Language Matters: Definitions of Accessibility-related Terms

Attitudes can be the most difficult barrier people with disabilities face in achieving full integration, acceptance, and participation in society. Since words are a mirror of society's attitudes and perceptions, we should all put great thought into how we present information about people with disabilities, to help overcome negative attitudes and shape positive ones.

A Way with Words (Government of Canada)

There are differing views regarding the appropriate use of language to refer to disabilities. Certain types of language are considered appropriate by government and disability organizations, and useful guidance may be obtained from their publications and websites. Despite the advice contained in the guides of organizations and governments, individual people with disabilities and their families may have their own preferences so ask what they prefer.

Disability Law Primer (ARCH Disability Law Centre)

Able-bodied
This term is used to describe someone who does not identify as having a disability. Some members of the disability community oppose its use because it implies that all people with disabilities lack "able bodies" or the ability to use their bodies well. The term "non-disabled" or the phrase "does not have a disability" or "is not living with a disability" are more neutral choices.

Accessibility
Accessibility is the degree to which persons with disabilities can access a device, service or environment without barriers. Accessibility is also a process – it is the proactive identification, removal and prevention of barriers to persons with disabilities.

"Much of what disables people from participation is not the disability itself but rather the environment or aspects of the environment, external features of society created by people." (World Health Organization)

Accessible Tourism
There is no single, universally accepted definition of "accessible tourism". Accessible tourism, also known as "Access Tourism", "Universal Tourism", "Inclusive Tourism" and in some countries such as in Japan "Barrier-free Tourism", is tourism and travel that is accessible to all people, with disabilities or not, including those with mobility, hearing, sight, cognitive, or intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, older persons and those with temporary disabilities". Accessible tourism caters to the needs of a full range of consumers including persons with disabilities, older persons and cross-generational

families. It entails removal of attitudinal and institutional barriers in society, and encompasses accessibility in the physical environment, in transportation, information and communications and other facilities and services. [(Takayama Declaration, UNESCAP)](#)

Accommodation
Accommodation is an individualized and reactive adaptation or adjustment made to provide a person with a disability with equitable and non-discriminatory opportunities for participation.

Alternative format
Alternative format refers to the conversion of printed text, audio or video files into formats more easily accessed by persons with disabilities.

Audio format
Audio is an alternative format for persons with a vision, intellectual or developmental or learning disability, or who cannot read print.

Braille
Braille is an alternative format for persons who are blind or deafblind. It is a tactile system of raised dots representing letters or a combination of letters of the alphabet. Braille is produced using Braille transcription software.

Captioning
Captioning translates the audio portion of a video presentation by way of subtitles, or captions, which usually appear on the bottom of the screen. Captioning may be closed or open. Closed captions can only be seen on a television screen that is equipped with a device called a closed caption decoder. Open captions are "burned on" a video and appear whenever the video is shown. Captioning makes television programs, films and other visual media with sound accessible to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Descriptive Video Service (DVS)
DVS provides descriptive narration of key visual elements–such as the action, characters, locations, costumes and sets–without interfering with dialogue or sound effects. DVS makes television programs, films, home videos and other visual media accessible for persons with vision disabilities.

Electronic text
Electronic text is used with computer synthetic voice technology (screen reading software) that allows persons who are blind, have low vision or who have learning disabilities to hear a spoken translation of what others see on the monitor.

Large print
Large print is an alternative format for persons who have low vision. Large print materials should be prepared with a font (print) size that is 16 to 20 points or larger.

Windowing
Windowing enables persons who are deaf to read, by means of a sign language interpreter, what others hear in a video presentation or broadcast. The interpreter appears in a corner or "window" in the screen, translating spoken word to sign language. Windowing may include open or closed captioning.

Assistive technologies
Technologies (software or hardware) that increase, maintain or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities when interacting with computers or computer-based systems.

Assistive device
An assistive device is a tool, technology or mechanism that enables a person with a disability to do everyday tasks such as moving, communicating or lifting. Assistive devices help persons with disabilities maintain their independence at home, at work and in the community.

Digital audio player
An assistive device that enables persons with hearing loss to listen to books, directions, art shows, etc.

FM transmitter system
An assistive device used by persons who are Deaf, deafened, oral deaf or hard of hearing to help boost sound closest to the listener while reducing background noise.

Hearing aid
An assistive device that makes sound louder and clearer for persons who are Deaf, deafened, oral deaf or hard of hearing.

Magnifier
An assistive device that makes print and images larger and easier to read

Mobility device
An assistive device that helps persons who have difficulty walking. For example, wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, canes and crutches.

Teletypewriter (TTY)
An assistive device that helps persons who are unable to speak or hear to communicate by phone. The person types their messages on the TTY keyboard, and messages are sent using telephone lines to someone who has a TTY, or to

an operator who passes the message along to someone who does not have a TTY.

Barrier

A barrier is anything that keeps someone with a disability from participating fully in society because of their disability. Barriers can be visible or non-visible.

Attitude: Identified by persons with disabilities as the hardest barrier to overcome, attitudinal barriers describe what we think and how we interact with persons with disabilities.

Architectural or structural barrier: These barriers result from the design elements of a building such as stairs, doorways, the width of hallways and room layout. These barriers may also occur through everyday practices, such as when boxes or other objects obstruct pathways.

Information or communication barrier: Examples of this barrier include small print size, low colour contrast between text and background or not facing the person when speaking.

Systemic: Systemic barriers are policies, practices or procedures that result in some people receiving unequal access or being excluded.

Technology: This occurs when technology, or the way it is used, cannot be accessed by people with disabilities. For example, websites not accessible to people who are blind and use screen reader software.

Communication

Includes languages, display of text, Braille, tactile communication, large print, accessible multimedia as well as written, audio, plain-language, human-reader and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, including accessible information and communication technology.

Disability

Disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and mind and features of the society in which they live. A disability can occur at any time in a person's life; some people are born with a disability, while others develop a disability later in life. It can be permanent, temporary or episodic. Disability can steadily worsen, remain the same, or improve. It can be very mild to very severe. It can be the cause, as well as the result, of disease, illness, injury, or substance abuse.

According to the traditional, bio-medical approach, disability is viewed as a medical or health problem that prevents or reduces a person's ability to participate fully in society. In contrast, the social approach views disability as a natural part of society, where attitudes, stigma and prejudices present barriers to people with disabilities, and prevent or hinder their participation in mainstream society.

Deafblind: A person who is deafblind can neither see nor hear, to some degree. Many persons who are deafblind are accompanied by an intervenor. Intervenors are trained in special sign language that involves touching the person's hands in a two-hand, manual alphabet.

Hearing loss: Persons who have hearing loss may be deaf or hard of hearing. Like other disabilities, hearing loss has a wide variety of degrees. Deafness can be evident at birth, or occur later in life from other causes, such as meningitis. Persons who are partially deaf often use hearing aids to assist their hearing. Deaf persons also use sign language to communicate. While American Sign Language and Quebec Sign Language (LSQ, or Langue des signes québécoise) are commonly used, not everyone with hearing loss uses them.

Deaf: In Deaf culture, indicated by a capital "D", the term "Deaf" is used to describe a person who has severe to profound hearing loss and who identifies with the culture, society and language of Deaf persons, which is based on Sign Language. Persons who are profoundly deaf may identify themselves as culturally Deaf or oral deaf.

Deafened: This term describes a person who has lost their hearing slowly or suddenly in adulthood. The person may use speech with visual cues such as captioning or computerized note-taking, speech reading or sign language.

Hard of hearing

This term describes a person who uses their residual hearing and speech to communicate. The person may supplement communication by speech reading, hearing aids, sign language and/or communication devices.

Oral deaf

This term describes a person who was born deaf or became deaf before learning to speak, but is taught to speak and may not typically use American Sign Language.

Intellectual or developmental disability: Persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities may have difficulty doing many things most of us take for granted. These disabilities can mildly or profoundly limit one's ability to learn. These disabilities are often non-visible. Clinical diagnoses of cognitive disabilities include autism, Down Syndrome, traumatic brain injury (TBI), and even dementia. Less severe cognitive conditions include attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Learning disability: The term "learning disabilities" refers to a range of disorders that affect how persons process information. Learning disabilities can result in reading and language-based learning problems (dyslexia), problems with mathematics (dyscalculia), or problems with writing (dysgraphia).

Mental health disability: Mental health disabilities include schizophrenia, depression, phobias, as well as bipolar, anxiety and mood disorders. Mental illness is often episodic, so a person who has a psychological or psychiatric disability may not have symptoms all the time, and a person who has experienced an episode of mental illness in the past will not necessarily have a repeat experience.

Physical disability: There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities that can affect a person's mobility. The cause of the mobility disability may be non-visible, as in the case with arthritis, heart and lung conditions.

Speech or language disability: Some people have problems communicating. It could be the result of cerebral palsy, hearing loss or another condition that makes it difficult to pronounce words, causes slurring or stuttering, or not being able to express oneself or understand written or spoken language. Some persons who have severe difficulties may use communication boards or other assistive devices.

Vision loss: Vision loss reduces a person's ability to see clearly. Few persons with vision loss are totally blind. Some have limited vision such as tunnel vision, where a person has a loss of peripheral or side vision, or a lack of central vision, which means they cannot see straight ahead. Some can see the outline of objects while others can see the direction of light. Some common causes of vision disabilities are scratched corneas, diabetes-related eye conditions, injuries and corneal grafts.

Disabled
"Disabled" generally describes functional limitations, including walking, lifting, learning and breathing. While the terms "disabled people" or "the disabled" are more commonly used in Europe", in North American the term "people with disabilities" is preferred.

Discrimination
Any distinction, exclusion or restriction that results in the unfair or negative treatment of a person or group, for reasons such as their race, age or disability.

Dog-in-training
(a) is being trained by a dog trainer to become a guide dog or service dog, and
(b) is certified as a dog-in-training

Duty to accommodate
Employers and service providers have an obligation to adjust rules, policies or practices to enable individuals with a disability to participate fully. The duty to accommodate means that sometimes it is necessary to treat someone differently in order to prevent or reduce discrimination.

Guide dog
(a) is trained as a guide for a blind person, and
(b) is certified as a guide dog

Handicap/handicapped
Avoid using "handicap" and "handicapped" when describing a person. Instead, refer to the person's specific condition or use "person with a disability."

Inclusion
An approach that aims to reach out to and include all people, honouring the diversity and uniqueness, talents, beliefs, backgrounds, capabilities and ways of living of individuals and groups.

Intervenor
An intervenor is a specially trained professional who mediates between the person who is deafblind and others, enabling them to communicate effectively with, and receive information from, their environment.

Invisible disabilities
While many people associate disability with people using wheelchairs or white canes or who are missing limbs, the majority of disabilities are invisible. The preferred terms are "non-visible" or "non-evident" disability.

Language
Language includes spoken and signed languages and other forms of non-spoken languages.

Non-disabled
 "Non-disabled" refers to someone who does not have a disability and is the preferred term when the context calls for a comparison between people with and without disabilities. Use 'non-disabled' or 'people without disabilities' instead of 'healthy', 'able-bodied', 'normal' or 'whole'.

Person with a disability
People-first language avoids defining a person in term of their disability. In most cases, this entails placing the reference to the disability after a reference to a person, as in "a person with a disability," or "a person living with a disability," rather than "the disabled person." In North America, "person with a disability" is the preferred reference as the person is not defined by their disability. Note that people-first language is not preferred by all people with disabilities. Specifically, some members of the autism and Deaf communities prefer identity-first language, for example "She is autistic".

Service animal
Service animals help people with disabilities to overcome a variety of barriers, much like a white cane or a wheelchair. For example, they may guide a person with low vision, alert their owner who is hard of hearing to sounds, or keep a child with autism from running into danger. Service animals do not necessarily wear a vest or have certified training.

Suffers from /victim of/ afflicted with/ stricken with
These terms carry the assumption that a person with a disability is suffering or has a reduced quality of life. It is preferable to use neutral language when describing a person who has a disability, simply stating the facts about the nature of the disability. For example: "He has muscular dystrophy" or "she is living with chronic pain".

Support Person: A support person (sometimes referred to as a 'caregiver') means, in relation to a person with a disability, another person who accompanies them in order to help with communication, mobility, personal care, medical needs or access to goods and services.

Undue hardship
Circumstances involving cost, health or safety issues that would make it impossible or very difficult for an employer or service provider to meet their legal duty to accommodate.

Universal design
The design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Universal design does not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where needed. Universal design is also referred to as inclusive design, barrier-free design, human-centered design, design-first, person-first design, and universal access.

Website Accessibility
The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) is the internationally recognised standard for website accessibility, created by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The first version of WCAG was published in 1999 as WCAG 1.0. The most recent version, released in 2018, is WCAG 2.1 which includes everything in the previous version, WCAG 2.0, plus additional support for web content on mobile devices.

Wheelchair/ wheelchair-bound/ confined to a wheelchair
People who use mobility equipment such as a wheelchair, scooter or cane consider the equipment part of their personal space. They can have widely different disabilities and varying abilities. It is acceptable to describe a person as a "wheelchair user" or "someone who uses a wheelchair," followed by an explanation of why the equipment is required. Avoid "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair-bound" as these terms describe a person only in relationship to a piece of equipment. The terms also are misleading, as wheelchairs can liberate people, allowing them to move about, and they are inaccurate, as people who use wheelchairs are not permanently confined in them, but are transferred to sleep, sit in chairs, drive cars, etc.

Sources

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