



How to Create Accessible Seating for Meetings and Events

By: Rosemarie Rossetti, Ph.D.

When planning a meeting or event, it is essential to prioritize inclusivity by accommodating attendees with diverse needs. Inclusivity fosters community engagement by ensuring that everyone feels valued and welcomed. Additionally, it helps organizations comply with accessibility laws and demonstrates a commitment to equity and respect for all participants. Ensuring accessible seating arrangements reflects a commitment to inclusivity and allows everyone to participate comfortably. Here are some key strategies for creating an accessible seating plan.

Identifying Needs

During the registration process, ask attendees if they require accessible seating accommodations. For example, you might include a question: "Do you have any specific seating needs, such as space for a mobility device, a service animal, or proximity to a sign language interpreter? If so, please let us know how we can best assist you."

Specifically, inquire about the following:

Mobility Devices: Determine who will use mobility aids such as wheelchairs, scooters, or walkers.

Service Animals: Identify attendees who will be accompanied by service animals and ensure adequate space is reserved.

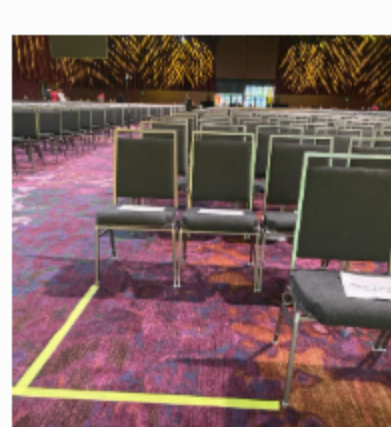
Medical Equipment: Some attendees may require space for medical equipment. Gathering this information in advance helps in planning effectively.

Reserving Accessible Spaces

To accommodate attendees using mobility devices:

Remove Chairs: Designate specific areas where chairs can be removed throughout the room, creating space for attendees to park or remain in their mobility devices.

Strategic Placement: Arrange these spaces near aisles and in varied locations—front, middle, and back—to provide attendees with options that suit their preferences.



Marking Areas: Use colored tape to outline accessible spaces on the floor. A 45-inch X 45-inch area is an ideal size to ensure sufficient room, as it provides ample space for mobility devices such as wheelchairs or scooters to fit while allowing attendees to navigate the area easily.

Clearly marked spaces make it easier for attendees to locate their reserved areas.



Providing Appropriate Seating

Bariatric Chairs: Chairs should accommodate guests of all sizes. Some attendees may require larger, wider, heavy-duty bariatric seats with armrests to accommodate their size and weight. Position these chairs in various locations in the meeting rooms. These chairs can be sourced from event furniture rental companies or specialized suppliers. Consider providing at least 5-10 such chairs for an average-sized event, depending on the expected number of attendees and their needs.

Row Spacing: Ensure generous spacing between rows of chairs to facilitate easy movement. This is especially important for attendees with limited mobility.

Exit Proximity: Seat attendees with limited mobility closer to exits to provide quick and easy access if needed.

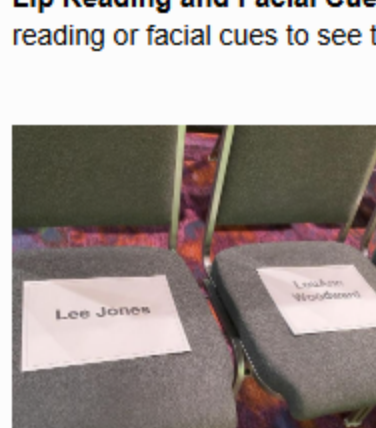
Accommodations for Vision and Hearing Impairments

Front-Row Seating: Reserve seats in the front row for attendees with low vision or hearing. This ensures an unobstructed line of sight to the stage or speaker.

Sign Language Interpretation: Position seats to allow a clear view of sign language interpreters for attendees who rely on this service.



Lip Reading and Facial Cues: Ensure that seating arrangements allow those who rely on lip reading or facial cues to see the speaker.



Labeling Reserved Seats

Clear Signage: Label reserved seats with signs on or over the backs of chairs. Use clear and visible text to indicate the purpose of the reservation. An example of signage can be "Accessible Seating" with the International symbol for accessibility.

Personalization: Consider personalizing the signs with attendees' names to facilitate identification and avoid confusion.

Visibility: Ensure the signage is easy to spot without intruding or drawing undue attention to the reserved areas.

Additional Considerations

Flexibility: Be prepared to make last-minute adjustments to accommodate unforeseen needs. Having a few extra accessible spaces or chairs on hand can help address unexpected requirements.

Communication: Inform attendees in advance about the availability of accessible seating and encourage them to communicate any specific needs.

Event Staff Training: Train event staff to assist attendees with accessibility needs. Staff should be familiar with the seating plan and ready to guide attendees to their reserved areas. Training topics might include how to use accessible features of the venue, effective communication with individuals with disabilities, and strategies for managing unexpected accessibility challenges.

Conclusion

Creating an inclusive seating arrangement requires thoughtful planning and attention to detail. Event organizers can foster an environment where everyone feels welcome and included by identifying attendees' needs, reserving appropriate spaces, and ensuring clear communication. Prioritizing accessibility enhances the attendee experience and reflects a commitment to equity and inclusivity.

Copyright by Rosemarie Rossetti, Ph.D. 2025

About the Columnist

Rosemarie Rossetti, Ph.D., is an internationally recognized accessibility consultant, speaker, author, and CEO of Rossetti Enterprises LLC. www.RosemarieSpeaks.com

She speaks to and consults with hotels and lodging venues to ensure the environments are accessible and that services are provided to accommodate people with disabilities.

Having been paralyzed from the waist down with a spinal cord injury, she speaks from her wheelchair, sharing her experiences. She presents to audiences throughout the U.S. and beyond as a recognized expert on accessible and universal design.

Phone: (614) 471-6100
Rosemarie@RosemarieSpeaks.com
www.RosemarieSpeaks.com

