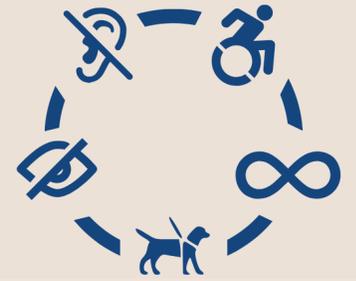


Serving clients with disabilities



A guide for small businesses

This is a guide of practical ideas for businesses to create a welcoming place for customers with disabilities. They focus on low cost or no cost actions.

Prepared in March 2026 by the San Francisco Office on Disability & Accessibility, in partnership with the Office of Small Business.

Table of contents

General guidance for any disability	2
Mobility disabilities	3
Service animals	4
Blind or low-vision customers	5
Deaf or hard-of-hearing customers	5
Speech disabilities	7
Neurodiverse customers	7
Intellectual or cognitive disabilities	8
Chronic health disabilities	9
Mental health disabilities	9

General guidance for any disability

To serve any person with any kind of disability, focus on good communication and positive customer interaction.

Assume competence	Always speak to the customer as an adult capable of understanding.
Ask how the person prefers to communicate	This avoids guessing and ensures comfort.
Speak directly to the person, not a companion	This shows respect and maintains autonomy.
Maintain eye contact and stay focused	This signals that you are listening and engaged.
Repeat or rephrase information when needed	Clarifying helps avoid misunderstandings.
Pay attention to body language without over-interpreting it	Not every movement is communication.
Ask before touching mobility devices or belongings	These items are part of a person's personal space.
Assist with payment only with clear permission	Some customers may need help retrieving a wallet or card.
Place purchased items on a wheelchair or backpack when requested	This supports independence and convenience.
Ask, "How can I best assist you today?"	This simple question prevents assumptions and empowers the customer.

<p>Invite feedback and co-design Improvements.</p>	<p>The best way to improve accessibility is to ask the community. Such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymous feedback forms • Short surveys about sensory comfort • Partnering with local disability advocacy groups • Testing changes with clients before full implementation
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Even a simple sign that says, “If there’s anything we can adjust to make your visit more comfortable, please let us know,” signals openness and care.



Mobility disabilities

People may use wheelchairs, walkers, scooters, or other mobility devices.

<p>Keep aisles clear and wide enough to move through easily</p>	<p>Cluttered aisles can block access. Maintaining at least 3 feet of clearance ensures customers can navigate safely.</p>
<p>Offer to retrieve items from high shelves</p>	<p>Many customers cannot reach elevated displays. Staff assistance ensures equal access to merchandise.</p>
<p>Allow mobility devices in customer areas</p>	<p>Wheelchairs and similar devices must be permitted anywhere customers are allowed.</p>
<p>Allow non-standard power-driven mobility devices in appropriate circumstances</p>	<p>Devices like Segways® may be allowed unless they pose safety risks. Staff should understand in advance whether such devices are appropriate for your business.</p>
<p>Provide curbside or alternative service when barriers exist</p>	<p>If a step or narrow doorway prevents entry, staff should bring products or services outside.</p>

Understand that some barriers require long-term fixes	Ramps, wider doors, and accessible restrooms may be added over time, but staff should still offer immediate alternatives.
Parking & exterior Access	<p>Keep accessible routes clear</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boxes or displays must never block ramps or pathways. <p>Ensure accessible parking is clearly marked</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs and painted access aisles help customers find appropriate spaces.



Apply for a grant to improve your business's physical accessibility at [SF.gov/ADAGrant](https://sf.gov/ADAGrant)



Service animals

Service animals are working animals, not pets.

Welcome service animals regardless of "no pets" rules	They are trained to perform essential tasks for people with disabilities.
Know the only two questions you may ask	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the dog required because of a disability? • What task has it been trained to perform? • Staff should never ask for documentation.
Allow service animals in all public areas	They must be allowed anywhere customers can go.



Allow service animals for people with many types of disabilities. Not only people who are blind.



Blind or low vision customers

Offer navigation assistance respectfully	Ask, "Would you like assistance?" and let the person take your arm if they choose.
Read menus, labels, or printed information aloud when asked	This ensures equal access to information.
Provide information in multiple formats	Electronic documents, large print, or audio versions help customers access materials independently.



Deaf or hard-of-hearing customers

Deaf communities are diverse with people identifying as Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Hard of Hearing, and Late-Deafened.

Ask about communication preferences	Start by asking, "What's the best way for us to communicate with you?" and honor their choice—whether it's sign language, email, captioning, speech-to-text, texting, writing on a paper, or another method.
Set up a Deaf-friendly space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good lighting and seating for lip-reading or hand-signing • Captions on videos



Speech disabilities

Deaf communities are diverse with people identifying as Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Hard of Hearing, and Late-Deafened.

Be patient and allow extra time	Do not interrupt or finish sentences for the person.
Use writing tools when needed	Some customers may prefer typing or writing.
Ask the person to rephrase if you still don't understand	Different wording may be easier to understand.



Neurodiverse customers

Neurodivergent disabilities include many different conditions, such as autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, and others. You don't need to know their disability. Simple changes can make the experience better for everyone.

Make communication clear and predictable	<p>Many neurodivergent clients appreciate clarity and structure.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Post clear signage with simple instructions● Offer step-by-step explanations of services● Provide written summaries of appointments or purchases● Display prices clearly to avoid uncertainty● Share what to expect (e.g., "Your appointment will take 45 minutes. We'll begin with...")● Predictability reduces anxiety.
Sensory Processing	Sensory disabilities can affect how people see, hear, or process sounds, lights, or other sensory information.



Giving choice empowers clients and reduces stress.



Intellectual or cognitive disabilities

Use simple, clear explanations	Break information into smaller steps.
Offer help reading labels or instructions	Some customers may need support understanding written information.
Use visual cues or pictograms when possible	Visual information can make navigation easier.



Chronic health disabilities

Many clients with chronic health disabilities (including Long COVID and autoimmune disorders) are immunocompromised or medically vulnerable.

Improve air quality & infection safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Upgrade HVAC filters (MERV-13 or higher if possible) ● Add portable HEPA air purifiers ● Improve ventilation (open doors/windows when feasible) ● Allow staff and customers to mask without stigma ● Offer contactless payment and pickup options
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Mental health disabilities

Interact calmly and respectfully	A supportive tone helps create a safe environment.
Provide quiet spaces when possible	Some customers may need reduced noise or stimulation.



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The Office on Disability and Accessibility works to make San Francisco a city where everyone—residents, visitors, and workers—can fully participate in civic life. Learn more at SF.gov/ODA.

The Office of Small Business is San Francisco's central point of information for small businesses. Learn more about SF.gov/OSB.