

Cultural Access

Why is Cultural Access Important?

First of all, Cultural Access processes ensure access for people with disabilities, as well as their family and friends, to cultural arts experiences and opportunities. The idea of cultural access encompasses more than just physical accessibility, and includes programmatic, attitude and communication accessibility.

So, why is Cultural Access important? There are several ways to respond to this question, and the response might depend upon who you are, what your individual and/or organizational responsibilities might be, and simply how you view the world. While easily understood by those who directly benefit from “improved access” initiatives, exploring broad based access issues can lead to comprehensive improvements to cultural venues. Ultimately, exploring “access” is a process that benefits the entire organization and the wider community.

A healthy cultural community contributes to the economic diversity and vitality of the larger community. When a cultural organization takes on the mind-set, the challenge, and the privilege of presenting itself as available to all people, the entire community benefits.

Ten Ways to Achieve Cultural Access

- 1. Approach Access as a Process.** Make access part of the fabric of your organization. Just as you never stop producing new events, exhibits and programs, you’ll find endless ways to include the greatest possible audience.
- 2. Make Access Somebody’s Job.** At every cultural institution, there should be a person who has the specific responsibility of access.
- 3. Build Relationships.** Create an accessibility committee made up of the representatives in the disability community and key staff at your organization. Find out what you’re doing right, and what needs improvement.
- 4. Evaluate What Have.** To know what you need, examine what you’ve got. What physical alterations do you need to make at your facility? Who on the staff needs sensitivity training? Ask your new accessibility committee to help conduct the evaluations and the training sessions.

5. Take Advantage of Free Resources. Free help and resources exist on every level. For instance, just do an Internet search on “cultural access” to find a wealth of online resources. Did you know that Delaware Division of the Arts provides Cultural Access Opportunity Grants?

6. Make Goals You Can Achieve. Start with what’s doable. If you’re a small-town theater, maybe include an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter or volunteer audio describer at one performance. Remember that it’s better to do something small than nothing at all.

7. Market to Community. Access is useless if the people who can use it don’t know about it. Create an access statement that clearly describes what you do offer and your commitment to include all people at your institution. Advertise your access offerings in the publications read by these populations (which are often the same publications read by the general public).

8. Consider Both Sides of the Stage. Access isn’t just about the audience. People with disabilities sing, dance, act, paint, direct, play instruments, choreograph, do set design, produce, write, sculpt –everything artists do. And their work needs to be staged, performed and exhibited.

9. Accept Criticisms. Establish a grievance process where people can lodge complaints. Ask for feedback and bravely receive it.

10. Build on What You Create. Never stop creating access. Keep coming up with new ideas and innovations. Remember, it’s a process. When you receive feedback from people with disabilities, put it to use.

Resources

- The *National Endowment for the Arts* (arts.gov) has an intense commitment to accessibility. The NEA’s **Office of Accessibility** is the technical assistance arm of the NEA that focuses upon making the arts accessible to all individuals. This site has numerous downloadable publications that support greater cultural access initiatives.
- The *Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts* (kennedy-center.org/accessibility) is a leader in accessible programming, including audio described, sign-interpreted and sensory-friendly performances. The annual **Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD)** program conference supports the development of cultural access throughout the country.
- All state arts agencies have an individual and/or committee assigned to the responsibilities of overseeing arts access. This resource can offer support for improving cultural access within local communities.
- *VSA Delaware* (VSADelaware.org) is the local VSA state affiliate. There are VSA affiliates in states throughout the country. These non-profits are useful resources for supporting greater cultural access.