

Disability Inclusion in COVID-19: Guidance for programming

Around 15% of the world's population has a disability. People with disabilities are at increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and more likely to be disproportionately affected by the health, economic and social impacts of the global health pandemic. It is crucial to ensure that people with disabilities are included in programming responses to COVID-19. Below are some key points to consider as part of your response.

Key messages on disability inclusion and COVID-19 response

- Organisations representing people with disabilities (DPOs¹) should play a key role in raising awareness of people with disabilities and their families on COVID-19 and also in advocating for disability-inclusive response to COVID-19 crisis.
- Any COVID-19 programme response must be inclusive of people with disabilities and ensure equal access to programmes for all people with disabilities, recognising that women and girls with disabilities are often left behind.

Information and communications

Information on COVID-19 and related interventions needs to be accessible and understood by all, including people with different disabilities. Suggestions include:

- **Consult with Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs):** Seek the advice of people with disabilities and their representative organisations including DPOs to make sure your information and communication are accessible to the widest possible range of people.
- **Use a variety of methods** to provide information. (No single method can be accessed by every person). For helplines, consider other direct channels in addition to phone, e.g. web chat.
- **Ensure resourcing for translations and accessible formats** for the information that you are sharing. Accessible formats would include use of sign languages, Easy Read, plain language, captioned media, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication.¹
- **Include people with disabilities as communicators** of information to the general public or communities that you work with. In images and photos, show people with disabilities in active and positive roles alongside people without disabilities.
- **Utilise disability networks:** Ensure that any public information is also distributed through local disability networks – through DPOs and other organisations that work with people with disabilities.

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)

WASH interventions need to ensure that people with disabilities are included. Suggestions include:

- **Handwashing stations:** Ensure that public handwashing stations can be easily located and used by people with disabilities. Use universal design principles² and check accessibility with people with disabilities and their representative organisations where possible.
- **Household access to WASH:** Prioritise asking people with disabilities and their households what adaptations may be needed in WASH supplies and equipment. Some people with disabilities have additional challenges with implementing COVID-19 prevention if they use their hands to move, obtain

¹ Augmentative and alternative communication are various methods of communication that can help people who are unable to use verbal speech to communicate.

² Universal design principles help to guide the process of design so that product, environment, or communications are usable to the greatest extent possible by all people. For further guidance, refer to DFAT's [Accessibility design guide: Universal design principles for Australia's aid program](#)

or communicate information. Others already experience greater difficulties with WASH activities and depend on a support person (often female) to assist with WASH activities.

- **Hygiene messaging:** Expand messaging to include the sanitising of assistive devices or products that are frequently handled and used by people with disabilities (e.g. walking sticks, wheelchairs, walking frames, white canes, eyeglasses, hearing aids, etc.)
- **Hygiene kits:** Consider that some people may need additional amounts of hygiene supplies and some may need access to incontinence products. Ensure that any distribution of hygiene kits include enough soap and supplies of menstrual hygiene products.

Health services

Ensure that people with disabilities can access health services. Suggestions include:

- **Health workers:** Reinforce messaging on the importance of access to healthcare for people with disabilities to ensure they receive equal and non-discriminatory access to healthcare. Promote opportunities for health workers to learn about disability rights and inclusion.
- **Transport:** Support options for transport for people with disabilities and their support people who otherwise would not be able to reach healthcare and life-saving measures.
- **Health facilities:** Ensure that any new health facilities, either temporary or permanent, are accessible to people with disabilities so that they can reach, enter, and use the services. Consult with local DPOs about short-term and long-term measures needed to improve accessibility of existing health facilities.
- **Mental health & psychosocial support:** As part of health responses, support messaging and services that help people to stay healthy, manage anxiety, and foster social support. Ensure that people with disabilities are able to receive these messages and participate in responses.

Access to essential items

Ensure that people with disabilities have continued access to food and essential items. Suggestions include:

- **Priority assistance:** Create means for priority assistance for people with disabilities to food and essential items, including hygiene products.
- **Recognise specific needs:** Recognise that some people with disabilities have specific requirements that are part of their essential items, for example medications. Ensure that they have ongoing access to these requirements.
- **Distribution points:** Ensure that distribution points and other humanitarian services are accessible to persons with disabilities by ensuring that they are able to reach, enter, circulate and use the services.
- **Utilise disability networks** to provide services such as delivery of food and essential items for people with disabilities with high support needs who may have had their usual personal support system disrupted.

Protection and safeguarding

Ensure that initiatives for prevention and response to abuse and exploitation are inclusive of people with disabilities. Suggestions include:

- **Recognise increased risk:** Recognise that people with disabilities are already at increased risk of abuse, particularly women and children with disabilities. Lockdown measures can further exacerbate risk of domestic violence and as well as difficulties in accessing support services.
- **Accessible information & services:** Ensure that information and helplines are accessible and adapt services in consultation with people with disabilities.
- **Utilise disability networks** to provide or support a system of follow-up for at-risk individuals with disabilities and their families. Ensure organisational safeguarding systems are in place.