



REMOVING BARRIERS*

Planning Accessible Meetings that Consider the Health of Everyone

*Special Edition: Asthma, allergies, headaches,
chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and chemical sensitivities*

Planning accessible meetings may seem challenging, but the extra effort pays off. Creating a barrier-free meeting that is comfortable for everyone requires an open mind and a willingness to make changes.

This document provides you with methods to remove barriers for people with asthma, allergies, headaches, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and chemical sensitivities, all disabling conditions that are dramatically increasing. The prevalence of asthma alone increased 75% between 1990 and 1994 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). Although much is still unknown about all of these conditions, a significant overlap among them exists in that chemicals, particularly petrochemicals, are known to exacerbate the symptoms. For example, over 70% of all asthmatics develop respiratory symptoms when exposed to the chemicals in perfumes, colognes and other personal care products (Food and Drug Administration).

Each of these conditions may require a different accommodation. Some accommodations, such as providing a scent-free environment, should be made no matter who will be attending your meeting, because fragrances (derived from chemicals) seem to be a universal trigger. Providing a scent-free environment is the precautionary principal approach to planning a meeting; when consequences of an action are unknown, but potentially harmful, it is best to avoid that action. You just never know who will attend your meeting or how someone will be affected by chemicals.

Maybe you are still unsure if you should make the effort to provide accessible meetings. Interestingly, removing barriers benefits everyone in the long run. For example, even though automatic doors and ramps were not developed with everyone in mind, they happen to benefit everyone. Likewise, providing a space that is chemical-free benefits everyone (research suggests it increases worker productivity). Besides, planning meetings that are accessible for all participants is simply a good hosting practice.

To learn about creating a barrier-free meeting that is comfortable for people with asthma, allergies, headaches, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and chemical sensitivities, please see the back of this sheet. It is highly likely that at least 20% of those people attending your meeting, workshop, event, or conference will require at least one of these accommodations.

The North Carolina Office on Disability and Health in collaboration with the Center for Universal Design developed the guide "Removing Barriers: Planning Meetings That Are Accessible To All Participants." For in depth information on providing accommodations for wheelchair users or people with hearing and sight impairments please refer to the guide at www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncodh. You can also contact the Office of Disability and Health, New Mexico Department of Health at (505) 827-0272 for a free copy.



Think of everyone's health, including people with
asthma, allergies, headaches, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and chemical sensitivities.

CONSIDER THESE POINTS WHEN PLANNING YOUR NEXT MEETING.



Prior to the meeting

All meetings should be posted as scent-free. It is easy to do and makes a difference in worker productivity for all. Prior to the event, be sure to make the scent-free request to all participants. You may need to ask people more than once. The day of the event is too late to make the request; someone will have to leave, the person(s) wearing the scents or the person(s) reacting to the scents, and everyone has the right to be present.



Choosing the meeting space: If at all possible...

Avoid newly painted and remodeled spaces. Rooms with older tile, wood floors, and older carpet are generally tolerable.

Ensure that the meeting space was not recently cleaned, unless non-toxic cleaning agents were used.*

Make sure there is an accessible bathroom. Alternative chemical-free products are available if you must use air deodorizers or fresheners.*

Avoid spaces that are dusty or moldy.

Pesticides are a problem for many people. If at all possible, find a location where pesticides are not used. Otherwise, check with maintenance personnel to find out when, where and what kind of pesticides were used. Depending on the pesticide, break down from the time of application might be as soon as six weeks, but some take months. If the pesticide has not broken down yet, schedule a teleconference or a different meeting space.

Try to choose meeting spaces with windows that open. If this is not possible, use a quality air purifier. Be sure the air purifier is *not* an ionizer or ozone unit; these can exacerbate asthma.

Good air circulation is important. Be sure the air is not circulating from a loading dock or truck loading zone.

Last but not least, ensure the meeting is in a smoke-free environment. If possible ensure that smokers smoke far away from the entrance to the building.



During the meeting

Ensure that markers are 100% non-toxic, water-based.*

Respect the people who choose to sit in back or away from people in meetings. People may not be able to participate in icebreakers or activities that involve close personal contact due to the chemicals in personal care products.

* Alternative products are available at natural food stores or on the Web. If you work for the State of New Mexico and use the Save Smart plan, Belew's catalog offers less toxic alternatives such as Simple Green All-purpose cleaner. Note that AP certified, non-toxic markers are also available through Belew's, but these are not fully water-soluble and may contain solvents that can trigger reactions.