

Tips for Maintaining Accessibility During and After COVID-19

The American Alliance of Museums offers the following tips from experts Janice Majewski and Beth Ziebarth to help you determine policies related to maintaining accessibility for visitors and staff with disabilities amid the pandemic. The information shared here is based on the best available information as of publication. Museums are encouraged to seek legal and other expert advice on their specific circumstances regarding compliance with the [Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act](#), and/or any state or local accessibility and health requirements.

When museums reopened after COVID-19 closures, they proceeded to limit entrances, enforce physical distancing, alter paths through galleries, cancel tours and programs, and eliminate any physical contact with surfaces judged nonessential. These measures were strict and inconveniencing for many, but devastating for visitors and staff with a broad range of disabilities. Suddenly hard-won accessibility and inclusion in spaces, exhibitions, programs, and retail diminished or disappeared entirely for this part of our audience.

Now as we develop more permanent plans for the path ahead, it's critical that we plan for *all* of our public. We want to make sure our decisions protect everyone—visitors and staff alike—but do not disproportionately burden or exclude some people more than others.

Here are some examples of inclusive re-opening practices that place accessibility at the forefront for your museum to consider:

Before the visit

- » When selecting or building an online museum admission ticketing system, keep the ticketing process accessible by consulting the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (WCAG) in the resources linked below. This includes steps such as using alt text for images, providing on-screen content that screen readers can easily read, and including captions and audio descriptions for videos.
- » Include information on the ticketing website about [visit requirements](#), including limitations on group size and the level of accessibility visitors should anticipate. Provide details on any accommodations that need to be requested in advance of a visit, and offer accessible contact information for visitors to make a request or ask questions.
- » If your museum is relying on apps and websites to offer visitors information, maps, and tours during the pandemic, consult the current Mobile Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (part of the WCAG website linked above) for guidance about how to make these accessible. This Alliance blog post from accessibility expert, Sina Bahram, gives "[10 Best Practices of Accessible Museum Websites](#)."

Online programming

- » Make your online programs more accessible with features such as closed captioning, image description, and post-program transcripts. Be aware that if you are using speech recognition AI for closed captioning (instead of a live captioning service,) you may need to review the captions for accuracy to ensure that program participants who require them receive information that is clear and meaningful.
- » Keep in mind that many visitors may have become more comfortable with technology over the course of the pandemic (think of all those video reunions between family members!), so apps that support accessibility may be more welcomed and readily used than before.

During the visit

Ticketing/Entry:

- » Consider timed ticketing, which offers increased predictability about when one can enter the museum and how many other visitors will be there, building confidence about a visit. Reduced crowd sizes and physical distancing may make the overall environment less busy and noisy, and therefore more comfortable for individuals who have difficulty processing stimuli or hearing clearly. Virtual queuing and timed ticketing also eliminate long lines to make a visit easier for people with mobility disabilities, limited stamina, and age-related disabilities that induce pain when standing for extended periods (just remember to keep physically distanced seating available throughout the building.)
- » Ensure that all visitors can use the same designated entrances and exits, if they must be limited to maintain appropriate distancing. The entrances should be located on an accessible route and meet the [ADA Standards](#) for clear open width, hardware, opening force, and other requirements.
- » Ensure check-in and screening procedures for ticketing, security, and compliance with COVID-19 protocols are accessible for all visitors. Provide easy-to-read signage, with audio and print alternatives to ensure that everyone has access to the necessary information. Contactless, accessible procedures (e.g., online purchasing of tickets and payments for retail) can improve communication between staff and visitors who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind, have low vision, and/or have some brain-based disabilities that produce social anxiety.
- » To balance staff safety with visitor accessibility needs, consider limiting the time individual staff members can have proximity to a visitor they are assisting. Depending upon staffing levels, it may be necessary to impose a time limit on assistive services or tours for both staff and visitor safety. However, if you create such a protocol, it is *essential* to have it posted along with other accessibility information on the museum and ticketing websites and other advertising sources.
- » Consult the information available on face coverings/masks and people with disabilities from the [ADA National Network](#). Robin Jones, ADA expert, states in a November 9, 2020, email to the Kennedy Center's cultural arts access network:
 - o Entities are not required to allow entry to individuals who are unable to wear facial coverings due to a disability based on the CDC information related to transmission of the virus and potential risk that is associated with exposure by persons who are not wearing a mask/facial covering.
 - o If a museum prohibits someone from entering without a face covering/mask they [the museum] are still obligated to modify their policy or procedures to allow the person access to goods and services if possible. This could include

a virtual tour of the facility, curbside service, etc. Museums would need to examine the types of programs and services that they provide to the public and identify potential alternatives that would still provide accommodations to enable access to the program or service. While it is recognized that the experience may not be the same and the visitor may not have their “preferred” option provided, the health and safety of all supersedes in these situations.

- » Have staff wearing masks, particularly those stationed at entrances, wear a design with clear panels that meets CDC safety criteria, so that people who are deaf or hard of hearing can see their mouths for speech reading purposes. When this is not possible, having iPads or even just paper and pencil on hand can help facilitate communication between staff and visitors.

Tours/onsite programming:

- » Try not to eliminate accessible services and programs when docent or staff-led tours and access to tactile elements are restricted due to COVID-19 precautions. For example, develop staff procedures for providing sighted guides, visual descriptions, and tactile experiences for visitors who are blind or have low vision.
- » If you are still providing tours, continue to provide services and technologies for accessible tours (e.g., sign language interpretation and portable assistive listening devices to aid communication when social distancing in tours).
- » Ensure one-way paths of travel are accessible—meeting requirements for clear width, turning spaces, accessible barriers, and other requirements—and address ways to minimize the distance a person with a disability might need to cover between seating areas. Wider paths required for physical distancing can make travel through the museum easier for people with mobility disabilities who use assistive devices (e.g., wheelchairs, canes, crutches, walkers).
- » Ensure defined paths through galleries allow people with low vision to get close enough to objects, labels, and videos to see them. If that is impossible due to safety issues, create separate tours that allow these visitors to go beyond the barriers or engage with the objects in a different way. Large, high-contrast print labels with good lighting—long advocated for to serve people with low vision—are more readable from a distance and so reduce crowding close to them.
- » Provide access to tactile signage as required by the ADA (e.g., for restrooms, exits, and other permanent locations) for people who are blind or have low vision, and do not prevent them from using it unless staff is onsite to guide everyone to these spaces.

Seating, physical distancing, and essentials:

- » Maintain accessible seating in the museum. The seating should be 17-19” above the floor, stable, and preferably with a back and arms to make it easier for a visitor to lower themselves onto the seat and rise up from it. Choose easily cleaned seating materials like plastic or other non-fabric materials. Provide signage that alerts visitors to the need to maintain distancing from people not in their group when seated.
- » Ensure any stanchions used for distancing are cane-detectable. [Cane-detectable stanchions](#) typically have a tape at 36” above the floor and a second tape between 12” and 27” above the floor.
- » Define ways that elevators can remain available to people with disabilities that prevent them from climbing or descending stairs. Elevator signage should reinforce physical distancing requirements by limiting capacity but not eliminating use in necessary locations or completely.

- » If you need to close restrooms for cleaning or social distancing, always have accessible restrooms available elsewhere. If not all restrooms are accessible, create signage to direct people from the inaccessible ones to the accessible ones.
- » Choose handwashing and sanitizing options that are easily accessible to people with mobility disabilities, low vision, brain-based disabilities, and chemical sensitivities. Assess the height, method of operation, reach range, and cane-detectability of hand sanitizer dispensers. Choose unscented sanitizers for people with allergies and sensitivities to scents.
- » Ensure new retail and restaurant procedures you develop serve visitors with disabilities. Signage, audible information, and/or staff should inform visitors of the protocols for queuing, payment, staff assistance, and seating for dining. The Cuseum Playbook advises that if museum members need to use their membership cards for transactions—including admission, shop, and food discounts—organizations should consider implementing a contactless digital scanning procedure to eliminate the need for physically exchanging the card with staff. This practice has the added benefit of making the use of membership cards more accessible for people with limited hand dexterity, who may not be able to insert or slide a card in point-of-service equipment.
- » Develop procedures for the maintenance, sanitation, and availability of tools and technologies needed to accommodate visitors with disabilities. These may include wheelchairs, assistive listening and visual description equipment, noise-cancelling headphones, and other sensory tools. If your museum has a quiet room, maintain its availability to visitors with sensory issues by developing a procedure that ensures cleaning between uses and appropriate physical distancing.

Selected Resources

- » [Smithsonian Accessibility Tip Sheet: Sighted Guide amid COVID-19 Social Distancing Requirements](#)
- » [How Will COVID-19 Change the Way Museums Are Built?](#)
- » [Reopening Museums & Cultural Attractions: Succeeding in the Post-COVID Era with Thoughtful Digital Tools](#)
- » [Great Lakes ADA Center. Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) National Resources](#)
- » [Advocacy for inclusive museums after COVID-19](#)
- » [As the Smithsonian starts to reopen, a small team takes on a big question: how to keep coronavirus concerns from taking away accessibility?](#)
- » [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\)](#)

Selected Examples of Museums Websites for Covid and Accessibility Information Before Visiting:

- » [International Spy Museum](#)
- » [Museum of Science, Boston](#)
- » [National Aquarium](#)
- » [The Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum](#)
- » [The Walters Art Museum](#)
- » [United States Olympic & Paralympic Museum](#)

Selected Resources on Face Coverings and Masks:

- » [Webinar Covering Title III of the ADA related to masks/facial coverings](#)
- » [Webinar Covering Access to Programs and Services of the ADA which includes discussion of facial coverings/masks](#)
- » [Webinar covering Title II and Post-Secondary Education which includes a discussion of facial coverings/masks](#)
- » [Good fact sheets and FAQ's on Facial Coverings/Masks published by some of the members of the ADA National Network](#)

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Support Free COVID-19 Resources for the Museum Field

The current crisis is taking a distressing financial toll on cultural organizations, and AAM is no different. In these challenging times, we ask that if you can, consider supporting our [advocacy work](#) and making extensive [COVID-19 resources](#) freely available for our field, by [making a donation](#) or [becoming a member](#) of AAM. Thank you for your much-needed support.