence Issues, or Neurodivergence

## Other Great Resources

- Audio Description Resource Guide - National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS) <https://www.loc.gov/nls/about/services/reference-publications/guides/audio-description-resource-guide/>
- The UDL Guidelines: UDL (Universal Design for Learning) <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>
  - Though this is intended for teaching individuals with different disabilities, it can be adapted to make theatre more accessible.
- ADA Part 36 <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-28/chapter-I/part-36>
  - Nondiscrimination on the basis of disability by public accommodations and in commercial facilities; discusses removal of barriers, accessibility for the Blind, Physically Disabled, Deaf/HOH, and more