Willing and able
10 tips for working with people with disabilities

1. **Ask first.** Don’t assume people need help. Ask if they need anything to make the process more effective or easier for them. They are the experts on their needs and how to best meet them. If they do request assistance, ask for specific instructions on how you can help. Be sure to ask if you don’t know what to do or what something means.

2. **Keep an open mind.** Don’t make assumptions about a person’s abilities. The individual is the best judge of what he or she can or cannot do. If a person has a speech impairment, don’t assume that person also has a hearing impairment or intellectual limitations.

3. **Be direct.** Make eye contact and speak to the person directly, even if their personal care attendant or interpreter is with them.

4. **Speak like yourself.** Use your normal volume and pace, unless they ask you to speak louder or slower.

5. **Ask for help.** If you don’t understand what someone is saying, ask the person to repeat it or offer another form of communication (such as paper and a pen or a computer) for clarification.

6. **Be wheelchair-sensitive.** If you’re working with someone who uses a wheelchair or mobility device, don’t lean on it. Also, if you’re speaking with them for a prolonged period of time, sit in a chair to be at their level. Never start to push someone’s wheelchair without first asking the occupant’s permission.

7. **Give visual aid.** If you are working with someone who is visually impaired, clearly identify yourself when you first arrive and be sure to let him or her know when you’re leaving the conversation or room. Also, offer to read any written information. Give the person your arm and gently guide him or her if requested. When walking with a person who is visually impaired, allow that person to set the pace. If the person asks for or accepts your offer of help, don’t grab his arm. It is easier for him to hold onto you.
8. **Speak clearly, listen well.** If you are working with a person who has a developmental disability, use clear sentences, simple words and concrete concepts. Gauge the pace, complexity and vocabulary of your speech to match his or hers. Stand in front of the person and use gestures to aid communication. And, unless you are informed otherwise, remember he or she can make his or her own decisions. Allow people with speech impairments to finish their own sentences. Don't talk for them or interrupt. Ask questions that permit short answers or a nod of the head. The other person always has the option of giving a longer response.

9. **Don't pet the dog.** If you’re working with someone who has a service dog, ask permission before touching the animal.

10. **Relax.** Mistakes are human. Just be willing to learn from them.