

Providing Excellent Customer Service for Older Adults and People with Disabilities



Get on board with assisting older adults and people with disabilities!

These best practices explain how to best serve older adults and passengers with disabilities. Follow the basic rules of safety, customer service, and good manners when assisting and communicating with your older adult passengers and people with disabilities of all ages. By using these tips, you and the passengers will have an enjoyable trip!

Effective Communication Tips

- Always have a pen and paper handy. This can prevent many challenging or seemingly impossible communication situations.
- Speak directly to passengers not their companions.
- Speak clearly with a normal tone and speed unless the passenger requests otherwise.
- If you are asked to repeat, write, or spell what you said, do so calmly and pleasantly.
- Be willing and ready to break information down into smaller pieces or use simpler language if needed.

- Be patient and allow the passenger to take his time. Respond to him in a calm, professional manner.
- Be an effective listener and use affirming responses.

Person-first Language

- Emphasize the person not the disability. Use person-first language, such as “person with a disability” vs “disabled person.”
- Mobility aids are used by people, not used to describe people. Say “person that uses a wheelchair” instead of “wheelchair-bound.”
- While there are some groups or individuals that prefer identify-first language, such as people that are blind, deaf, or autistic, person-first language is universally accepted as an appropriate way to refer to people with disabilities.

General Guidelines for Assisting Passengers with Disabilities

- Know and follow your transit agency standard policies on assisting people with disabilities and be prepared to make reasonable accommodations to policy and practice.
- Performance of all safety procedures are of utmost importance for you and the passengers.
- Treat your older adult passengers and people with disabilities with courtesy and respect.
- Give passengers with disabilities and older adults the same information and choices that you give other passengers.
- Never make assumptions about your passengers’ physical or mental abilities.
- Ask passengers if they need assistance—don’t assume.
- Provide assistance with lap/shoulder belts for passengers upon request.
- Remember personal space, consider your position relative to theirs, and do not touch passengers without their permission.
- When passengers are disembarking, alert passengers to any barriers or obstacles around the stop.



Assisting Passengers with Hearing Impairments

- Face passengers when speaking to them, and don't let objects obstruct their view.
- Do not raise your voice—doing so distorts your lip movement and makes lip reading difficult.
- Be sure to notify the passenger of any audible announcements. Pen and paper would assist when this occurs.

Assisting Passengers with Visual Disabilities

- Identify yourself both at the initial encounter and during conversations involving multiple people.
- Respond verbally when passengers give you information, so that they will know that you have heard them.
- If handling a monetary transaction, count the passenger's change out loud.
- Allowing persons who are blind to grab your arm when walking gives them more control, rather than if you grabbed their arms to lead them.

Assisting Passengers Who Use Wheelchairs and other Mobility Devices

- Ask passengers how you can assist them.
- Wheelchairs, walkers, canes, and other mobility devices are part of the passenger's personal space. Do not hold or lean on them without the passenger's permission.
- Make no assumptions on how to operate mobility aids.
- Never operate an electric mobility device for a passenger.
- Wheelchairs that fit the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) definition must be accommodated. They are not required to have brakes, foot pedals, lap belts, or any other specialty equipment.
- Handle all mobility aids with great care. They are often expensive and not easily replaced.



Assisting Passengers that are Difficult to Understand

- Display empathy, try not to interrupt, hurry the person, or sound frustrated. Adopt an open attitude toward successful communication.
- Do not finish a passenger's sentences in an effort to speed up the conversation.
- Just because you can't understand the passenger, doesn't mean the passenger doesn't understand you.
- Pen and paper can make all the difference.
- If you have tried several times and cannot understand the passenger, it sometimes helps to have them spell the word they are trying to say. Do not interrupt them, even if you figure it out before they finish.

Assisting and Communicating with Passengers with Hidden Disabilities

- Follow all transit agency safety and service policies as well as the other tips on this sheet to ensure a successful trip for persons who may have disabilities that aren't visible or are unknown to you.
- Deploy the lift/ramp when/if requested without question or discussion.
- Inform all passengers that you are there to assist if needed.
- It is NOT acceptable to ask passengers about their disabilities even if you're curious. This is private information.



Assisting Passengers with Service Animals

- A service animal is any guide dog, signal dog, or other animal individually trained to work or perform tasks for an individual with a disability.
- Dogs are the most common service animals, but, in accordance with U.S. DOT ADA regulations, other animals may help people with disabilities.
- If you're not sure that the animal is a service animal, you may ask if it is a service animal. You may also ask what type of tasks the service animal performs. You may not ask for identification, special vests, or a demonstration of the tasks the animal performs.
- A person with a disability may have more than one service animal.
- The owner must stay with the service animal and keep it under control at all times. Being under control does not mean the animal needs to be on a leash.
- Never touch or talk to the service animal—it is working!
- If a service animal is being overly friendly, blocking the aisle, or demonstrates other unacceptable behavior, ask the handler to correct the situation before taking punitive action.

Physical Assistance for Passengers with Disabilities

- When assisting a person from a sitting to standing position, have the sitting passenger place their feet under them and to lean forward. Stand in front of the person with one foot in front of the other before offering the passenger your arm.
- When assisting ambulatory or semi-ambulatory passengers, position yourself on their downhill side and point out any upcoming barriers and/or safety equipment.
- When assisting passengers with wheelchairs on the lift/ramp, you must retain full control of the wheelchair (the exception to the rule of not touching a person's wheelchair). Do not operate the controls of an electric wheelchair.
- Tilting a wheelchair onto its rear wheels can make it easier to maneuver over or around small barriers. Only tilt manual wheelchairs with a tilting bar, always tell the passenger prior to tilting a wheelchair or returning the wheelchair to its original position, and be sure you know the proper tilting procedure before trying this maneuver.
- Pulling a wheelchair rather than pushing may prevent the smaller front wheels from getting stuck in certain types of terrain. Always ask the passenger's permission prior to pulling the wheelchair in case motion sickness may be an issue.

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