



Breaking Through the Barriers:
A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR SHELTERS
ON REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS



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January 2004

Introduction

This best practices manual and the accompanying resource directory have been created to help administrators and line staff of individual and family shelters to better address the accommodation needs of people with disabilities seeking emergency shelter. It is designed as a field guide, addressing common issues encountered by shelter staff, disability advocates and those seeking shelter. The recommendations contained in each section have been developed within the context of real life situations. They are based on policies and procedures adopted and used by shelter providers involved in the project. While this manual focuses on helping people access emergency shelter, the writers of this manual believe that individuals are certainly better served in their own homes. Our goal will always be housing first, but we recognize that many persons who seek shelter have major health and/or physical access issues. This manual is meant to assist shelter providers and shelter guests with an understanding of some of the resources available and some of the accommodations that may be necessary to better serve the guests. As such, it is hoped that it will provide a practical guide regarding reasonable accommodations for people with a range of medical, physical, sensory and cognitive disability concerns.

The manual has been created by a unique coalition consisting of family and individual shelter providers, representatives from independent living centers, homeless and disability advocacy organizations, legal service providers, community based agencies and state and local government officials. These individuals and agencies were brought together through a common vision of improving access to shelter for people with disabilities and providing shelters with the information and resources needed to help them meet their obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other federal and state laws. Since its inception, members of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless' "Breaking Through The Barriers" coalition have worked to eliminate barriers facing people with disabilities in need of emergency shelter. This manual is just one of the coalition's efforts to address these concerns.

For more information about the project or to become active in these activities contact the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless at (781) 595-7570/(617) 423-9162.



Acknowledgements

This manual has been made possible through the generous contributions of The Boston Foundation, the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission and the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance.

We want to give special thanks to:

- Commissioner Elmer Bartels and the staff of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission for supporting this project in its infancy; and to
- John Wagner, Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, and Tom Noonan, DTA General Counsel, for working collaboratively with the Breaking through the Barriers Coalition over many months to finalize this manual and for distributing this guide to shelter providers throughout the Commonwealth.

A big round of applause and appreciation to the following members of the *Breaking Through The Barriers Coalition* for all the time and energy they contributed to this project. Their efforts were the key to making this manual a reality.

- Brenda Brown, Ad-Lib
- Holly Vernon & Bill Henning, Boston Center for Independent Living
- Barry Boch, Boston Healthcare for the Homeless
- Beth L'Heureux and Carol Fabyan-Takki, Boston Public Health Commission's Homeless Services
- Pam Burkley, Cape Organization for the Rights of the Disabled
- Nancy Crowder, Citizens for Adequate Housing /Inn between Shelter
- Shelley O'Neill Croal, Coughlin & Co. Real Estate
- Jane Alper, Disability Law Center
- Dick Bauer, Greater Boston Legal Services
- Jane Banks, Jessie's House Shelter
- Leslie Lawrence, Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless
- Cathy Burke, Massachusetts Commission for the Blind
- Naomi Goldberg, Massachusetts Office on Disability
- Chris Ragosta, Pine Street Inn
- Lisa Sloane, Sloane Associates/Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
- Elaine Faria, Southeast Center for Independent Living
- Rick Malley and Janet Shaw, Stavros
- Pam Brown, Tri-CAP

We also want to give special recognition to Liz Curtis, social work intern extraordinaire, who helped to write this manual and basically kept the rest of us on track.

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PROVIDING REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS



The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires that people who have a disability have the same right to services as people without a disability. Sometimes in order to access programs and services, a person with a disability may need a reasonable accommodation, a change to the shelter's policies or procedures. This section provides examples of reasonable accommodations and how shelters can provide them.

What do shelters have to do under state and federal laws?

Under the ADA regulations, people with disabilities are entitled to "reasonable accommodation." A reasonable accommodation is a modification to rules, policies and procedures to help people with various types of disabilities access or use services.

For example, policy at an individual shelter may require guests to be out of the shelter by 9:00 am. A person with a physical disability may request additional time as a reasonable accommodation because it takes that individual longer to eat and use the facilities. In a family shelter, a person with a severe respiratory disability may request being assigned to jobs that are not problematic for her disability.

Shelters are only required to provide accommodations that are "reasonable." Accommodations are considered "reasonable" if they do not change the "fundamental nature" of the program and/or are not administratively or financially burdensome. For example, if a shelter is located within an old building that only has stairwells and narrow hallways, cost may prevent the shelter from changing all of the interior architecture to become more accessible for people with wheelchairs. An example of a reasonable accommodation in this shelter might be permitting a guest who uses a wheelchair to conduct meetings with caseworkers in an alternate room with a wide entranceway.

Do I have to notify guests about their right to make an accommodation request?

Yes. It is up to the program to let everyone they serve know that they can ask for certain accommodations if they have a disability that makes it hard to participate in any program or service without one. This notification should be easily seen and read, and offered in more than one format, such as verbally and in large print and/or Braille or sign language.

How do I know if a guest needs an accommodation?

In most instances, a guest will let shelter staff know when he needs an accommodation. Even if a guest does not request an accommodation, if you have reason to believe that the guest has a disability and may need an accommodation, it is good practice to notify the guest that your program makes reasonable accommodations in appropriate cases and give the guest a chance to request an accommodation.

It is a good practice to give all guests the chance to disclose the fact that they have a disability and might require an accommodation. An easy and appropriate way to do this is explaining to all new guests what reasonable accommodations are and the shelter's obligation to provide them. This can be done during a formal intake procedure. Shelters that do not have a formal intake process have found it useful to pay attention to who is new in the shelter and make a special effort to speak with them to ask if they might need help or other accommodations to make full use of their services. As a follow up to providing information about accommodations, shelter staff can ask all incoming guests if they need an accommodation for any reason. All guests should be asked the same questions and given the same opportunity to disclose a disability.

Some general questions that can be asked of shelter guests to determine if an accommodation is needed include:

- Is there anything we might provide to help you be part of our programs and services?
- Would you like to share anything about yourself that might help us serve you better?
- We offer a variety of services to ensure equal access to our programs and services. Is there anything we can do to help you have access to them?

It is usually not appropriate to ask an individual specific questions about his or her disability such as asking what the disability is or what medications someone is taking unless additional information is necessary to be able to provide an appropriate reasonable accommodation. If the individual chooses to disclose this information to the shelter, it should be kept confidential.

Some people have undiagnosed disabilities, and the disability itself acts as a barrier to self-disclosing. Therefore, it is a very good idea for shelter staff members to make an effort to observe guests' behaviors. If you suspect someone needs an accommodation, it is good practice to simply offer it even if the person has not asked for one.

Should the shelter have a formal process for filing accommodation requests?

Yes, it is good practice for each shelter to have a specific process for addressing ADA accommodation requests, so the procedure is widely known and used.

Shelters should address any accommodation request whether it is verbal or written. It is a good idea for shelters to provide a way for guests to file written requests for disability-related accommodations. This can provide an opportunity to keep track of when the request was made, and how the shelter responded. It would be helpful for any forms to be written simply and clearly and in various formats so guests will use them even if they do not know that they are making a request under the ADA.

Once a request is made, staff members can inform a supervisor that a guest has asked for an accommodation. Supervisors can then decide whether and how to make the requested accommodation.

What if I believe a guest needs an accommodation but has not asked for one?

It is generally up to the person with the disability to ask for an accommodation, and to let programs know which accommodations, or changes in procedures, work for them individually. However, shelters should offer a reasonable accommodation if staff has reason to believe the person has a disability, even if the guest has not requested an accommodation.

What if the behavior requiring the accommodation is problematic?

Not every problem or behavior can be acceptable in a shelter setting, but many problems have explanations and solutions. It is important to consider that people with disabilities requesting shelter have no other options, so shelter denials are serious problems to be avoided whenever possible. Even with a list of resources, it can be hard to solve every problem, however, some attempts need to be made to avoid immediate denials.

Does a guest have the right to file a complaint if an accommodation is not provided?

Yes, guests have the right to file complaints if a reasonable accommodation is not provided.

A good practice for handling complaints about accommodations is to follow the shelter's internal grievance procedure. These procedures should be posted in areas of the shelter where guests can easily see them, and should be provided in alternate formats, such as audio, large-print, or Braille.

Shelters can also designate a staff member as being responsible for guest complaints. The designated person can then assist any guest in making a formal complaint about an accommodation and make sure that the proper procedures are followed.

If the shelter decides to deny a request for an accommodation, the guest should be advised that they have the right to call the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to file a complaint and to be assisted in doing so if requested. For family shelters, guests may also be able to file a grievance that the placement itself is a problem and another more accessible placement should be found. Shelter staff should be aware of this option, but attempt to make accommodations in their shelter before a client is relocated or while a guest is waiting for a new placement. Families placed in shelter by DTA may also have a right to a fair hearing regarding the type of shelter placement or DTA's termination of their shelter benefits if the shelter cannot or did not provide a needed accommodation.

It is a good idea to post DTA's phone number in a place that is easily noticeable if it has not already been done.

It is good practice for shelter staff to inform all guests about the grievance process when they enter the shelter.

If someone did not identify himself as a person with a disability or did not ask for any accommodations when he arrived at the shelter, do I have to provide one if asked for it later on during his stay?

People can ask for an accommodation at any time during their stay at a shelter, so shelters must be willing to consider requests regardless of when they are presented.

Does a shelter have to provide the requested accommodation regardless of cost or difficulty?

No, the shelter is only required to provide accommodations that are reasonable. Accommodations are not reasonable if they fundamentally alter the nature of the program or are an undue financial or administrative burden.

Whether a requested accommodation is reasonable must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. For example, installing a roll-in shower might be reasonable for a shelter with a very large budget and/or access to outside funds for rehabilitation but might not be reasonable for a small shelter with a small budget and no access to outside funds. Shelter staff providing personal care assistance for a guest would generally be considered a fundamental alteration to a shelter program and therefore would not be considered a reasonable accommodation.

How should I respond if another shelter guest asks why someone is getting special treatment?

Remember, you should never tell other guests that an individual has a disability or provide any information about a person's disability. It is good practice when faced with such questions to explain that sometimes accommodations are made for various reasons and that each guest's personal situation is confidential and that you cannot discuss another guest's situation. However, if he feels that his own needs are not being met by the program, the two of you can discuss the situation and possible accommodations.

SAFETY AND SECURITY



While the safety and security of guests with disabilities can be a real concern, it is important to ensure that shelter access is not denied based upon inaccurate beliefs about risks. There are many ways to ensure a guest's safety and remain in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and other requirements under state and federal laws.

What do shelters have to do under state and federal laws?

Shelters cannot deny access based solely on a person's disability. Safety concerns must be based on actual risks, not on stereotypes or assumptions about people with disabilities. For example, the shelter should not assume a person with a mobility disability will not be able to exit safely in the event of fire.

If your shelter provides an intake process, you should assess guests to determine if they might need an accommodation for safety. If you do not do intakes, you should be aware of new guests, and attempt to assess whether they might need an accommodation to ensure safety.

All staff should be aware of the shelter's evacuation plan and any other safety-related plans.

How do I ensure the safe evacuation of people with mobility and other disabilities in the case of a fire or other emergency?

When guests arrive at the shelter, an informal assessment can be made to determine whether they might require an accommodation or if they might have trouble evacuating the shelter in an emergency. Even when a resident has a condition that may or may not meet the definition of a disability (e.g. individuals who are unsteady or intoxicated), the shelter should anticipate the need for an immediate evacuation. Other examples of people who might need extra help include those who use wheelchairs, have trouble seeing or hearing, or have a cognitive disability.

Some accommodations that can be made for people who may have difficulty evacuating in an emergency include:

- Keeping track of people's bed or room numbers so they can be easily found and assisted in an emergency.
- Assigning people who may have difficulty evacuating to beds or rooms near exits or staff members.
- Reviewing your shelter's evacuation plan, and making adjustments if necessary to ensure that people with disabilities are included in the plan.
- Designating staff to assist individuals who have been identified as needing assistance.

Fire departments often recommend that people in wheelchairs gather in one area and wait to be rescued by the fire department. Contact your local fire department for specific suggestions, and to help you develop the best plan.

How do I keep guests safe who may be at risk of being taken advantage of?

Some guests, because of cognitive or other barriers, may be more at risk of being taken advantage of by other guests. Steps you can take to provide a safer environment include:

- Assigning at-risk people to beds or rooms near a staff person.
- Designating a bed or room to be used in these situations and making sure all staff know to keep a more watchful eye over people assigned to them.

What should I do if there is a guest who is HIV-positive?

Individuals who are HIV-positive and people living with AIDS are protected under the same state and federal laws that require shelters to make all programs and services accessible. One should assume any guest or staff person has a potentially communicable disease, and use precautions to protect others. No one should be refused shelter based on his or her HIV status

There are some easy ways to prevent HIV infection. Staff and guests are always encouraged to use universal precautions to protect all staff and all guests from ALL communicable diseases. Guests should never use a toothbrush, razor or syringe used by someone else. When cleaning up blood or other bodily fluids staff should always use latex gloves and bleach. People with latex allergies can use polyurethane gloves to protect themselves from transmission.

Please refer to the MEDICAL NEEDS section of this manual for additional suggestions on how to help guests with medical conditions.

PHYSICAL ACCESS



According to the Americans with Disabilities Act and other state and federal laws, people with physical disabilities must have equal access to services and programs. In some cases this requires that physical modifications be made to provide access for people with physical disabilities.

What do shelters have to do under state and federal laws?

A shelter that receives public funds must take steps to ensure that its programs and activities, when viewed as a whole, are accessible to people with disabilities unless the shelter can show that providing access would impose an undue burden or fundamentally change the nature of the program offered by the shelter. A shelter can provide access in a number of different ways: for example, by making structural changes, by relocating a program to an accessible location, or by providing an aide to assist a person with a disability in accessing the program.

If a shelter cannot provide access without causing an undue burden or fundamental alteration, the shelter should help find an alternate accessible shelter and assist the guest to get into that program. No one should be turned away because the shelter is not accessible.

What parts of the shelter need to be physically accessible?

People with disabilities must be able to participate in the range of shelter programs and services offered by the shelter. Shelters that receive state and federal money should be accessible. If they are not, they should be working toward accessibility. Some essential aspects of a shelter should be the focus of initial accommodations. For example, people need to be able to get in and out of the shelter, sleep, eat, toilet, bathe, and use any services and programs.

What can I do to make the entrance, bedrooms, bathrooms, and dining areas more accessible?

To determine your shelter's accessibility call your local Independent Living Center (ILC), or the Massachusetts Office on Disability to identify an access expert who can walk through your shelter with you.

Areas can be made more accessible in a variety of ways, such as:

- Removing barriers such as furniture, decorative features or other items from doorways and hallways to widen the path of travel.
- Installing ramps to fit over a small number of steps or acquiring/renting portable modular ramps.
- Adding railings to steps and adding grab bars to toilet and shower areas.
- Replacing or modifying the height of dining tables to provide enough room to fit a wheelchair.

- Relocating services to an accessible area, for example, holding meetings in an accessible room.
- Ensuring that bath and kitchen items are accessible, for example, storing bath towels or dining utensils on lower shelves.

Please refer to the accompanying resource directory for information about available services or where to purchase products.

What if my shelter is not physically accessible at all?

State and federal laws require most shelters to become accessible. If a person requests shelter and your shelter cannot accommodate that request, the shelter has the responsibility to provide the person with an alternative (potentially including transportation to an alternative site). This is likely to involve working with DTA, Independent Living Centers or other community organizations.

My shelter is physically accessible, but many programs take place in inaccessible areas. What should I do?

If physical access is a barrier to programs or services, shelters must find other ways of accommodating people with disabilities. For example, provide case management in a room that is wheelchair accessible when the normal meeting space is inaccessible.

MEDICAL NEEDS



Sometimes people arrive at shelters with medical needs that staff might not know how to deal with. Some common medical issues include environmental allergies, the need for a personal care attendant, the need for nebulizers or c-paps or bi-paps¹, the need for syringes or medications, and the need for very clean environments. People with disabilities who have medical symptoms have an equal right to shelter and may need reasonable accommodations to shelter policies or practices to participate fully.

What do shelters have to do under state and federal laws?

People with disabilities who have medical symptoms are protected by state and federal nondiscrimination laws. Shelter staff are not required to provide medical or personal care to guests, but are required to provide reasonable accommodations to enable persons to participate in the program.

For example, guests who need to take medically prescribed controlled substances or use syringes to take medication will need an accommodation to any shelter policies prohibiting the use of needles or certain medications at the shelter. Accommodations such as locking syringes and medications in a secure place while not being used would be considered a reasonable accommodation.

General tips to making accommodations for shelter guests with medical needs

- It is good practice to ask new guests if there are any accommodations that they might need to allow them full access to programs and services.
- When deciding how to accommodate a guest's medical needs, it is important to base your decision on the individual's specific circumstances and not just on the presence of a specific medical condition. Individuals with similar conditions may need different types or levels of accommodations based on their skills and experiences.
- Work with Health Care for the Homeless, Independent Living Centers, hospitals, and other health care organizations to gain information about how best to make programs and services accessible for people with medical needs.
- If a guest needs medical or personal care that staff cannot reasonably provide, the situation can be discussed with the guest to find out how he might best be assisted and accommodated. The guest should be asked about his preferences and whether he would like help putting the necessary services - such as a PCA - in place or making arrangements to transfer to another type of placement.

How can I help someone who needs a breathing apparatus, such as a nebulizer or oxygen tank?

Some shelters have concerns about the safety of using oxygen tanks. One way to avoid risk is to not allow smoking in the shelter or to set aside a separate room to accommodate guests who must have

¹ C-Pap and Bi-Pap machines are used for people who have a history of sleep apnea. The C-Pap (continuous positive airway pressure) and Bi-Pap (bi-level positive airway pressure) machines create a pressure which counters sleep apnea. The machines run on electricity and use room air as opposed to oxygen. The machines can be somewhat noisy roughly similar to an air conditioner.

access to oxygen tanks. People who use oxygen tanks should be separated from smoke for many reasons.

Shelters have accommodated people who need access to c-paps or bi-paps (used for treating sleep apnea) by assigning them to beds that are next to electrical outlets or providing alternate sleeping areas if there are no shelter beds near electrical connections.

Shelters have accommodated guests who only need access to nebulizers or other breathing devices at various times during the day or evening by setting aside an office or other room in which an apparatus can be set up and used as needed.

What is a Personal Care Attendant (PCA), and how can I help someone who needs PCA services?

Individuals with physical disabilities that limit mobility sometimes have personal care attendants (PCAs) to help them with daily activities, such as bathing, eating, and toileting. While shelter staff are not required to perform these activities for a guest, the shelter must provide reasonable accommodations.

Examples of reasonable accommodations shelters have made include:

- Allowing shelter access to PCA's so they can help the person with disabilities who hired them.
- Allowing guests with PCA needs more time to bathe, toilet, dress, and eat.
- Allowing guests with PCA needs to stay inside during the day.

Shelters can also work with local Independent Living Centers to find PCA help for a guest with such service needs. PCA services can also be obtained from the local Visiting Nurse Association (VNA). It would be wise to establish a relationship with the local home health providers (such as the VNA) prior to making urgent requests for assistance.

If a PCA does not show up to provide care for a guest with such needs and a replacement PCA cannot be found, shelters could ask the guest if he or she would like to remain in the shelter without assistance for toileting, bathing, dressing, or if he or she would like help finding a different placement. It is important for shelters to involve guests in the decision-making process. The person with the disability is usually best able to make decisions about his or her particular physical needs.

When someone needs more medical support or personal care than the shelter is capable of providing some shelters have allowed that person to enter the shelter while staff members try to find an appropriate placement to meet his or her needs.

How do I keep the shelter a safe place when a guest requires syringes or medically prescribed, controlled substances for prescribed medical reasons?

People with disabilities who need medically prescribed, controlled substances and prescribed medical syringes have an equal right to access shelter programs and services. Some guests might have disabilities that require them to use syringes to remain healthy. The most common example is diabetes, which often requires individuals to take regular shots of insulin so they do not become ill.

One way shelters have accommodated individuals with these medical needs has been to insist that all medications and medical syringes are locked in a safe place where only staff have access. This is appropriate as long as guests have access when needed. Please refer to the Appendix for a sample policy regarding the medical use of syringes in shelters.

How can I help a guest who has allergies or multiple chemical sensitivity disorder?

If a guest has a disability that makes them extremely sensitive to chemicals or other substances found in the environment, shelters must make accommodations to protect the guest's health and allow access to programs and services. Shelters have done a number of things in order to accommodate guests with allergies or multiple chemical sensitivity disorder, such as:

- Asking staff to not wear perfume or aftershave lotion.
- Removing carpets when possible to lessen dust, dirt, and other irritants.
- Preventing smoking in the shelter or limiting areas where smoking can take place.
- Making sure the individual is out of the room when cleaning.
- Releasing the individual from chores or substituting other activities, or using cleaning products that do not trigger symptoms.
- Allowing bed changes when someone's allergies or chemical sensitivity makes it difficult for the guest to sleep in a certain bed.

Shelters should make an effort to accommodate guests who have allergies or multiple chemical sensitivity disorder; however, some shelters might not be appropriate for individuals with such disabilities. In this case, you should work with guests and DTA to find more appropriate placements.

How can I help a guest who is HIV-positive or living with AIDS?

Individuals who are HIV-positive and people living with AIDS are protected under the same state and federal laws that require shelters to make all programs and services accessible. Shelters cannot deny access to the shelter or its programs or services based solely on a person's HIV status.

There are some easy ways to prevent the spread of HIV. Shelter staff and guests should take universal precautions to prevent HIV infection. For example, guests should not share personal items, such as razors and toothbrushes, and shelter staff should use latex or polyurethane gloves and bleach in the case of an injury or accident which results in bodily fluid exposure or spill.

Refer to your shelter's policies on HIV safety and how to assist guests who are HIV positive or living with AIDS. Ask your supervisor where to locate these policies.

How can I help a guest who needs a very clean environment?

There are several medical conditions that might require a person to be in a very clean environment and/or to have limited exposure to large numbers of people. Some of these include recent amputees and individuals undergoing chemotherapy.

Shelters have accommodated guests with this type of medical need by:

- Asking local hospitals to extend patients' stay.
- Allowing people to remain inside during the day.
- Providing the guest with a separate room if possible.
- Allowing the guest to wash sheets, towels, and dishware separately each day if possible.

If the shelter has difficulty providing the necessary environment and/or limiting the guest's exposure to large numbers of people, the staff should try to make as many accommodations as possible until the guest can be transferred to a more appropriate facility.

COMMUNICATION ACCESS



Certain disabilities affect communication. Some of these disabilities include: visual, hearing, cognitive and speech disabilities. Sometimes these communication disabilities may cause an individual to have difficulty understanding rules or accessing all programs and services. There are many ways to accommodate people with these types of disabilities so that guests' needs and shelter needs are met.

What do shelters have to do under state and federal laws?

All programs and services must be accessible for people with communication disabilities. If some programs and services are not accessible, reasonable accommodations must be made. For example, a shelter's use of written information might not be accessible to people with visual disabilities. Verbal communication, such as reading the shelter rules to a new guest, might be an appropriate accommodation.

Sometimes it will be difficult to know if someone has a communication disability. Individuals with disabilities of this nature might be reluctant, or unable, to self-disclose to shelter staff. Therefore, it is good practice for shelters to offer reasonable accommodations to everyone. For example, upon entrance into the shelter, staff could read over and explain rules and procedures to all new guests and ask if there is an accommodation they might need. People who are deaf or hard of hearing might be able to communicate with pen and paper to some extent. Sign language interpreters can be used for the initial sign in or for any important meetings during a shelter stay.

How do I know if someone has difficulty communicating?

When people enter your shelter for the first time you can respectfully ask some questions that could help you know who might need a communication accommodation. For example, you can say:

- Lots of important information here is provided in writing. Will that be effective for you?
- Do other ways of communicating information work better for you?

Larger shelters often do not have a formal intake procedure, which makes it difficult to ask these questions. Some practices used by some of the larger shelters include:

- Making a point to try to communicate with new guests that staff do not know, and trying to find out if they have any accommodation needs.
- Sharing any concerns about access issues with other staff.

Your observations are important. If someone takes longer to do things, seems very confused or is not following directions you should carefully look into the cause of these behaviors to see if a reasonable accommodation is needed.

What types of difficulties might people with communication and or visual disabilities encounter, and how can shelters help them?

People with **visual and cognitive difficulties** might not be able to read printed information such as shelter rules, or chore schedules, though, some people with visual disabilities can read things that are printed in large print. Others require spoken information or special type such as Braille. Some of the good policies used by shelters include:

- Printing all documents in a font of 18 point or higher, or having large-print versions available. (Items can be enlarged on your copy machine)
- Using audiotape versions of written materials.
- Providing telephones with large numbers.
- Reading important written information such as shelter rules to all guests.

People with **hearing loss** might have difficulty understanding what you are trying to tell them or difficulty telling you something. Some people with hearing loss communicate in writing. Some people use sign language. Some people who use sign language also know and can read English; others cannot. Some good practices used by shelters include:

- Providing interpreters for guests with hearing loss for any important discussions, for example, during a termination proceeding.
- Accommodating individuals with hearing loss during routine communication by using simple, clearly written notes.
- Keeping communication equipment in the shelter, such as TTY machines and microphones for use during meetings and giving guests access to TTYs to make calls on their own behalf.
- Using a computer to assist with communication or allowing guests to use a computer to speak and connect with outside agencies or individuals.
- Using a buddy system, staff assistance, bed shaker, or alarm equipment to alert a person with severe hearing loss to an emergency.

People with **cognitive disabilities**, such as learning disabilities, mental retardation and head injuries, might have difficulty understanding or need more time to learn what you are trying to communicate to them. They also might have difficulty communicating something that they need to others. Some good practices used by shelters include:

- Keeping language simple.
- Using pictures to replace text.
- Presenting information in a variety of ways over a period of time to see what works best.
- Reading all important directions and rules to shelter guests.

Individuals with **speech disabilities** might have difficulty expressing themselves in as clear a manner as they wish. Staff might have trouble understanding what some guests are trying to say. For example, if a staff member is asking a person to answer some questions, the staff member might not think they are getting the answers they need. Some good practices used by shelters in such situations include:

- Asking the guest to repeat what was said.
- Repeating what you understood the guest to be saying and asking if you are correct.
- Asking the guest to write down or spell out what they are saying.

If you think you are having difficulty talking with a guest, ask that guest if he or she would like to try communicating in another way.

What if I cannot provide exactly what the guest needs to communicate effectively?

The most important thing to remember is that while you try to get the appropriate tools to help communication, do your best to accommodate the person and to help the guest access the programs and services available at your shelter. For example, this might mean writing notes and pointing at objects until a sign language interpreter can be found.

Where can I get help communicating more effectively with guests?

Please refer to the accompanying resource directory for information about available services.

MAKING EXCEPTIONS TO RULES AND PROCEDURES



In order to operate a safe and peaceful environment, family and individual shelters generally have a set of specific rules and procedures in place, which provide a guideline for behaviors and expectations of the residents. Implementing these procedures consistently is important so that consumers feel that they are being treated equally, fairly and without bias or favoritism.

However, it is important to evaluate when a rule is unnecessarily creating a hardship that could prohibit a person from participating and receiving needed services in the program. Sometimes the effort to be a bit creative and willing to make adaptations may make the difference in whether an individual or family receives critically needed shelter services and eventually moves to permanent housing.

Sometimes people display difficult behaviors or have trouble following shelter rules because of a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability. It is important for shelter staff to fully assess the reason for the behavior, and make special accommodations for individuals when appropriate. There are some easy guidelines to follow to make sure that people with disabilities have access to shelter while not infringing on the rights of other guests.

What do shelters have to do under state and federal laws?

Shelters must make reasonable accommodations in policies, practices, and procedures when necessary to make sure individuals whose disabilities cause them to display difficult behaviors have equal access to all programs and services.

If a guest is displaying behaviors that the shelter feels are problematic, staff should ask the guest to stop the behavior, and explain what will happen if the behavior does not stop. Staff should speak with supervisors and other professionals to determine if the behavior is related to a disability. Staff should then determine if an accommodation could be made to reduce the problem behavior. If the shelter finds it cannot make an accommodation, other shelters should be sought that can better address the person's needs.

Case Example: A male resident of a large individual shelter was repeatedly given instructions by a staff member, but he consistently performed only one part of the task. He became agitated and angry when asked why he was not following directions. After an assessment, the staff member realized that the guest was not purposely breaking the rules. The man had cognitive disabilities that made it difficult for him to follow more than one-step directions at a time. The staff made adjustments by asking him to complete only one part of a task at a time.

What should I do if a person is refusing to abide by the shelter’s rules or is displaying disruptive or aggressive behavior?

Discuss the behavior with the guest. Explain what will happen if the shelter’s rules are not followed.

Work with your supervisor or healthcare professional to try to find out why the person is behaving in that way, and if it could be caused by a disability. If possible, offer the guest a referral to a mental health professional for an assessment of the behavior.

If the failure to comply with the rules is due to a mental health, cognitive or other disability, reasonable accommodations should be made whenever possible. Staff should try to determine what the barrier may be to the guest being able to comply with the expectation. It may be as simple as providing the instructions in writing, reducing the number of tasks, switching one type of house chore for another that the client is able to accomplish or allowing additional time for the person to complete the task. Family shelters may even need to raise these concerns with the Department of Transitional Assistance and advocate with DTA to provide reasonable accommodations with respect to specific DTA rules.

Case example: A female guest of a family shelter was not completing the necessary daily tasks that were part of the shelter rules. The woman stated that she had forgotten, and complained that she was often tired. After an assessment by a health care professional, the shelter staff realized that the woman had chronic fatigue syndrome, which was making it hard for her to comply with all of the shelter rules. The staff accommodated the woman by reducing the number of tasks she had to complete each day, and reminding her when it was time to do chores.

The following chart provides examples of situations in which a problematic behavior may be disability related, and if so, suggestions for how a shelter can address the issue.

Problem	Possible Causes	Possible Solutions
A guest does not follow rules and/or ignores staff.	The guest does not understand the rules, or cannot read the rules. The guest might have hearing or vision loss.	Try explaining things in simple, short sentences. Use quiet, calm gestures to help describe what you are saying.
A guest seems to be clean and sober but has trouble walking and talking.	The guest may have a disability that affects balance or muscle control. The guest may have had an injury to the brain.	If the person does not seem dangerous to anyone, he or she can be offered some assistance such as being assigned a bed near a staff member or the bathroom. Ask the guest if he or she would like assistance carrying food trays. Allow extra time for chores and responsibilities.

Problem	Possible Causes	Possible Solutions
The shelter guest seems excited and repeats demands or requests from others in a loud or upset manner.	Some disabilities, such as brain injuries, autism, or Alzheimer's make it easier to get upset over changes in routines.	Calmly ask the guest to speak in a quieter voice and explain what will happen ahead of time to limit confusion. Avoid arguing with people with memory loss, as it may make them more confused and more agitated. Written instructions are easier for some people to understand.
A guest is speaking very loudly or very quietly, but is insisting on staff's attention	The guest may have hearing loss and might need to get or give information.	If the person does not seem dangerous, try using a pen and paper to communicate. Assign a person to notify guests with hearing loss of special events or unexpected dangers. Provide strobe lights flashers (that go off with smoke alarms) to alert someone with hearing loss to a fire. Provide a TTY phone or internet attached computer to allow guests with hearing loss access to outside resources.
A guest in a wheelchair will not move to the toilet or a bed. He or she refuses to accept help from shelter staff to get into a bed or bathroom.	The distance from the wheelchair to the bed or toilet may be too high or low and the guest might be afraid of falling. The guest might be concerned that being out of the wheelchair will make movement impossible. Sometimes people are safer staying in wheelchairs than risking a fall or even a sore that will not heal well.	Staff can trust the decisions of most people who use wheelchairs - they know their bodies best. Some people with wheelchairs do not need a toilet to go to the bathroom. Staff can set aside a secluded area so guests can have privacy for hygiene tasks. The guest who has a disability is often the best person to answer any questions you have about what types of accommodations may work best for them.

Please Note: A shelter must be mindful of situations that could unreasonably jeopardize the health or safety of other shelter residents.

Sometimes a guest would be better accommodated in a different type of shelter.

Some people may have an easier time managing their behaviors in different kinds of shelters. A person may have difficulty behaving well in a large shelter because of the stress of living with so many strangers. In cases such as this, it may be better to help the individual to obtain shelter in a smaller setting. Families who are experiencing behavioral problems, such as a child with disruptive attention deficit disorder, may do better in a scattered site shelter than in a congregate shelter.

The goal should always be to identify creative ways that a client may be served and provided shelter. Some areas, such as Boston, have access to resources that provide behavioral assessments. In Boston, the Department of Mental Health can do assessments of behaviors and how they might relate to disabilities.

Please refer to the accompanying resource directory for information about available services.

Appendix A: Sample Protocols

- HEALTH CARE BED PROTOCOL
- NEBULIZER PROTOCOL
- SYRINGE POLICY AND PROTOCOL

Appendix B:

**PROVIDING EFFECTIVE
COMMUNICATION**

Appendix C:

**COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE
WITH DISABILITIES**