

Inclusive Service Environments

What is an inclusive service environment?

What are the elements of an inclusive service environment?

Does language matter?

Section I: Inclusive Service Environments

Key Words and Terms

Accommodations

Inclusive Service Environment

People First Language

What is an inclusive service environment?

Creating an inclusive service environment is challenging, thought provoking, and rewarding. It is a continuous process, one that evolves and responds to changes in the environment or in policies. It becomes an integral part of all that you do, from kick-offs to celebrations, from recruitment to retention, from policy to practice. It impacts team-building and participant development. It is an integral part of strategic planning and meeting planning. It benefits individuals with disabilities and those without. It guides those who are served and those who serve, those who direct and advise, and those who lead.

An inclusive service environment starts with the actions and attitudes of the individuals who are already in that environment. A program manager who thinks first about what someone can do is sure to be more inclusive than one who thinks about an individual's limitations. A program manager who uses "people first" language is already aware that individuals with physical or mental limitations are people before they are disabled. A program manager who leads by example, who provides training in disability awareness and sensitivity, and who works to ensure equal expectations and contributions will be more successful in creating an inclusive service environment than one who does not.

What are the elements of an inclusive service environment?

An inclusive service environment ensures the respect and dignity of

individuals with disabilities. It does not pry into medical histories or diagnoses, and it guards against the casual exchange of privileged information. It speaks and listens to the individual with a disability. It understands that personal preference in accommodation is often a personal need. It is flexible when necessary.

The built environment — paths, doors, rooms, restrooms, kitchens — of an inclusive service environment meets current accessibility standards to the greatest extent possible. Accessibility is considered when planning events, seeking program or meeting space, and evaluating placement sites. When you move desks or serve refreshments, give consideration to ensuring the continued ability of persons with mobility, hearing, visual, and cognitive disabilities to continue to use the space independently. There are community organizations that can assist you in considering accessibility, as well as numerous guides and checklists.

An inclusive service environment willingly and proactively provides accommodations. When requests are made and questions arise, the individual making the request is asked for clarification first before anyone else. In an inclusive service environment, the first considerations are ensuring access, opportunity, independence, and dignity; not cost or inconvenience.

In an inclusive service environment, persons with disabilities are welcomed and are valued for their contributions as individuals. The presence of a disability is not seen as a detriment. Rather, disability is valued as part of the range of diversity that exists in the human condition. In some cases, a disability can present challenges that allow program staff and participants to grow and to enhance their knowledge and skills. In an inclusive service environment, staff and participants work with the goal of ensuring full inclusion and participation of an individual with a disability. Everyone is aware that excusing an individual from activities (e.g., “It is okay if you don’t come to the meeting

TIP
Ensuring that background noise in meetings is minimized helps everyone at the meeting.

TIP
There should always be a 36-inch wide path to all areas.

because it is in an inaccessible location.”) or denying information (e.g., “Never mind that you cannot hear the training, it is not that important anyway.”) are exclusive actions. In an inclusive service environment, full participation is not the goal — it is the action.

An inclusive service environment understands that every individual is just that — an individual. No two people experience disability in the same way. Two individuals with the same disability may have very different perspectives, attitudes, interests, backgrounds and skills. An inclusive service environment sees individuals, not stereotypes.

TIP
Providing accommodations can assist in full participation in all activities.

Interacting with People with Disabilities — Some Basic Etiquette

- Always be aware of barriers, both permanent and temporary.
- When talking to a person with a disability, speak directly to the person. If there is a companion or interpreter present, always direct your comments to the person with the disability.
- Never assume that a person with a disability needs your assistance. It is always polite to offer your assistance, but once you have offered, wait for a reply before acting. If the person accepts your offer, wait to be directed. Do not be offended if your offer of assistance is not accepted; many persons with disabilities would rather do things for themselves whenever possible.
- Do not assume that a person with a physical disability also has a cognitive disability.
- Never lean on a person's wheelchair. A chair is often considered an extension of the body and leaning on it is the same as leaning directly on the person. If you bump into a person's wheelchair, say, "Excuse me." It's the same as bumping into the person directly. When talking to a person in a wheelchair, try to sit so that you are at eye level.
- When interacting with a person who has difficulty with attention or short-term memory, face the person and maintain eye contact. Use short sentences and give instructions in increments.
- Assistive devices (canes, crutches, wheelchairs, walkers, communication boards, etc.) should be respected as extensions of the person or as personal property. Do not move or play with them without permission from the user.
- When talking with a person who is blind or has a visual impairment, always identify yourself at the beginning of the conversation and remember to inform the person when you are ending the conversation, changing location, or leaving the area. Never hold the person's arm while walking; let her hold your arm. This will allow her to walk slightly behind you and get a sense of what to expect from the motion of your body. Ask if the person would like verbal cues as to what is ahead when you approach steps, curbs, or other barriers.

- Never pet or call to a service animal when the animal is in a harness. The harness tells the animal that it is time to work and its attention needs to be focused on its master. When the animal is at rest or out of harness, you may ask the owner for permission to pet it.
- When talking with an adult with a cognitive or psychiatric disability, do not speak as you would to a child. Use age-appropriate language and mannerisms. Also, do not assume that because a person may not speak, that they are unable to understand or hear you.
- When talking with a person with a psychiatric disability, make eye contact and be aware of your body language. Be patient and understanding, and speak normally – mental illness does not mean an inability to hear or understand language. It also does not mean that someone will behave inappropriately.
- When speaking with a person who is Deaf or has a hearing loss, always look directly at the person. Keep your mouth and face free of hands or shadows. Do not speak with exaggerated slowness or with exaggerated facial expressions. As is proper telephone etiquette with all persons, speak clearly and distinctly when leaving voice mail messages. Also, do not shout; an increase in volume may actually make it more difficult for the person to understand you.
- If you are speaking with a person with impaired speech, listen carefully and repeat what you've heard. Don't pretend to understand if you don't, and don't give up and say, "Never mind, it wasn't important." That tells the person you're talking to that you don't value his input enough to continue the conversation. Also allow more time for a conversation with a person with a speech impairment; do not rush him or try to finish his sentences.
- Fear is one of the main reasons why we are reluctant to interact with people with disabilities – do not let fear of making a mistake, fear of saying the wrong thing, or fear of the unknown make you reluctant to interact with people with disabilities. The greatest mistake we can make is to exclude people with disabilities because of those fears. If you make a mistake, acknowledge it, apologize, and move on.