

## DeafBlind Etiquette & Guidance for DORS Staff

The following guidance is provided for DORS staff who are serving DeafBlind individuals. This guidance focuses on standard DORS counselor and DeafBlind meetings. For any questions regarding this guide, please contact the DeafBlind Specialist, Leo Yates at [leo.yates@maryland.gov](mailto:leo.yates@maryland.gov). For additional DeafBlind resources, see the [resource guide](#).

### **Prior to the Meeting**

1. In order to plan the meeting, ask what the DeafBlind individual's communication preferences are, whether they are using tactile signing, pro-tactile, braille, speaking verbally if they have residual hearing, and/or other communication methods. Sometimes, it may be multiple communication methods. This will help with planning and making arrangements.
2. Because there may be other people involved in meetings with DeafBlind individuals, it is important to remember (and even ask) who else may be involved in the meetings such as interpreters, co-navigators/SSPs, advocates or family members, transportation, other providers (like Service Coordination), among others. DORS only provides co-navigators/SSPs for DORS-related services when available by certain partners or vendors but sometimes a DeafBlind individual will have their own. Interpreters and transportation will likely need 1 or 2 weeks advance notice to arrange these services.
3. Some DeafBlind individuals may have a preference when it comes to tactile or ASL interpreters. If possible, ask them for the names of their preferred interpreters and look into arranging this. It may help to ask, "Do you use traditional tactile signing, hand-on-hand when communicating?" Sometimes, communicating can vary depending on the DeafBlind's communication style.
4. When emailing interpreter requests with the DORS DeafBlind Specialist, provide a brief summary of the assignment (e.g., review of IPE). Send interpreter requests to the DORS DeafBlind Specialist, the communication type (ASL, tactile interpreting, Signed English, etc.). Include the date and time, the location of the meeting, what type of meeting it is, and contact information on the day of the event (to share with the interpreters).
5. The meeting or work space may need to be adapted for the DeafBlind individual. If it was not asked prior to the meeting, then do ask at this time. An example is not having a sunlight window in their view (behind the person the DeafBlind individual is communicating with) as it may diminish, disrupt, or distract their communication. Simply asking, "how can we make our meeting accessible for you?" may be all that is needed. If there is no response, then ask, "Do you need an interpreter, a well-lit room, or handouts in large print or in braille?" (braille materials will likely need advanced planning). This may prompt additional responses.
6. Some DeafBlind individuals may have sight sensitivities (and even noise sensitivities). For instance, if a Deaf or hearing individual wears a polka dot shirt or a neon colored shirt, this may hinder visual communication. When the DeafBlind individual signs or uses tactile signing, wearing a solid color shirt that contrasts your skin tone can usually be helpful for communication purposes (this will depend on their vision impairment).
7. Include additional time for meetings as the logistics may delay or prolong the meeting. Perhaps an additional 1-2 hours depending on the meeting discussion.

8. There is a strong likelihood that you will be in close proximity to the DeafBlind individual. Be mindful that some individuals are bothered by strong colognes and perfumes.
9. Consider inviting the DORS DeafBlind Specialist to attend the meeting for additional support.
10. Some DeafBlind individuals use Communication Facilitators (CF) who may come to their home one or two days a week. This might be an ideal time to communicate by video phone or VRS when the CF is there for short conversations. Ask if they have a CF and what day of the week is best to contact them.
11. For DeafBlind individuals who use tactile signing, it may be helpful to have hand sanitizer on hand, in particular if persons attending the meeting may have health concerns. It can be helpful for all involved.

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### **At the Meeting**

1. If transportation was arranged, sometimes the driver comes early. In these instances, it is recommended to still greet the DeafBlind individual and let them know the meeting will start at the scheduled time. Sometimes, others participating in the meeting may not have arrived. This assures the DeafBlind individual that they are at the right place and will wait for their appointment.
2. Depending on the DeafBlind individual, they may likely want you to guide them to the space or meeting place. For example, when they arrive at the DORS office, they may be guided by the primary DORS staff to their office or conference room. ASK FIRST before assuming they need to be guided as some may want a guide while others may be tracking/following you.
3. Introductions and who is present are a must so DeafBlind individuals are aware, informed, and included to others' presence.
4. If you were unable to identify their communication preferences at the time of scheduling the meeting, then ask what their communication preferences are. Perhaps their preference is using tactile signing, pro-tactile, speaking verbally if they have residual hearing, and/or other communication methods. They may have multiple communication preferences.
5. At the time of first meeting the DeafBlind in person, commonly after the introductions of who are present, explain the layout of the space so they are aware. Ask if this setup meets their preference, typically where individuals will be seated. Sometimes, the DeafBlind individual will have a preference if the interpreter or tactile interpreter is on their right or left.
6. Be aware that the DeafBlind individual who is using residual sight to track (follow) what is being signed, might likely include them putting their hand on the back of your hand or holding your wrist, in order to stay within their sightline when communicating.
7. An accessible space helps with communication for DeafBlind individuals. Sometimes, this can be asked prior to meeting with them, but sometimes the space might need to be adapted. An example is not having a sunlight window in their view (behind the person the DeafBlind individual is communicating with) as it may diminish, disrupt, or distract their communication. Simply ask, "how can we make our meeting accessible for you?" may be all that is needed. If there is no response, then ask, "Do you need an interpreter, a well-lit room, or handouts in large print or braille?" This may prompt additional responses. Moving seats around can be common.

8. If the DeafBlind individual is accompanied by a co-navigator / support service provider (SSP), ASL interpreter, a family member, and/or an advocate or ally, they too should be introduced. It is good practice to document the names of those present.
9. If you are unable to communicate in a certain method, such as speaking or using pro-tactile, then make it be known so the DeafBlind individual is aware and can make any adjustments if possible.
10. Avoid any empathetic remarks over their DeafBlindness as it may be misconstrued as audism.
11. When the DeafBlind individual and their DORS services are the reason for the meeting, it can be construed as rude if communication is not being shared with them (meaning, don't have side conversations about the DeafBlind individual without them knowing it).
12. It can be helpful to some DeafBlind individuals attending the meeting by periodically asking if they have any questions or comments they wish to share, particularly if they are seemingly quiet.
13. Be mindful of the pace of the conversation as tactile sign language is often slower than signing. Also, repeating signs or rephrasing concepts can occur with regular sign language interpreting and tactile interpreting. One person should speak at a time.
14. For extended meetings or conversations, sometimes breaks are necessary, in particular when tactile interpreters are involved. If there is only one tactile interpreter, then ensure there are breaks.
15. It is very important that the DeafBlind individual is making their own decisions and choices. When possible, offer choices even when there is a best choice - let them decide.
16. If family members are making/stating decisions for the DeafBlind individual, you should still inquire with the DeafBlind individual so you can hear their decision or choice.
17. If the DeafBlind individual has a seeing-eye dog, do not pet or interact with the dog unless you have permission (the dog is working).
18. The DeafBlind individual may possibly use a white cane for navigating, depending on their vision loss. It is important not to move it without the DeafBlind individual knowing. Typically, they will move it or fold it up if that is needed.
19. If you or someone significant to the meeting leaves the space or room, communicate this with the DeafBlind individual.
20. Typically, it is NOT necessary to introduce the DeafBlind individual to someone and add "This is so and so, they are DeafBlind." If the DeafBlind individual wishes to disclose this, then they will be the one to do it. (Sometimes, it is obvious.)
21. Some to most DeafBlind individuals are time-oriented (following set schedules/appointments) and it is important to them to keep scheduled appointments. This may be the case when others are involved such as tactile interpreters, family members, advocates, and the like. If there is a delay, be sure to communicate this.
22. When DeafBlind individuals who need to use the bathroom, have either a DORS staff of the same gender or someone who accompanied them guide the DeafBlind individual to the bathroom.
23. If there are other providers involved in the DORS case, be sure you have permission from the DeafBlind individual to communicate with them. Don't forget to have the individual sign the consent of release of information.
24. If a tactile interpreter or ASL interpreter is present, avoid the "tell them that..." statements. Speak directly to the DeafBlind individual instead of speaking to them in third-person.

25. If the DeafBlind individual needs to sign documents, have a signature block on hand as it will make it easier for the DeafBlind individual to sign the document(s).
  26. Avoid the temptation of looking on your cell phone (texting) while in the meeting. If you wouldn't pull out your cell phone with a sighted person, you shouldn't pull it out with a DeafBlind person. Certainly, if it pertains to the meeting, like checking the calendar or to see if another individual attending has texted, then this is okay.
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### **Following the Meeting**

1. If possible, make what was discussed accessible in other ways, such as a meeting summary by email, a video recording of the meeting (such as Zoom), and the like. Offer this to see if this is their preference. This may help them to capture what may have been missed.
2. Check in with the DeafBlind individual following the meeting to see how the meeting went for them. Sometimes, they may have recommendations to improve communications for the next or follow up meeting.
3. If there is a follow up meeting, be sure to make the arrangements, such as transportation, interpreters, and/or referrals.
4. Continue communicating updates from the meeting with the DeafBlind individual, even when there is no update. Historically, DeafBlind people are not communicated with so even brief updates are better than waiting for long periods of time.