

Accessible Cooling Centers Guide



Guide to Ensure People with Disabilities and Individuals with Access and Functional Needs Can be Served Equitably at Cooling Centers

The purpose of this guide is to support jurisdictions to plan for, and operate, accessible Cooling Centers that can serve people with disabilities and individuals with access and functional needs in an inclusive and equitable manner.

Planning

Access works best when you prepare in advance and when there is accountability.

- Consult and collaborate with disability and access and functional needs-related organizations (e.g., Area Agencies for Aging, Independent Living Centers, Aging and Disability Resource Centers, and Community-Based Organizations) before, during, and after the operationalization of cooling centers. The importance of inclusive planning cannot be overstated.
- Designate a team member to be responsible for ensuring there is physical and communication accessibility at each cooling center. This individual should work closely with organizations to understand their physical and communication-related accessibility needs.
- Train all staff and volunteers on how to respond to requests for, and questions about, reasonable accommodations.
- Ensure cooling centers are reachable via local public transportation services and pre-identify accessible providers. Many individuals utilizing cooling centers will rely on accessible public transportation to get to and from the sites.
- Identify vendors in advance who can be called on to provide reasonable accommodations (i.e., ASL interpreting service, remote or phone interpreter apps, alternate format company for Braille, large print translation of documents).

Communication

Provide accessible information and communication about staying healthy and safe.

- Never ask for proof of disability.
- Use plain language and everyday words, avoid policy and medical language.
- Provide all information in accessible formats and easy-to-read materials with large text and pictures or visual cues.
- Enlist trusted messengers who represent the communities to conduct outreach.

Site Set-Up

Use the following checklist to ensure a person with a disability or an individual with an access and functional need will be able to navigate the cooling center:



- Is there clear, easy-to-read, visible signage directing people to, and around, the site? Is it in common languages or graphics?
- Is there an ADA Notification posted onsite? Is it clearly stated how someone can request a reasonable accommodation or modification?
- Are parking lots, walkways, and entrances completely flat and in close proximity to the site?
- Is there an entrance that does not require stairs?
- Are doors easily opened by someone who uses a wheelchair or who has limited mobility? If not, is there someone who can provide assistance?
- Are check-in or registration tables physically accessible to wheelchair users?
- Is the area clear of furniture or other items (such as bags or extension cords) that would prevent ease of movement within the space by a person who is blind or someone using a wheelchair?
- Is there a quiet or private space for people to use?
- Are there accessible gender-neutral bathrooms, washing stations, and service animal relief areas?
- Are there measures to advertise no identification questions will be asked and to ensure immigration documentation is never requested or discussed in connection with cooling center services?
- Are there separate designated areas for guests with pets and guests without pets (including for guests with pet allergies to stay safe)? Is there access to water for pets / animals?
- Are there educational or entertainment programming provided in accessible formats?

Staff and Volunteer Orientation

Provide orientation to public facing staff and volunteers on communication etiquette and protocols for interactions.

- Train staff and volunteers to ask individuals with disabilities and people with access and functional needs if they want or need assistance instead of making assumptions about what someone may need or want.
- Train staff and volunteers to communicate directly with the individual they are assisting, not the person with them (i.e., their interpreter or personal care provider).
- Ensure all team members have pen and paper or a digital device to use as needed when communicating with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Short written exchanges may be useful, but more complex interactions/conversations require ASL interpreters.
- Identify local resources so that cooling center staff can recognize and refer any behavioral health needs that may arise.
- Educate staff and volunteers to understand that all support personnel, caregiving staff, and service animals are allowed to remain with the individual and must be granted access into, and throughout, cooling centers. Service animals are not considered pets and must be allowed entry into cooling centers.
- Train cooling center staff to recognize the [signs and symptoms of heat-related illness](#).
- Designate a point of contact to address questions or concerns.

Cleaning Protocols to Help Prevent Illness

Provide information on cleaning protocols for staying healthy and safe.

- Keep bathrooms and all sinks consistently stocked with handwashing supplies, including soap and hand drying materials.
- Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizers that contain at least 60% alcohol at key points within the facility, including entrances/exits and other common areas.
- Follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidance for [Cleaning and Disinfecting Your Facility](#).
- Post signs providing instructions on hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, cough etiquette, and face coverings if symptomatic.

Special thanks to the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund and the California state agencies contributing to this guide:

- Governor's Office of Planning and Research, Office of Community Partnerships and Strategic Communications
- California Department of Public Health, Office of Health Equity and Center for Preparedness and Response
- California Commission on Disability Access