

# Disability Sensitivity at the Polls

## California Secretary of State

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The rules of etiquette and good manners apply when working with every voter who enters a polling place. In addition, the following guidance may be helpful when working with people with disabilities.

### Meeting a Person With a Disability

- **Greet everyone with a smile, eye contact, and a spoken greeting.** Some people are uncomfortable with handshaking or physical contact. Be respectful of personal boundaries. Likewise, if someone offers you a handshake, feel free to accept it.
- **Speak directly to a person with a disability,** not just to others accompanying a person.
- **Offer assistance, but do not insist on providing it.** It is best to ask all voters if they need assistance or would like to use an accessible voting system, instead of assuming who may or may not have a disability. Always ask how you may best assist before acting, wait until the offer is accepted, and then listen or ask for instructions. It is unsafe to grab a walker, white cane, or other aid without permission.
- **Don't ask about or mention a person's disability** unless he or she talks about it or it is relevant to the conversation. Don't praise someone with a disability for having "overcome" the disability. All voters are equal. Don't patronize or talk down to someone with a disability.
- **Keep your communications simple.** Use plain language (i.e., "May I help you?" rather than "May I assist you?"). Keep sentences short and rephrase or repeat your comments if the voter is not understanding you. Focus on one topic at a time and be sure to allow time for the person to respond. Also, pay attention to the person while you're speaking with them, as they may be using body language to communicate.

### Interacting With a Person Who Uses a Mobility Device (e.g., Wheelchair, Scooter, Cane, etc.)

- **Provide personal space.** The mobility device is part of an individual's personal space. Do not push, lean on, or hold onto a person's mobility device unless the person asks.
- **Maintain a clear path.** Make sure that the path of travel to the check-in tables and voting booths are clear before the polls open and remain clear throughout the day. Reference the polling place accessibility survey and voting area layout.
- **When giving direction to someone using a mobility device,** consider the distance, weather, and physical obstacles such as curbs and stairs the person will encounter. Know where the accessible pathways, restrooms, and water fountains are both in and outside of the building. Reference the polling place accessibility survey.

### Meeting Someone With a Disability That Affects Speech

- **Pay attention, be patient, and wait** for the person to complete a thought and do not try to finish it for them. Ask the person to repeat the thought if you do not understand what they are trying to say.
- **Understand a person may use assistive technology** such as an alphabet board or computer to communicate.

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### Meeting Someone Who is blind or low vision

- **Greetings.** Identify yourself and introduce anyone else who may be with you. Also, don't leave the person without saying you are leaving.
- **Guiding.** If asked to be a sighted guide, place your arm against their hand, or close enough that they can easily find it. Never push or pull someone. Always discuss where you are going and remember to stop at stairs or curbs.
- **Giving verbal directions.** When offering verbal directions, use clear language, such as "to your right, straight in front of you", rather than "over here, or that way".
- **Guide and service animals.** Do not pet or distract a guide or service animal. The animal is responsible for the owner's safety and is working. People who are blind or low vision often use guide or service animals. However, be aware that people with other disabilities may use service animals as well.

### Communicating With Someone Who Is Deaf or Uses an Assistive Hearing Device

- **Let the person take the lead** in establishing which communication method he or she prefers to use (e.g., assistive technology, writing on a piece of paper).
- **Talk directly to the person** even if a sign language interpreter is present. If the person lip reads, face him or her directly and speak at a moderate pace. For some people, it also may help to simplify sentences and use more body expressions.

### Use Appropriate Language

- Instead of disabled person, handicapped, or crippled, say **person with a disability**
- Instead of an able-bodied person, say **person without a disability**
- Instead of mentally retarded, retard, slow, or special, say **person with an intellectual or developmental disability**
- Instead of the blind, say **person who is blind or low vision**
- Instead of hearing-impaired, deaf, dumb, or mute, say **person who is hard of hearing or a person who is deaf**
- Instead of a victim of, suffers from, or afflicted with (a condition), say **person who has a disability, uses a wheelchair, is blind, or is deaf, etc.**
- Instead of epileptic, say **person with epilepsy**
- Instead of a Down's person or Mongoloid, say **person with Down Syndrome**