

# **Providing Quality Services to NRCS Customers with Disabilities**

## **Potential Customer Base**

The NRCS community constantly tries to provide better services to existing customers and to expand its market by developing new customer bases. A large untapped customer market is the disability market, which can be an economically advantageous niche for our agency.

At 20 percent of the population, people with disabilities comprise the nation's largest minority group. As the population ages, approximately 40 percent of those over 65 will likely have disabilities. According to the Census Bureau's 1997 edition of "Current Population Reports," there are 54 million Americans with disabilities.

Serving customers with disabilities provides significant opportunities for the NRCS. More than 20.3 million families in the U.S. have at least one member with a disability.

## **Key to Quality Customer Service**

The key to providing quality services to customers with disabilities is to remember that all customers are individuals. Persons with disabilities come in all shapes and sizes with diverse personalities, abilities, interests, needs, and preferences--- just like every other customer. Below are some basic tips for interacting with customers who have disabilities. However, in most cases, the best way to learn how to accommodate customers with disabilities is to ask them directly.

Etiquette considered appropriate when interacting with customers with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Listen and learn from what the customer tells you regarding his or her needs. Remember, customers with disabilities will continue to patronize our agency that welcome them, are helpful, are accessible and provide quality services.

## **Serving Customers Who Are Visually Impaired**

- Speak to the customer when you approach her or him.
- State clearly who you are; speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Never touch or distract a service dog without first asking the customer.
- Tell the customer when you are leaving; never leave a person who is blind talking to an empty space.
- Do not attempt to lead the customer without first asking; allow the customer to hold your arm and control her or his own movements.
- Be descriptive when giving directions; give the customer verbal information that is visually obvious to persons who can see. For example, if you are approaching steps mention how many and the direction.

- If you are offering a seat, gently place the customer's hand on the back or arm of the chair and let her or him sit down by her or himself.
- Make sure the customer has picked up all of her or his possessions, before leaving.
- Ask if the customer needs assistance signing forms. Offer to guide her or his hand to the appropriate space for signature.

## **Serving Customers Who Are Hearing Impaired**

- Gain her or his attention before starting a conversation (i.e., tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm).
- Identify who you are (i.e., show them your name badge).
- Look directly at the customer, face the light, speak clearly, in a normal tone or voice, and keep your hands away from your face; use short, simple sentences.
- Ask the customer if it would be helpful to communicate by writing or by using a computer terminal.
- If the customer uses a sign-language interpreter, speak directly to the customer, not the interpreter.
- If you telephone a customer who is hard of hearing, let the phone ring longer than usual; speak clearly and be prepared to repeat the reason for the call and who you are.
- If you telephone a customer who is deaf, use your state telecommunications relay service. Wisconsin relay is **711**, Federal relay is **1-800-877-8339**.
- Discuss matters that are personal in a private room to avoid staring or eavesdropping by other customers or employees.

## **Serving Customers With Mobility Impairments**

- Put yourself at the wheelchair user's eye level. If possible, sit next to the customer when having a conversation.
- Do not lean on a wheelchair or any other assistive device.
- Do not assume the customer wants to be pushed --- ask first.
- Provide a clipboard as a writing surface if counters or reception desks are too high; come around to the customer side of the desk/counter during your interaction.
- Offer assistance if the customer appears to be having difficulty opening the doors.
- Make sure there is a clear path of travel.
- If a person uses crutches, a walker, or some other assistive equipment, offer assistance with coats, bags, or other belongings.
- Offer a chair if the customer will be standing for a long period of time.
- If you telephone the customer, allow the phone to ring longer than usual to allow extra time for her or him to reach the telephone.

## **Serving Customers With Speech Impairments**

- If you do not understand something do not pretend that you do; ask the customer to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back.
- Be patient; take as much time as necessary.
- Try to ask questions which require only short answers, or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate on what the customer is saying; concentrate on listening and communicating.
- Avoid barriers like glass partitions and distractions, such as noisy places.
- Do not speak for the customer or attempt to finish her or his sentences.
- If you are having difficulty understanding the customer, consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask the customer if this is acceptable.
- If no solution to the communication problem can be worked out between you and the customer, ask if there is someone who could interpret on the customer's behalf.
- Discuss matters that are personal in a private room to avoid staring or eavesdropping by other customers or employees.

### **Serving Customers With Cognitive Disabilities**

- Be prepared to provide an explanation more than once.
- Offer assistance with and/or extra time for completion of forms, understanding written instructions, and/or decision-making; wait for the customer to accept the offer assistance; do not "over-assist" or be patronizing.
- If a customer has difficulty reading or writing, she or he may prefer to take forms home to complete.
- Be patient, flexible, supportive; take time to understand the customer and make sure the customer understands you.
- Consider moving to a quiet or private location, if in a public area with many distractions.

### **Remember**

- Provide access to facilities and services.
- Relax.
- Listen to the customer.
- Make the customer feel comfortable.
- Treat the customer with dignity, respect, and courtesy.
- Offer assistance but do not insist.
- Ask the customer to tell you the best way to help.
- Deal with unfamiliar situations in a calm, professional manner.