

UUCA Accessibility Policies

Sept 2014

Introduction

People with disabilities have spiritual lives and spiritual needs, as do all people, and desire a faith community where they can grow, participate, and offer their abilities and gifts.

As a welcoming faith community we are called to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of all people through active compassion, justice, and equity. UUCA expresses these values by engaging creatively to eliminate barriers, whether physical, emotional, intellectual, or social, for people who are disabled, their family, and their caregivers.

Disabilities can be lifelong, affecting people from birth and throughout their lives; disabilities may occur later in life and require adjustments. Disabilities may be physical, developmental, cognitive, or affect mental health. Disabilities may be visible and they may be invisible. Disabilities may be fairly stable and fixed and they may be progressive, requiring periodic adjustments.

Though this document addresses UUCA's goals for being inclusive of those who have disabilities and have joined our faith community it is important to acknowledge that any of us who are currently able-bodied could at some point in our lives become someone with a disability. Therefore, attending to the needs of people with disabilities is in the spiritual interest of, and an important step in, growing the faith of our whole community.

Moving toward inclusion might be thought of as an ongoing process to continually improve and broaden our efforts. It is the goal of this document that UUCA become not only fully accessible under the law, but take the next step to truly welcome people with disabilities, and integrate people with disabilities into every facet of UU religious life.

A fully welcoming environment is most evident in the attitudes and actions of the congregation - from all members including the lay and professional leadership. The barriers to an individual's participation will vary by a person's specific disability, and specific accommodations are made on a case-by-case basis, as well as general accommodations for the benefits of all who might attend a service.

The goal is for the congregation to have a practice of full inclusion of each person independent of disability/ability. By ensuring full participation in church life, each person is able to bring his or her whole self, not sacrificing any part of that whole self "to fit in" or "not make a fuss." Everyone is ensured the ability to be a full member because diversity and difference are viewed as gifts that enrich everyone.

The congregation recognizes the presence of people with disability and therefore makes some general accommodations that are evident, visible, and available to all. The

congregation has a covenant for appropriate behavior which applies to all congregation members and visitors attending any congregational event.

Accommodations and Reducing Physical Barriers

A. Mobility

Wheel-chair accessible entrances are clearly marked.

All areas of the church are accessible to people with mobility difficulties: ramps, elevators, pew cutouts, and accessible restrooms

Elevators are working properly.

Information about buses that come to Briarcliff Road and Cliff Valley should be available on the website.

For someone with partial mobility issues, if he/she can ride the bus to Briarcliff/Cliff Valley, it may be difficult to get from there to UUCA due to the fact that there is no complete sidewalk for the whole distance.

Recognize there may be a need to offer rides to people from their house to UUCA and devise a strategy for identifying people who can provide rides and connecting them to people who need them.

Recognize the need for seating outside the sanctuary, in order to rest between the social hall and the front lobby, for people who are somewhat impaired but can walk.

B. Visibility

Provide large type and/or Braille orders of service, hymnals, and other congregational publications.

Ensure adequate lighting.

Make sure website is accessible to those with visual disabilities (for example, web sites have alternate text for pictures, captions for spoken words.)

Congregational documents (minutes from meetings, bylaws, etc) in accessible format for those who use screen readers.

For secure web site areas that require interpreting a security code of numbers and letters, an audio CAPTIA that allows images not readable by screen readers to be interpreted.

Computers used in worship, religious exploration or church administration should be evaluated and equipped for people with visual impairments

C. Hearing

Needs can vary by person and level of impairment; some may be completely deaf, others may have hearing impairments, some may have auditory processing problems and each of these will require different approaches.

Provide assistive listening devices in worship and at meetings.

Make sure sound system is in good working order.

Consider having sermon manuscripts available to people before the service so someone with hearing impairment can read and follow along.

Hire someone who can sign the service

Develop a policy and procedures for providing sign language interpreters if and when necessary.

Films and videos used in services and other programs should be captioned.

Develop congregational knowledge of “Deaf culture” and the differences between “Deaf people” who do not consider deafness a disability and those who develop hearing loss later in life. Also establish a general understanding of the diverse communication preferences and strategies found among people who are Deaf or hard of hearing

D. Chemical and other Environmental Challenges

Encourage people not to wear heavily scented products to church

Have a separate seating area for people who need protection from fragrances and other environmental challenges

Avoid scented cleaning products

Avoid bright fluorescent lights

Label foods (at receptions, for example) with a list of ingredients

Forego foods (like peanuts) that are highly toxic to some people

Avoid flickering or blinking lights or text in films, videos, and computer screens to minimize the possibility of triggering seizures

E. Learning Disabilities and Developmental Disabilities

Obtain written biographies for children with learning or developmental disabilities (form can be provided) that describe the child in terms of preferences and strengths as well as ways to address behavioral issues. Make these available to classroom teachers. Ensure privacy.

Provide extra classroom assistance when needed.

Find ways to adults with developmental disabilities to participate in worship and/or other aspects of congregational life.

F. Cognitive impairment- Dementia

Recognize and accept the person as they are now rather than focusing on what they were capable of in the past.

Speak to the person and include in conversations.

Visit people with dementia wherever they live—nursing home, personal care, or family home.

Get to know the people who provide care to someone with dementia.

Where appropriate, allow the person with dementia to do what he/she is able to do.

Recognize that someone with advanced dementia may no longer be able to participate in the same way as they once did.

Recognize that someone with dementia still has spiritual needs and may still express a spiritual life.

Listen respectfully.

Holding the hand of a person with dementia may be a good way to connect.

Recognize that situations with a lot of noise or activity can be stressful for someone with dementia and they may need a quieter location within the sanctuary or when attending events.

Be aware of changing needs within a family, recognizing the caregiver's need for help.

G. Mental Health

Visit congregants who are hospitalized for mental health problems

Provide caring support for spiritual needs of people with mental health diagnoses

Recognize that mental illness does not have a correlation with violent behavior

Include people with mental health disabilities in congregational activities including worship

Be aware that people with mental health difficulties can recover and that participation in a religious community is often an important part of recovery.

Have an education program such as the Caring Congregation to educate the congregation about how to be sensitive to the needs of people with mental health diagnoses and, if applicable, their families. The congregation provides or recommends support groups, and pastoral care.

H. Addiction

Provide or give referrals to 12 step or other addiction support groups for people with addiction problems.

If possible, create a network of people who are in recovery and would be willing and able to talk to someone who may have an addiction and may be seeking help.

I. Service Animals

Allow for participating, without segregation, of people with service dogs

Make sure congregants know service animal etiquette: Do not pet guide dogs, Do not make noises at service animals. Do not feed service animals. Do not feel offended if the person does not feel like discussing his/her disability or the type of assistance the animal provides.

J. Hidden Disabilities

Recognize that people may have disabilities that are not apparent: traumatic brain injury, effects of chemo therapy, heart ailments, chronic pain, chronic fatigue, epilepsy, fibromyalgia, mental health conditions and others.

Some people who don't appear to be disabled may fatigue quickly. Have options where people can sit and participate in activities or who can opt out of an activity part way through.

K. Inclusion/Integration

Include and address the needs of people of all ages with disabilities at every level and in every facet of congregational life - in worship, in programs, in committees, in RE

programs, in social occasions, people -welcoming not only their presence, but the gifts of their lives as well.

People with disabilities are acknowledged and included like any other person – equally, as they have the same precious gifts as unique and valuable human beings, not focusing on the disability, but using any necessary accommodations to ensure their full inclusion and participation, as desired by the individuals.

Minister and staff should be trained in how to work with people with disabilities, and families of people with disabilities -- including knowing how, when, and to whom to make referrals. This training should include the importance of handling requests confidentially.

The congregation drafts its own non-discrimination policy as part of its by-laws and other official documents affecting congregational life. It is implemented fully, with clear remedies when discrimination happens

Congregation members learn how to be helpful when help is requested, allowing each person to be as independent as possible. This means that people know that they should ask before assisting a person, and listen to what is requested.

Work with families with a member who has a disability to involve the entire community in providing for the emotional and spiritual development of all children.

L. Intellectual barriers

Address assumptions that may include the idea that someone with cognitive impairments or intellectual disabilities is not intellectually capable of participating in the ritual and religious life of the congregation.

Recognize that one of the strengths of UUism—the value we place on intellectualism—can become an impediment if it isn't balanced with compassion.

Listen deeply to the ways that people with intellectual/cognitive impairments may express their experiences of a spiritual life and may desire to share those.

M. Advocacy

Advocacy brings action by and on behalf of people with disabilities out of the church and into the surrounding community.

Enlist people from within disability communities to guide your congregation's actions in a direction where they, themselves, see the greatest need.

Designate staff / leader / committee to identify who has the power to make decisions affecting people with disabilities within the local community.

Designate staff / leader / committee to monitor and keep abreast of the disability issues most needing attention locally at any given time.

Work in collaboration and coalition with other UU congregations, other faith communities, and social justice organizations to keep track of legislative developments at the state and national levels, and work to promote justice, freedom, and equality in the larger society.

Minister, staff, and leadership speak out when the rights of people with disabilities are at stake.

Be intentional about including and accepting leadership from people living with disabilities in advocacy work.

Cultivate “inclusive alliances” in which diverse members of the congregation advocate together, side by side, rather than encourage the perception that people without disabilities must do this work for people with disabilities.

Become familiar with access requirements of people with “emerging” disabilities.

N. Outreach

Many people with disabilities in the community feel “invisible.” They may lack transportation, and become house-bound, cut off from activities and people and unable to achieve their goals. They may become isolated because they cannot hear or see the same way as others. Too many are cut off from a faith community and the spiritual support that it can provide. Outreach efforts to people who have disabilities can help to make them more “visible” – and more valued.

One goal for congregational outreach is to reduce the physical, social, and spiritual isolation of people with disabilities. By doing so, outreach will increase for all members of the community to learn from, value, grow with, and appreciate each other.

Identify and listen to people in the community who report feeling isolated because of their disability.

Providing for their spiritual needs – worship, prayer, companionship, introductions.

Referral to local organizations that provide services for their disability.

Advocating for them when their rights and services are being threatened, as by budget cuts to funding for social services.

Make use of mediators and advocates who know access law, protocol and etiquette to help troubleshoot difficult situations.

O. Pastoral and lay-led support

Worship services ideally include: imagery, stories, readings, metaphors, music, and touch that references lived experience including those living with disabilities.

In worship or storytelling, include stories of characters with disabilities as a natural part of the tale

Use language that is not dependent on physical ability

Training in awareness and policies for working with people who have disabilities, for religious exploration teachers, ushers/greeters, lay ministers, and staff

A Covenant of Right Relations, regardless of differences, is displayed and included in the order of service and/or spoken litany in a service.

A process for handling complaints of overt or reckless discriminatory actions against people with disabilities.

G. Families and individuals

Actively engage families, friends, and individuals affected by disabilities in conversations and efforts to make the congregation welcoming to all including those with disabilities.

H. Congregational Education and Training for Religious Exploration Teachers

Some general training about how to be welcoming and inclusive of people with disabilities. It isn't necessary to know everything about all disabilities in order to be welcoming. Talking to people, a handshake, saying that you are glad to see the person, sitting with them in services, visiting in the social hall may be simple ways to make people feel welcome. Training and strategies for RE teachers to use in the classrooms with children.