

# Serving Customers with Disabilities: Restaurant Staff Guide

More than 1 in 4 (27%) of Americans report living with at least one disability. It is common, and sometimes not obvious or visible. Below are some tips to help serve your restaurant customers with disabilities.

**Never assume someone with a disability needs help, and ask them how they would like to be helped.**



People with disabilities are the experts on their own disability and needs.

## How to talk about disability:



**Use**

Disability

**Why?**

Disability is not a bad word! Use disability rather than special needs or differently abled.

**Use**

Accessible

**Why?**

Handicap is an outdated, derogatory term. Instead, use accessible bathroom or accessible parking space.

**Use**

Intellectual, Developmental, or Cognitive Disability; Neurodiverse

**Why?**

Mentally challenged or retarded are outdated, derogatory terms.

**Use**

Deaf or deaf  
Hard of Hearing

**Why?**

Some parents may use the term 'hearing impaired'. Many who are part of the community prefer 'deaf' or 'Deaf', since 'impaired' can be negative.

## Service Animals



Recognized by the ADA. You may only ask:

1. Is this a service animal required because of a disability?
2. What task is the service animal trained to perform?



# Tips for Serving Customers with Disabilities

## Customers Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing



- Use **writing notes, notes app, speaking, lip reading, or using sign language** to communicate
  - Allow the individual to tell you their preference
- **Write down information**– Specials, List of salad dressing choices, side choices, etc.
- Make sure the person can **see your face and mouth**
- Noisy environments may make it hard for people to hear if they are using assistive devices

## Customers Who Are Blind or Low Vision



- **Introduce yourself** and your role
- **Wayfinding**: Offer your elbow and provide verbal directions as you navigate
- **Read writing out loud** and **assist with paying bills as needed**
- **Use clock cues** when placing items on the table– “Your water is at 12 o’clock”
- **Update your website** with current information in HTML or Word document - no PDF’s

## Customers Who Use Mobility Aids



- **Offer a variety of table heights**
- If requested, **move chairs** to allow a person using a wheelchair to sit at the table
- **Do not touch** an individual’s mobility device
- **Speak directly to the individual**, *not* their companion
- Keep the **path of travel clear** to the restroom or exits, and be aware of **table spacing**

## Customers Who Are Neurodiverse



- **Neurodiverse** individuals think, behave, and interact in a variety of ways. This includes people with Autism, cognitive or intellectual disabilities, and more
- Be an **active listener** and make sure you are understood
- **Write down information** (specials, lists of options, etc.), and **pause between information**
- **Be mindful of sensory input**, such as light, noise, and crowds

## Customers Who Have Mental Health Conditions



- **Never make an assumption** about someone’s mental health
- Use “**I statements**” to express a concern, such as “I hear that you are upset right now, but I am going to fix the problem with your room.”
- **Be direct**: Stick to one topic at a time and communicate in a straightforward manner
- Call, text, or chat 988 (NAMI hotline) if someone is having a mental health crisis

## Resources



[cityofchicago.org/disabilities](https://cityofchicago.org/disabilities)

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