

USDA Office of Operations TARGET Center

Guidelines for Mentoring a USDA Employee with Disability

Mentoring provides an opportunity for employees with disabilities to explore a potential career path, evaluate personal goals, and participate in work-related activities that strengthen their skills and help advance their careers. Mentors also benefit by expanding their management and communications skills, learning more about the experience of disability, and contributing to the success of an individual with a disability.

The USDA Office of Operations TARGET Center developed general guidelines below to mentor an individual with a disability.

General Guidelines for Mentoring an Individual with a Disability:

- Disability should not define the person.
- In the disability community, an individual is recognized first before the disability.
 - Creating a comfortable working relationship is key to mentoring employees.
 - Communicating on a first-name basis is ideal.
- First, ask if the individual wants assistance, and then ask how to assist.
- Ask for specific instructions on how you can be helpful.
- Know that individuals have abilities, families, hobbies, likes, and dislikes.
- Know that the individual performs tasks well when teleworking and in the office.
- When hosting a meeting or providing instruction, provide printed materials or [alternative formats](#) in advance.
- Relax and help the mentee feel relaxed.
- Individuals require accommodations to meet their needs at minimal cost.
- Today's technology provides increased accessibility; more than you can imagine.
- The [TARGET Center](#) provides accommodations to meet an individual's accessibility needs.
- Have any questions? Always remember to "Ask the Individual."

Mentoring an Individual Who is Blind or Has Low Vision:

- It is not acceptable to lead or grab the individual's arm or hand to assist him or her.
- It is acceptable to assist an individual once the individual asks for help or accepts your offer of help.
- It is easier for the individual to hold onto your elbow when you lead.
- Do not touch or move the individual's white cane with or without two red bands or other assistive devices, since these items are extensions that belong to the individual and are very important.
- Provide visually-detailed instruction of the environment to the individual when you are walking with him or her.
- Do not pet or touch guide dogs without asking the owner because the Service Animals are performing tasks for the individual.

Mentoring an Individual Who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing:

- Individuals prefer to be called “deaf and hard of hearing”, not “hearing impaired.”
- Look directly at the individual when communicating with them (even when a sign language interpreter or companion is present).
- Make eye contact and use natural facial expressions and gestures.
- Use plain language and avoid jargons.
- Rephrase your sentence if the individual does not understand.
- Be aware of personal habits that may serve as barriers to comfortable lip reading (e.g., hand in front of mouth, not directly facing the individual, and chewing while speaking).
- Visual information is useful and preferred.
- Ask or write notes, if you or the individual needs clarity to understand.
- Provide Sign Language Interpreters (ask the employee for their preferred method of communication) at meetings, events, and trainings.
- Contact the [TARGET Center](#) for a Fact Sheet of “How to Work with Sign Language Interpreters - A Fact Sheet for Mentors Who are Mentoring Deaf and Hard of Hearing Individuals.”

Mentoring an Individual Who is DeafBlind:

- Adjust the lights in the meeting location, per the individual’s request.
- Wear a solid top that gives contrast with your skin for the individual to view you. The individuals have a variety of tunnel vision may exist. You will have to sign in a small space area in front of your chest so the individuals would be able to view the signs narrowly in your chest area. You can have a conversation with natural facial expressions, gestures. It is important for the individual to have accessible communication by seeing you clearly.
- Don’t wear flashy jewelry/buttons to ensure that the individual is able to focus and communicate with you without distractions. It is important for the employee to have accessible communication without frustration.
- Provide Sign Language Interpreters at meetings, events and trainings. Ask the individual for their preferred method of communication, e.g., a tactile or Deaf Certified Interpreter.
- Look directly at the individual when communicating with them (even when an interpreter or a companion is present).
- Make eye contact and use natural facial expressions and gestures in small space area in front of your chest.
- Rephrase sentences if you are asked for clarity.
- It is not acceptable to lead or grab the individual’s arm or hand to assist him or her.
- It is acceptable to assist an individual once the individual asks for help or accepts your offer of help.
- It is easier for the individual to hold onto your elbow when you lead.
- Do not touch or move the individual’s white cane with two red bands or other assistive devices since these items are extensions that belong to the individual and are very important.

- Provide visually-detailed instructions of the environment to the individual when you are walking with him or her.
- Do not pet or touch service animals without asking the owner, since service animals are performing tasks for the individual.
- Contact the [TARGET Center](#) for a Fact Sheet of “How to Work with Sign Language Interpreters - A Fact Sheet for Mentors Who are Mentoring Deaf and Hard of Hearing Individuals.”

Mentoring an Individual with a Physical Disability:

- It is inappropriate to lean on a wheelchair when communicating with the individual.
- When conversing with the individual, sit in a chair to have an eye level conversation with him or her.
- Do not touch or move the individual’s wheelchair or other assistive devices since these items are extensions that belong to the individual and are very important.
- Do not pet or touch service animals without asking the owner, since service animals are performing tasks for the individual.

Mentoring an Individual with a Dexterity Disability:

- Understand that conditions may include Quadriplegia, Paraplegia, Multiple Sclerosis, Cerebral Palsy, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, tendonitis, arthritis, sciatica, amputations or degenerative disc disease.
- Understand that there are limitations that affect mobility such as range of motion in the arms, fingers, wrists, back or neck, and decreased muscle control, spasms, paralysis, tingling or numbness.
- Provide an ergonomic workstation suited specifically for the individual.
- Do not remove an individual’s ergonomic equipment, since these items are extensions that belong to the individual and are very important.

Mentoring an Individual with Speech Disability:

- Allow the individual to finish his or her sentences, before interjecting.
- Ask simple questions where the individual can answer with a short statement or a nod of the head.
- Repeat what you understand in a statement or incorporate the individual’s statement into what you are saying.
- Accept longer responses from the individual.
- Ask or write notes, if you or the individual require clarity to understand.

Mentoring an Individual with Cognitive Disability:

- Understand that conditions may include dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Multiple Sclerosis, stroke, Alzheimer’s disease and traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- Understand that a cognitive disability may include memory loss, decreased organization, decreased concentration, word finding difficulty or orientation difficulty.
- Provide assistive technology for the individual to focus and accomplish tasks without distractions.

- Do not remove or replace an individual's assistive technology since these items are extensions that belong to the individual and are very important.

The Following Courteous Terms are Considered Acceptable and Respectful in the Disability Community:

- Individuals with disabilities
- Disability
- Accessibility
- Non-disabled
- Congenital disability
- Deaf or Hard of Hearing
- DeafBlind
- Blind or low vision
- Hidden disability
- Survivor
- Wheelchair user
- Someone of short stature
- Developmentally disabled
- Intellectual disability
- Learning disability
- Accessible entrance or parking

For additional information, questions or comments, select the link [Start My TARGET Experience](#).