

**Mid-Atlantic ADA Center**  
**SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH DISABILITIES: A TOOLKIT**  
**DECEMBER 4, 2018**

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>> Recording started.

>> ANN DESCHAMPS: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to Serving Customers with Disabilities: A Toolkit, a webinar put on by TransCen's Mid-Atlantic ADA Center.

My name is Ann Deschamps, and I'd like to welcome you. I'd like to take a minute as we are remembering President George Herbert Walker Bush this week. We would like to remember his tremendous role in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. In fact, it was one of the biggest accomplishments, if not the biggest accomplishment, of his administration, a true bipartisan effort, and we honor him for that.

Now, without any further ado, I will happily turn the mic over to Caleb Berkemeier, training specialist, from the Mid-Atlantic ADA Center to talk about our toolkit.

>> CALEB BERKEMEIER: Thank you, Ann. I'm going to tell you briefly what we're going to be doing. I'm going to take you through the customer service training resource that is posted on our website, and I'll show you at the end of this presentation where you can find that. I'm going to move through it pretty quickly.

Now, this is not a typical presentation where the slides are an

outline for the speaker. You're actually going to be looking at the slides from the toolkit itself, so -- and I'll be reading through those, but I'm also going to stop periodically to insert some comments and talk about some of the information and why we made the choices that we did.

I'm also going to tell a couple stories to illustrate some of the principles we're going to cover, so it's good for you to know up front that I am blind, so those are the kinds of stories I'll be telling. I don't presume to speak for any other disability. These circumstances can change depending on the one's disability and the interaction, but I do think that there are some crossover principles that can be gained from any disability-specific interaction, so I'll talk a little bit about that too.

Okay. So this presentation has two levels, so on one level I'm going to show you the customer service training resource that's intended for frontline staff, so most of what you're going to see here is probably not new to many of you. In one sense it's fairly basic, but on another level, there is a philosophy behind the composition of the resource, and I'm going to share that with you as we go through it.

Now, obviously, the underlying philosophy is something that frontline staff don't necessarily need to know, so if you use this in a group training, you don't necessarily need to address it, but you definitely can if you want do.

I think it makes for a really good discussion.

So on Slide 11, this is the opening for the training. It's Titled "Serving Customers with Disabilities, Tools for Success," and like I said, you can do this as a group training, but it can also be an individual thing, if you want to just give it to your employees and they can read it. It probably takes about 10 to 12 minutes to get through.

Slide 12. Welcome. This training is designed to help you interact more comfortably with customers with disabilities, and

there's images here of various types and styles of welcome signs, including one with sign language letters, a notice that service animals are welcome, and a sign that indicates an accessible entrance.

Slide 13. Did you know one out of five Americans has a disability? Many disabilities are not obvious. You wouldn't typically know that a person has a cognitive disability, an autoimmune disorder, or chronic pain.

Slide 14. The physical and mental limitations we experience as we get older can also be considered disabilities. With so many kinds of disabilities, you certainly interact every day with someone who is disabled.

Slide 15. The primary obstacle to full participation for people with disabilities is an inaccessible world.

You can help change this by improving the hospitality of your business, organization, or agency.

It all starts with providing exemplary customer service.

So this slide is our attempt to direct attention away from the individual's body toward the environmental, social, and attitudinal barriers that are the most significant reasons for why a person is disabled and why disabled people still experience segregation.

Later in the training, this slide is going to be the underlying foundation for the specific advice that we give for interacting with customers who have disabilities.

Slide 16. Excellent customer service is based on two habits; first, focusing on the person rather than the disability; and second, not making assumptions about what a person needs.

Now, in my opinion, these two habits are the linchpin of the entire training resource. We wanted to create something that went beyond the usual dos and don'ts because the truth is, you're never going to be able to come up with a comprehensive list of etiquette rules. The rules can change, depending on circumstances and the individuals involved. I mean, sometimes there can even be

contradictions. You might have experienced that before.

So instead of having to remember a bunch of rules, it's better to approach an interaction with a disabled person with these habits of thinking already instilled and allow your actions to be determined by them. Now, I personally think that this is the only way that we can improve upon the rules-based way of interacting with people who have disabilities, which is not to say, of course, that rules don't matter. In this very training, we do have disability-specific rules because many needs are simply not intuitive, so rules do matter, but consciously following rules is not going to get you all the way to a natural and comfortable interaction for you and the disabled person.

On Slide 17, we begin to elaborate on these basic principles.

A disability is a personal characteristic, just like race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

Just like these other characteristics, disability shouldn't have any effect on the way we interact with customers.

Slide 18. People with disabilities are so diverse that it is impossible to predict what any single individual might need or not need, so rely on each individual to let you know what they need.

I think this is another crucial point, one that might get forgotten about as we try to actively help people with disabilities.

I can't stress enough how lucky we are to live in a post-ADA world in which accepting and helping people with disabilities is now considered to be, by pretty much everybody, a good thing to do, as opposed to the pre-ADA world in which disabled people were mostly ignored and segregated, so it's a wonderful thing, and I don't want to be too critical of that progress, but I do want to point out that deciding what a disabled person needs or can do without consulting them first runs the risk of introducing another kind of marginalization.

On Slide 19, we continue to address this point. So in most situations, the way you treat a person with a disability should be

identical to the way you treat a person without a disability. For example, if you normally ask customers without disabilities if they need help, then you may ask customers with disabilities the same question.

Now, it's not stated here, but hopefully it's obvious that the reverse is also true. I mean, if you don't normally ask customers if they need help, then there isn't any reason to do so just because the person is disabled.

This is an important issue that might not get as much attention as it should. As we all know, one of the important criticisms that comes out of the Disability Rights Movement is against the paternalistic tendency and beliefs about and attitudes towards disabled people. Assuming that people with disabilities need help merely because they're disabled is a manifestation of paternalism, you know, even though it's most likely unconscious or unintentional.

But sometimes the paternalism is quite conscious and quite on the surface. I'll just stop here and give you one example from my own personal experience. A few weeks ago I was with some of my blind friends, we were in Philadelphia in the train station, late at night trying to catch a train back to D.C., and some of the employees there who were working at the platform noticed that there was a group of blind people who were waiting for -- to go down onto the platform to get on the train, and they came over and were very intent on helping us.

Now, not necessarily a problem. I mean, it is a big place, it's good to have that -- some help to navigate, but it quickly became clear that they had already decided what we needed before they even interacted with us. They wanted to take us down in an elevator, and, of course, we don't need to take an elevator, we can just take the stairs, and we tried to tell them that the stairs were fine, but they were insisting that we take the elevator.

So being late at night and all of us being tired, we didn't really fight the issue, not that we should have had to fight to begin with,

but we just said, okay, fine, we'll take the elevator.

So we head down in the elevator. We get down to the platform, and we have to walk the length of it to get to where we need to be. So as we're walking down, each employee has kind of like stationed themselves next to each one of us, almost like they were guarding us, and as they're walking down the platform, one of them keeps yelling out, Stay left, stay left, because, you know, I guess he was afraid that we were going to fall over onto the tracks.

Now, one mention of staying left is good, that's definitely helpful, but he was doing it the whole way down, and it actually was making it harder for us to walk in a straight line. I mean, if you can imagine, if you were to put a blindfold on and walk a straight line while someone is yelling at you the whole way through, it becomes very difficult.

So -- now, one of my friends actually told him that he didn't need to be giving us that much direction, and he kind of, you know -- he seemed to acknowledge what she was saying, but he didn't stop doing it, he kept doing it, so finally, when we got to the train, they wanted to put us in accessible seating, which we didn't need, and we told them, we don't really need that, but, again, they didn't listen to us. They went on to the train and they kicked people out of those seats so we could sit down, even though we were telling them we don't want those seats.

So anyway, I'm just telling the story just to illustrate the point that these things do still happen, and, you know, frontline staff, they don't have a lot of experience dealing with these situations, so it's not surprising when things like this happen, but that's why we wanted to write this customer service training resource in the way that we did and kind of put the principles up front, because we're hoping that frontline staff, after they go through this, will approach that interaction differently, instead of assuming what we need before actually asking us, they'll flip that around and they'll really listen to what we want to tell them.

Okay. Let's move on to Slide 20. Okay. So what can we do, practically speaking, beyond cultivating the two habits of mind. Well, just like you would with any other customer, observe a person with a disability when she enters your business.

If someone appears to need something out of the ordinary, it's okay to offer help.

For example, if someone looks lost or confused or is struggling to reach an item, she may appreciate an offer of assistance.

Slide 21. If your offer of assistance is accepted, then ask the customer what he needs and how you can help, then follow the customer's instructions.

So you can see that in this pattern of interaction, an offer of assistance is based not on the mere fact that a person is disabled but rather on an observation that the person actually might need something.

Furthermore, there isn't an assumption about what that need is. Even though it might be obvious, regardless whether the need is obvious or not, you should always still allow the person to tell you what they need and what you can do to help.

Another quick example from my own experience, just this past weekend I was walking home, a pretty long distance, and at one point on my route, I was getting confused as to which street that I needed to go down, and I was kind of running into an embankment along the sidewalk, and I was very obviously confused. I was kind of jerking back and forth, I was muttering. Anyone who saw this would see that this person is confused. And so a person who was walking down the sidewalk next to me called out that this was 16th Street. That was much appreciated, and it was based on an observation that I actually did need something.

Now, maybe it would have been better if she had stopped and asked if I needed help, that would be ideal, but, nevertheless, the fact that she based it on an observation that I really did need help was very good.

Later on in that route, I reached another section where there was a giant puddle, and I didn't want to step in that, so I was going to circumnavigate it, and I ended up on a grassy part and I started to backtrack towards the sidewalk. Now, in this instance, I was purposefully moving towards that sidewalk. There was a guy who saw me doing this, and as soon as he saw that I was on this grassy part, not on the sidewalk, he started rushing over to me, and he said, Oh, wait, hold on, stop, stop, I'll help you out. Now, in this case, he wasn't observing what I was actually doing because if he had been, he would have seen that I was handling it quite well. I might have been off the sidewalk, but, you know, I wasn't in danger and I was headed towards where I needed to be.

So I just give these two brief examples just to illustrate the point that when you are trying to figure out if a person with a disability or a customer needs help doing something, always stop for just a second and observe what they're doing, observe the situation, and pay attention to whether or not they actually look like they're struggling. If they're not, you can just let them go on their way. You can keep watching if you want just to see, but, you know, always base it on an observation of the situation, not just on the fact that, you know, there's a disabled person who's off the sidewalk.

So on Slide 22, we are going to transition to language usage. So are you ever confused about what kind of words and terms to use when talking about people with disabilities?

Slide 23. Person-first language puts the person first. For example, person with a disability; person who has autism; customer who is blind.

Slide 24. Identity-first language puts the disability first as a mark of identity, for example, disabled person, autistic person, blind customer.

Slide 25. So which one should you use?

There's no right answer, but person-first language is usually



acceptable.

If a customer prefers something different, accept the correction graciously.

So that's just a very brief mention of the language issue. For frontline staff, it's probably all they really need to know. We didn't include a list of inappropriate words and phrases because we're hoping that in 2018 people generally know about those inappropriate words and phrases.

I'm curious if you think that we're making the right choice there. You can let us know that in the session evaluations because we do intend to revise this training resource over time.

The reason -- I should probably also mention that the reason why we recommend person-first is simply because it's been the convention in the United States. I personally use identity-first language, so it's not as though we want to ignore people who prefer identity-first language, but because there are different preferences, that's why we decide to just go with the convention but also point out that, you know, if another preference is expressed, that that should be acknowledged as well.

All right. Slide 26. So now let's talk a little bit about some specific disabilities that we can apply these general principles.

Slide 27. Speak to customers with intellectual disabilities the same way you would any other customer.

If you're not understood the first time, try using different words to make your meaning clearer.

If you're unable to communicate effectively after several tries, it's okay to politely bring in your supervisor.

Slide 28. You might also have difficulty communicating with a customer who has a speech disability.

If you don't understand after a few tries, ask the customer if there are alternative methods you can use to communicate.

Slide 29. People who have stutters or speech blocks usually prefer to finish their own sentences.

Instead of trying to suggest a word or finish a sentence for a customer who is stuttering, wait for him to finish on his own.

I should probably stop here just to comment that I hope it's obvious that the habits and general principles that we've already discussed are influencing many of these disabilities-specific rules. In this case, for example, not immediately jumping in to compensate for the disability is derived from the habit of not assuming what a stuttering customer needs.

I should probably also point out here that these are rules that are really intended for people you've never met before. It is the case that, you know, we have friends who have disabilities and we may already know what their preferences are. Perhaps you have a friend who does have a stutter, and you know that he or she does prefer that the sentence be completed because it's simply easier. And if that's the case, then, by all means, do that, because ultimately, it's that -- it's the individual's preference that should be taken into account.

So these rules are intended for people you've never met before. If you don't know what they prefer, then these would be the best practices.

So because we started a little late, folks, we are going to go until 12 -- or 1:05.

All right. So on Slide 30, when communicating with a deaf person through an interpreter, it is important to look directly at the deaf person, not at the interpreter.

This might be difficult at first. Your gaze may be naturally drawn to the interpreter.

Don't worry if this happens, simply direct your eyes back to the customer with a smile.

Slide 31. If there's no interpreter, you might need to write notes, so have pen and paper available.

Some customers might be able to read your lips, so speak clearly and make sure your mouth is visible.

Slide 32. Many people with hearing loss still communicate through hearing and may ask you to speak more loudly.

It's okay to speak more loudly if a customer asks you to.

So here, again, we're trying to reinforce the idea that it's important to base your actions on what the customer tells the staff member that they need. We're trying to do this in most of the slides in this section.

Slide 33. When interacting with a blind customer, look at and speak to him, even if he is with another person.

In fact, always speak directly to the customer, regardless of the type of disability.

Slide 34. If a customer who is blind or has low vision wants physical guidance, ask how you may guide her.

If she wants verbal guidance, remember to give directions from her perspective, for example, your right might be her left.

Slide 35. You might need to read receipts, help fill out documents, assist with self-serve items, or provide information in large print, Braille, or electronic formats for individuals with vision disabilities.

Slide 36. Mobility disabilities include conditions that limit a person's strength, stamina, or movement, and affect things like standing, walking, bending, climbing, sitting, reaching, grasping, lifting, et cetera.

Slide 37. Some mobility disabilities are not obvious. For example, a heart condition might limit stamina and affect a person's ability to climb stairs or walk long distances.

The pain and stiffness of arthritis might limit the ability to grasp, hold, or lift objects.

So the reason why we're going through all this with mobility disabilities is because, again, frontline staff, they might not know all this stuff, and the less that you know about a disability, the easier it is to assume something about a customer, so we really want to make sure that they understand that they might not really be able to

see that someone is disabled, and so they shouldn't jump to a conclusion that that person is not disabled.

Slide 38. If you're speaking for more than a moment with a customer who uses a wheelchair, sit down if there is a chair available, or step back a couple paces so he doesn't have to strain his neck to look up at you.

Slide 39. Be aware of accessible paths through your place of business and keep them clear.

If you have service desks and counters that are too high for wheelchair users, be prepared to offer alternatives such as clipboards or lower tables.

Slide 40. Some of these principles also apply to interacting with customers of short stature.

Position yourself in a way that makes it easy for them to look at you, and be sure to work around high desks and counters that might not be usable for them.

Okay. On Slide 41, we transition to service dogs, and we included this in a customer service training resource because we frequently receive calls from people being given a hard time by frontline staff simply because they have a service dog, so as this slide says, many customers with disabilities use service dogs, so knowing a little bit about them will help your customer service.

So slide 42. Now, since we're running out of time, I'm not going to read all of these, I'll just do a brief overview of what's on each slide.

So on Slide 42, we have a list of what service dogs can do, and this was important, again, because there's probably an assumption by a lot of people that service dogs only help people who are blind, so we just want to make sure that frontline staff understand that that's not the only thing that a service dog is doing.

On Slide 43, here we have the service dog rules, so things like don't pet, make sure that they're -- the animal is housebroken and under control.

On Slide 44, we have the always important service dog vs. emotional support animal. Everyone always wants to know about that.

And then on slide 45, we have the two questions that can be asked to determine if the dog is actually a service dog.

Now, you know, I don't know if you want to have your frontline staff questioning customers who come in with service dogs. You know, that's up to you, but just keep in mind that these are the only thing that can be asked, and either frontline staff can do it, or if you don't want them to be doing that, you can have them get you and you can do it yourself.

Okay. Slide 46. Just continuing on with that -- with the previous slide, these are things that you cannot ask for, so a lot of misconceptions about there being documentation of some sort. There's none of that, no documentation. The only questions that you can ask were the two that were on the previous slide.

Okay. Slide 47, and here we have our concluding slide. It says, people with disabilities are eager to receive the services that you provide.

The most important things to remember are: Customers with disabilities should be treated with the same courtesy, patience, and respect as other customers.

Follow the customer's lead when it comes to preferred language, methods of communication, or providing help.

Okay. On Slide 48. Now, so here we have where you can find this training resource, so if you go to [ADAinfo.org](http://ADAinfo.org), right on the Home Page, you will find a link, so you click on the link that says -- I think it says, *Serving Customers with Disabilities: Tools for Success*, so once you click on that, you'll find this training resource right at the top. You'll also see some other resources that we have packaged with it. These are also very useful to have, so we've got quick tips for customer service. Quick tips are always helpful for frontline staff.

We've got a couple documents on service animals. It's a big issue, so reading through those can also be helpful. We have a fact sheet for food service. And for more resources like this, you can visit ADAHospitality.org. That's another website that we operate.

Okay. So that concludes the customer service toolkit. I hope you guys found that helpful and interesting, and please check it out on the website. We think it's -- it will be really helpful for frontline staff, something that's on a basic level but really does give those frontline staff what they need to know.

>> ANN DESCHAMPS: Thank you. Thank you very much, Caleb. That was exceptionally helpful, and thank you, everybody, for joining us.

We encourage you -- you'll be getting an evaluation via email. We encourage you to fill that out and give us feedback. We take that very seriously.

If you have any questions, call or visit us online, Mid-Atlantic ADA Center, a project of TransCen. Our toll free number is 1-800-949-4232. If you dial that anywhere in the country, you'll get connected to the center that serves your state in case you're outside of our region.

Our website is ADAinfo.org, and as I said, we're operated by TransCen, whose mission is meaningful work and community inclusion for people with disabilities.

Thank you again for joining us, and we will see you next time.

(Session concluded at 12:05 p.m. CT)

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