Meeting Accessibility 101

Why is Meeting Accessibility Important?

Accessible meetings help ensure that all community partners, community members, and employees at the State of Vermont have access to public health information. As state employees, we have an obligation to make our meetings accessible.

How agencies gather and collaborate has shifted over time from in-person meetings to virtual meetings. We should now expect to host a hybrid of in-person and remote participants. Accessibility should be a central focus and thoughtfully integrated into each meeting.

> 🔑 People with disabilities are not obligated to share their medical history or diagnosis for their needs to be respected and met. With over 24% of Vermonters having a disability, it's safe to say that there are disabled people attending our meetings throughout the state.

Image from Section508.gov

Vocabulary: accommodation ≠ accessibility

- **Accommodation** is for individuals and are **reactive**. **Accessibility** is for populations and is **proactive**.

- Accessibility is to make content **available to all**, in equally effective ways, at the same time.

- **Access needs** are the things we need to be able to access a particular space or activity. **All people have access needs, not just people who have a disability.** Some people's access needs are met more easily than others due to society's inherent defaults or norms.

- **Accessibility is the goal.** Accommodations are the tools we use to meet people's access needs and achieve accessibility.

> 🔑 Learning about accessibility can be overwhelming. It's important to remember that you may never reach "100% accessibility." That's okay!
>
> Access is all about human-centered design. Everyone's bodies and brains are different in what they need to succeed.

Goals for Accessible Meetings:

- **Communicate effectively**: Communicate with participants about their access needs by asking for and adapting to feedback before, during, and after the meeting.

- **Establish meeting agreements**: We suggest having participants view this "Purple Flag Video" before the meeting to be sure everyone is on the same page about how to provide and respond to feedback and contribute to a safe meeting environment.

- **Create hybrid meetings**: Hybrid meetings are the "gold standard" approach to accessible meetings. This helps immunocompromised and high-risk attendees know they can attend and have their voices heard, regardless of physical precautions taken.

> **KEY CONSIDERATIONS**
>
> ✓ **Budget time** to prepare
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> ✓ **Communicate** early and often
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> ✓ **Normalize mistakes** and learn from them
>
> ✓ Be **Flexible**

Plan for Virtual, In-Person, and Hybrid Meetings

It takes time and energy to do things thoughtfully. Consider the following in the early stages and throughout your planning process for virtual, in-person, or hybrid meetings (more detailed information in Appendix A):

- ✓ **Select a venue/format:** Different venues require different planning and accommodations.

- ✓ **Practice your format and/or get to know your venue**

- ✓ **Know your audience and communicate**: Because no two disabled people experience their disability in exactly the same way, it's important to have open and honest conversations with your audience. Ask about their access needs and have a general idea of how people with various disabilities use the web.

- ✓ Determine need for **captioning or interpreters.**

- ✓ Consider **other communication services.**

- ✓ Create **accessible marketing materials, documents and presentations.**

- ✓ **Incorporate feedback and accommodation requests** from your audience into plan.

> Disability can impact so many things, and meeting organizers are not mind-readers! We all have access needs, but some of us have access needs that are mostly met by society.
>
> When a person is disabled, fewer of their access needs are met, and rarely as automatically or easily.

Communicate Early and Often with Participants

The first step to finding out how to meet someone's needs is to ask **(types of common access needs can be found in Appendix B)**:

- What are your access needs?

- We will be providing [example: live captions]. Do you need any additional accommodations to participate in this meeting?

- Do you have any access needs that I didn't meet today? How can I do better?

- In the meeting registration process, include a statement like the following: "We strive to host inclusive, accessible events that enable all people to engage and participate fully. To request an accommodation or to ask about accessibility, please contact [name, email, telephone]."

Invitations, Registration, & Agenda

To avoid perpetuating barriers to independent access, make sure meeting invitations, registration, and agendas include information to help participants understand how to register and attend meetings (**more detailed information in** Appendix C):

Before sending out the agenda, have someone on your team review the documents you plan to use at the meeting (like handouts or PowerPoints) to be sure they are accessible.

Meeting Invitations

Include the following when sending invitations to your meeting:

- **Meeting/Event Description:** Use plain language with clear event purpose and description. Be sure your event promotional materials also use document accessibility best practices.

- **Date, time, and location details:** Provide details regarding the physical building accessibility, virtual/remote access availability, and transportation information.

- **Duration of the event:** Establish, communicate, and adhere to clear start and end times allows participants to plan their time and energy for the day.

Registration

The tool that participants use to register for the meeting should include the same information provided in your invitation or promotional materials.

- **Forms:** All users must be able to access the meeting information and online forms to fully complete the registration process.

- **Confirmation:** Provide an indication of completion and successful registration.

Agenda

Send an agenda at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting, preferably earlier. Include:

- Meeting purpose
- Speakers
- Schedule of day
- Time/place
- How to join

- Accommodations information
- Materials (like PowerPoints or hand-outs you plan to use at the meeting)
- Tech check for participants (if needed)

During a Meeting:

The following best practices apply to virtual, in-person, and hybrid meetings (**more detailed best practices information is available in** Appendix D):

✓ **Describe** what is being presented and **announce** yourself before speaking, especially during question-and-answer sections or discussions

✓ Establish **meeting rules**

✓ Assign **moderators, chat monitors** (someone who watches the chat and brings forward questions and comments) **noise monitors** (someone who speaks up if things are getting too noisy in-person), **jargon buster** (someone who explains or asks for clarification on abbreviations and technical terms) **and technical support**

✓ Be **flexible**

✓ **Ask** whether all attendees have what they need for effective communication

✓ Use **plain language**, avoid jargon and acronyms

✓ Make sure speech is **clear** and **slightly slower than your normal talking speed.**

✓ Have **adequate** and **adjustable lighting**

✓ **Inform attendees** if the meeting is being recorded before beginning

Virtual (or Hybrid)- Specific Meeting Considerations

Virtual meetings have different accessibility needs. If you are hosting a hybrid meeting, you will want to **consider a mix of both virtual and in-person best practices.**

Select a Platform for Accessibility:
It's important to choose a platform that supports accessibility for people who have mobility, vision, hearing, and cognitive disabilities. [Appendix E](#) **shows common platforms and accessibility features.**

Some virtual meeting platforms allow an untrained participant to type captions. This is not recommended because it is difficult to provide quality, synchronized translation.

- **Availability:** At the State of Vermont, we generally use Microsoft Teams. This platform might not be the most accessible option. If other platforms are preferred, you can try to work with community partners who have access to other platforms or work to get approval from the Agency of Digital Services.

- **Feature Accessibility:** Identify which features are accessible, and how you will accommodate equivalent access for attendees who are unable to access or use any features.

- **Captioning:** You may have the capability for a person to enter live captions or enable automated captions. [See Appendix F](#) for a table detailing the pros and cons of common platforms regarding captions.

During a Virtual Meeting

Meeting hosts should be familiar with the controls, features and functionality of the platform being used for the meeting. Below is a non-exhaustive list for hosts and presenters:

- ✓ Establish **communication** with support team.

- ✓ Hosts and presenters should have **camera** on, whenever possible, to enable lip reading.

  - o **Conflicting access needs** arise often – some disabled people require the ability lip-read, and others may require the ability to attend meetings with their camera off.

- ✓ Use proper **microphone positioning**, use a **headset** if possible, and **be sure your audio and video is working correctly.**

- ✓ Ask attendees to confirm that their **correct name** and **pronouns** are displayed.

- ✓ During Q+As, **read the submitter name and question** before answering.

- ✓ **Prevent echoing** - only use one audio connection method (telephone or computer, not both).

- ✓ **Mute** when not speaking.

- ✓ In large meetings, consider **turning off your video when not speaking.**

- ✓ Designate someone to read **chats aloud** during the meeting.

- ✓ Turn off your notifications.

- ✓ Share information with participants about how to minimize distractions, use accessibility tools, and any other tools you'll be using during the presentation, like whiteboard, poll app, etc.

  - o [Video of accessibility options in Teams](#)

  - o [Video of accessibility options in Zoom](#)

> Having a practical understanding of the platform controls mitigates technical interruptions that can wreak havoc on attendee attention and participation.

In-Person (or Hybrid)- Specific Considerations

In-person meetings have different accessibility needs. If you are hosting a hybrid meeting, you will want to consider a mix of both virtual and in-person best practices **(more detailed information about in-person best practices** [Appendix G](#)**):**

- ✓ Be sure there is **wheelchair access.**

- ✓ Be clear about **precautions** being taken to reduce risk of infectious disease.

- ✓ Be clear about **accommodations** needed by all attendees.

- ✓ **Service animals** must be permitted.

> Have someone on your team do a walk-through of any in-person space to find out if the meeting space fits your accessibility needs for the event.
>
> Be sure to map out where accessibility features are located.
>
> Arrive early to assist people who have access needs.

- ✓ Include **verbal descriptions of location** or **electronic maps.**
- ✓ Plan for **real-time captioning, ASL and foreign language interpreters, note takers.**
- ✓ **Reserve preferred seating** for people making use of sign language interpretation.
- ✓ **Normalize people having different needs, learning and communication styles.** Consider having fidget toys, offering a grounding exercise, stating that people can sit, stand, take a break as needed, etc.

Appendices

Appendix A: Detailed information for planning a meeting that is virtual, in-person, or hybrid

✓ **Select a venue/format:** Different venues require different planning and accommodations. You will want to carefully select the venue and consider if it is virtual, in-person or a mix of both. Get to know your space and/or practice your presentation tools.

✓ **Know your audience and communicate:** Because no two disabled people experience their disability in exactly the same way, it's important to have open and honest conversations with your audience, ask about their access needs, and have a general idea of how people with various disabilities use technology.

✓ **Determine need for Captioning or Sign Language Interpreters (ASL):** Meeting materials with audio components should have an accompanying text version (e.g., open or closed captioning, transcript). Some Deaf or hard-of-hearing participants may find it difficult to participate using captions and may request a sign language interpreter. Conversely, some people who are deaf/hard-of-hearing prefer not to use sign language and they may require real-time captioning services.

✓ **Consider Other Communication Services:** While captioning and ASL translation services are more commonly known accommodations, there are many other services available such as Video Relay Service, Video Remote Interpreting, Captioned Telephone, etc. Additionally, print media may be made available in Braille and large print.

  o Learn how to access Interpretation and Translation services.

✓ **Create Accessible Documents and Presentations:** Presentation documents such as PowerPoint, Word, and PDF must be accessible and, whenever possible, distributed ahead of the meeting to allow participants to pre-read or reference at their own pace during the meeting.

Creating Accessible Presentation Materials

Before the meeting, talk with each presenter about developing a presentation that will be accessible to all participants. Materials intended for electronic distribution (e.g., meeting platform, website, email) must meet Section 508 conformance criteria for the accessibility of the format in which the materials are available.

Use the available templates on the HIVE because they have accessibility features and tips built in. Also, read the AHS Minimum Accessibility Requirements by type.

The following links contain information on creating accessible content:

  • Document Accessibility Checklist

- [Create Accessible Documents](#)
- [Create Accessible PDFs](#)
- [Create Accessible Presentations](#)
- [Create Accessible Spreadsheets](#)
- Create Accessible [Audio and Video](#),

✓ Incorporate feedback and accommodation requests from your audience into existing plans, adjusting as needed for equitable access, participation, and comprehension. **If your ability to provide an accommodation changes,** remember to tell the participants before the meeting.

Learn more about offering accommodations on the [AHS-Accessibility Accommodations page](#).

Appendix B: Types of Common Access Needs

The meeting organizer should reach out to participants before the meeting to learn how to best meet their needs. Some common accessibility needs include:

- **Create color contrast and add additional details to visualizations.** Some participants may not be able to distinguish colors reliably, so need visualizations to include other details in order to understand them.
- **Screen readers, screen magnifiers, or computer keyboards** instead of the mouse to access information online.
- Deaf or hard of hearing people may use **speech-to-text translations or captioning.**

For more information, read [Accessibility by Disability](#) on the AHS Accessibility page.

Appendix C: Detailed Information for Invitations, Registration, & Agenda

To avoid perpetuating barriers to independent access, make sure meeting invitations, registration, and agendas include information to help participants understand how to register and attend meetings.

Invitations
- **Description:** Creative and engaging titles should be grounded in [plain language](#), with event purpose and description clearly marked
- **Date, time, and location details:** Provide details regarding the physical building accessibility, as well as virtual/remote access availability, up front. This includes any parking, public transportation, and parking information.
- **Duration of the event:** Establishing, communicating, and adhering to clear start and end times allows participants to plan their time and energy for the day.

Registration
The tool that participants use to register for the meeting should include the same information provided in your invitation or promotional materials.

- **Forms:** All users must be able to access the meeting information and online forms in order to fully complete the registration process.

- **Confirmation:** Provide an indication of completion and successful registration. Email confirmations should contain a summary of the event details and other materials for easy reference.

Agenda

- **Purpose:** Topic, issues, or objectives

- **Speakers:** List of attendees and presenters; include speaker biographies for larger meetings, webinars or conferences

- **Schedule of events:** specific dates/times, speakers, breaks, etc.

- **How to join:** the ways attendees can participate in the meeting (e.g., links to virtual platform, alternate telephone number)

- **Accommodations:** information on how to access available accommodations (e.g., Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART), ASL interpreters, assisted listening devices, alternate print formats)

- **Materials:** Whenever possible, distribute electronic presentation documents and media, including agenda, to invitees and attendees before the meeting

Appendix D: Detailed best practices to include in every meeting type (virtual, in-person, and hybrid meetings)

✓ **Use Audio Descriptions and Announce Before Speaking:** Blind and low-vision users who are unable to see visual information need verbal or pre-recorded audio that describes the text, images, graphics, charts, animations and video that comprise the visual portion of the presentation. Remember to announce yourself before speaking so participants know who is saying what.

✓ **Provide Moderators and Technical Support:** Be sure that all participants have access to someone who can help them navigate the technical environment. Remember that not everyone may use, or be familiar with, the platform being used for your meeting.

✓ **Be Flexible:** Some people's disabilities are more dynamic than others. With these participants or community partners, an asynchronous approach to collaboration may be required. Some people have chronic health issues that flare up unexpectedly, and therefore may need to miss a meeting without much notice. Other considerations may include flexibility in the meeting's timing (morning vs. evening) or on-camera requirements.

✓ **Tech Checks:** Provide ways for participants to test platform access prior to meeting (e.g., zoom test meeting), particularly when inviting individuals from outside of your organization

Appendix E: Choosing a Video Conferencing Platform

It's important to choose a platform that supports accessibility for people that have mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive disabilities.

Common accessibility features on virtual platforms:

- ✓ Screen reader support

- ✓ Captioning (manual and/or automated)

- ✓ Can be used by ASL Interpreters

- ✓ Spotlight or Pin videos to support sign language interpreters when the video follows the active speaker

- ✓ Has keyboard shortcuts

Unfortunately, no virtual meeting platform is perfect. **To select a platform to use for your meeting event:**

- ✓ Check with your agency/organization to identify which platforms you already have access to; and if you are co-hosting an inter-agency event, identify which platforms your partner agencies have access to.

- ✓ Implement meeting management strategies to compensate for weaknesses in your platform.

- ✓ Use other accessible services where possible to compensate for weaknesses in your chosen platform (e.g., a separate captioning-streaming website, hand-raising tool, polling/surveys)

Accessible Meeting Tips for:

- • [Microsoft Teams](#)
- • [Zoom](#)
- • [Google Meet](#)

Appendix F: Common Platforms: Captioning Pros and Cons

Types of Captioning

Real-Time (Live): Provide real-time, two-way captioning (e.g., [Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) available through your agency](#)) to enable participants to interact and participate in the meeting via a professional captioner.

Automated: Virtual platforms have increasingly integrated automated speech to text translation into their products. While these solutions may be serviceable for some, others may lack a human captioner's ability to translate heavily accented speech, acronyms, jargon, and ability to indicate speaker change, grammar, and punctuation. Be prepared to provide real-time, human-generated captions.

Virtual Meeting Tools	Supports	Pros	Cons
Microsoft Teams	Automated captions (live transcription) Manual captions added by a person.	Free and easy to set up for participants. Transcription/Captions can be edited and saved to recorded video. Captioning is available in different languages by moving to Teams Premium. Contact Agency of Digital Services to upgrade.	Accuracy will vary.
Zoom	Manual captions added by a person Automated captions (live transcription)	Free and easy to set up for participants. Captioning is accurate, can be saved as a transcript. Captioning is available in different languages.	You will need to hire a captioner and do some setup
Google Meet	Automated captions (live transcription)	Free and easy to setup	Accuracy will vary and captions are not saved.

Appendix G: Detailed Best Practices for In-Person Meetings

- ✓ **Wheelchair access** to the building entrance, meeting space, stages, lecterns, seating, tables, including registration, displays, food and beverage, and other services
- ✓ **Clear communication** about precautions planned to meet immune-related access needs, such as: use of air purifiers to ensure appropriate indoor air quality, encouragement and provision of face masks, provision of allergen information, or requesting that attendees test before an in-person meeting
- ✓ **Service animals**, such as guide dogs, must be permitted to accompany a participant to all areas of the facility where people are allowed
- ✓ **Verbal descriptions or electronic maps** of meeting room layout, emergency exit locations, and amenities
- ✓ **Real-time captioning, translators, ASL + foreign language interpreters, note takers**

✓ **Clear descriptions** about existing accessibility, including plans to record the session, access to restrooms/private space, information about the sensory environment (especially if venue is expected to be particularly loud or bright), availability of accessible parking, etc.

✓ **Clear communication** about how to request additional accommodations with examples, such as fragrance-free requests or additional break time.

✓ **Preferred seating** for people making use of sign language interpretation. The interpreter must be either next to the speaker/presenter or seated in a sight line to allow the deaf person to see the speaker/presenter beyond the interpreter.

Reference this checklist from Cornell University for some helpful tips.

Appendix H: Finalize Planning (Checklist) from Section508.gov

No.	Planning Item	Examples
1	Select the optimal venue and communications platform to meet your guests needs, of those available to me.	Registration, building entrance and rooms, telephone, virtual meeting software.
2	Secure support staff, technology and services necessary to accommodate your guests' needs	Captioning, ASL interpreting, Braille, large print, assisted listening devices, ushers/guides, seating
3	Update the meeting's promotional material, registration and agenda with any updates and additions to venue and communications platform accommodations	Meeting links, captioning links, platform help files such as test meetings, keyboard controls documentation
4	Verify that all electronic presentation materials conform with their applicable accessibility standards, and have been distributed to attendees	Documents, audio/visual media, no flashing or blinking
5	Conduct a dry-run or practice meeting and confirm that hosts, moderators, and presenters understand how to: • Access and operate the controls and interactive features of the communications platform selected for use in the meetings • Control and manage accommodations such as captioning, ASL interpreting, audio descriptions • Support on-site activities and amenities	• Login, audio and video, screen sharing, chat, polls/surveys, whiteboards, etc. • Enabling or turning on captions, pinning the ASL interpreters camera, describing visual information • Building access, seating, lighting, noise mitigation, assisted listening devices