

Outreach and Services to Diverse Communities with Special Needs

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Universal Design Concepts

What does Universal Design mean?

According to the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, this concept encompasses the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. With the three key principles of simplicity, flexibility, and efficiency, Universal Design seeks the easiest solution to all types of access, whether being able to enter a building with a wheelchair using a ramp, or including closed captioning in all videos.

History of Universal Design

Universal Design is a term coined by an architect, [Ronald Mace](#) who wanted to focus on accessible housing with a universal design. Mace championed accessible building codes and standards in the United States. Mace's term [universal design](#) exemplifies an all-inclusive philosophy of barrier free design.

Mace was born in New Jersey and contracted polio as a child. As a student at North Carolina State University School of Design, Mace encountered barriers in his wheelchair. Mace became an accessible built environment activist due to the inaccessible design of many facilities that he

encountered. He was involved with the passage of North Carolina's Chapter 11X, the first accessibility-focused building code in the United States. North Carolina's Chapter 11X became the model for other States to follow. This also influenced Federal legislation prohibiting disability discrimination. The requirements came to be included in the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

The concept of Universal Design is credited to Mace but it is [Selwyn Goldsmith](#) of the United Kingdom who contributed the idea of curb cuts. Goldsmith, after consulting with 284 other wheelchair users, conceived "dropped kerbs" in the early 1960s, better known as curb cuts today. The City of Norwich in the United Kingdom was the first city to install curb cuts at different intersections. Today, curb cuts are a common feature throughout the world.

Accessibility legislation such as the Architectural Barriers Act (1968); Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973; the Fair Housing Act Amendments (1988); and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) established minimum requirements to protect people with disabilities from discrimination. Universal Design focused on making the environment more accessible above and beyond the minimum requirements that law may require. Designers must focus attention on improving function for a larger range of people. While ensuring accessibility, these laws fail to address equity and diversity of use.

In 1985, Ron Mace cautioned that Universal Design should be: "The design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design." (Maisel & Ranahan, 2017). Mainly from the need to reevaluate existing legal mandates to ensure usability by people with disabilities, the [Principles of Universal Design](#) were developed at the Center on Universal Design, North Carolina State University in 1997.

Seven Principles of Universal Design

1. Equitable Use
2. Flexibility in Use
3. Simple and Intuitive
4. Perceptible Information
5. Tolerance for Error
6. Low Physical Effort
7. Size and Space for Approach and Use

Universal Design emerged from a barrier-free design concept within the built environment, to one of accessible design in all things for all people. This Universal Design approach is currently embraced by the broader accessibility movement. The focus expanded to include adaptive and assistive technology.

ACCESSIBLE	UNIVERSAL
A custom designed home based on an existing plan but requires additional costs for the redesign and custom construction details	A universally designed home plan costs the same as any other plan to build that anyone can purchase
Home modifications services by a contractor who charges more for her specialized knowledge of design for disability and aging	Home improvement services that incorporate universal design as a basic service
Assistive technology used to adapt an automobile display for people with special needs	Automobile instruments and controls customizable to accommodate differences in perceptual abilities, stature, motor abilities, and preferences
A building entry with a ramp at the side that is out of the way for all visitors but is accessible by code	A no step building entry that everyone can use easily and together
A hotel that has only the code-required percentage of accessible rooms	A hotel that has 100% universally designed rooms in a variety of types

(Steinfeld and Maisel, 2012, p. 69)

While both "accessible" and "universal" relate to design for diverse users, "accessible" focuses on ensuring a product or environment can be used by people with disabilities, often through specific accommodations. "Universal design" aims to create products and environments usable by all people, regardless of their abilities, to the greatest extent possible, without needing separate or specialized designs. Essentially, accessibility is a subset of universal design, ensuring that the needs of those with disabilities are met, while universal design takes a broader approach to usability for all users.

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Working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Clients

Excerpts from “Handbook for Florida Attorneys” Written by Sharon Caserta, Esq., SC:L

Deaf/Hard of Hearing Legal Advocacy Program Jacksonville Area Legal Aid Inc.

Equal Justice Works Fellow, CI/CT/CSC October 2008 with minor edits by Anthony Verdeja
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I. Community Terminology

As with any Cross culture terminology has great importance and will be viewed by the members of the community in different ways. People with some form of hearing loss will generally self-identify and use terms to define themselves. The most common terms used are “Deaf”, “Hard of hearing”, “Deaf/Blind” or Late- deafened”. If you are unclear as to your client’s identifier, simply ask them. One factor in a good attorney client relationship is to understand how the client wants you and others to perceive them as a person not just a client.(Citation1)

Deaf people who use American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate are proud of their language and cultural norms. Attorneys should be vigilant to respect this pride and avoid using pejorative terms such as “deaf and dumb”, “deaf-mute”, or “hearing impaired” in conversation or in court filings.

“Hard of hearing” individuals do not consider themselves culturally Deaf. The majority of this group does not know or use ASL. The qualifying identifier of this client base is the desire to

utilize their residual hearing by wearing hearing aids, augmenting their hearing aids with assistive listening devices and speech reading.

II. Communication Methods Use by Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deaf/Blind clients

Not all Deaf and Hard of Hearing people communicate the same way, even those who use sign language may use different forms of a signing system or signed language. Some deaf people can communicate in many modalities where others may choose to communicate in only one. When meeting with a Deaf or Hard of Hearing client a determination must be made as to the type of access services, auxiliary aid or assistive device needed for effective communication. The easiest way to ascertain the need is to simply ask the client what is most effective. Although Title III of the ADA does not require a private attorney to provide the exact auxiliary aid requested by the client (Citation 2) if a contrary aid is used it must be effective and should be done upon consult with the client. Since most attorneys have no training as to effectiveness of communication, linguistic needs, reading ability and other relevant criteria it's wise for counsel to defer to the Deaf client—who really is the expert on efficacy.

1. American Sign Language (ASL)

Sign Language is a visual and manual form of communication.(Citation 3) American Sign Language (ASL) is the primary language used by the Deaf Community.(Citation 4) ASL is not a universal language; it is a living, visual language that is not only a means of communication but also a repository of cultural knowledge and a symbol of social identity.(Citation 5) ASL is not English, nor is it based on the characteristics of an audist community. Most attorneys incorrectly think ASL is simply the English language signed on one's hands. ASL possesses its own grammatical rules, syntax, and includes regional dialects and can convey abstract

concepts.(Citation 6) ASL is not a written language; thus ASL users must navigate through legal documents in their second language, English, and second-language fluency varies with each client.(Citation 7).

For ASL users generally effective communication is achieved by the provision of a qualified, nationally certified and legally trained ASL interpreter. (Citation 8)

2. Signed English

ASL is a language whereas the American signing methods which are dependent upon knowledge of English are known as sign systems.(Citation 9). There is a section of the deaf and hard of hearing population who use a signing system known as Signed Exact English (SEE) or Pidgin Signed English (PSE). Signed English is a system that attempts, with varied degrees of success, to replicate the English language manually. (Citation 10) PSE is in essence a blend of ASL and Signed English. For clients using these systems English may be their primary language, and they may have less difficulty with written communication than ASL users.

For the Signed English, or Pidgin Signed English user, generally effective communication is achieved by the provision of a qualified, nationally certified, and legally trained ASL interpreter or transliterator (Citation 11)

3. Deaf/Blind Clients

A smaller section of the Deaf community are those individuals who are Deaf/Blind. These individuals have both a form of hearing loss and vision loss. Persons who are Deaf/Blind typically do not have total deafness or total blindness but rather have their functionality significantly affected due to an impairment of both hearing and vision.(Citation 12). Some Deaf/Blind clients use sign language and others do not.

For Deaf/Blind clients effective communication needs vary widely please consult with the client directly about the appropriate accommodation.

4. Oralism and Associated Communication Techniques

There is a segment of the deaf and hard of hearing population that does not use ASL or any form of a signed system and communicate orally. This client base often refers to itself as “hard of hearing”. These individuals will speak and attempt to speechread (lip-read) when communicating, and English is typically their primary language, therefore require different accommodations than members of the Deaf Community.

Not all deaf and hard of hearing people can speechread, and those who can have widely varying levels of proficiency. The task of speech reading is very difficult to master, with only 35% of spoken English visible on the lips; the ability or inability to lip-read is in no way related to a deaf or hard of hearing person’s intelligence. Some deaf and hard of hearing people use speech reading, typically augmented with hearing aids or other devices, as one part of their communication method but not as a standalone technique. Each client should be asked which mode of communication they prefer and be provided with the appropriate accommodation.

Hard of hearing individuals face a very difficult quandary because their hearing loss comes in many forms and degrees. There are times when they can hear well and other times when they cannot. The ability to communicate effectively depends on the environment, the speaker’s voice, the level of anxiety the situation imparts and other factors which the hard of hearing person cannot control. As a result, hard of hearing clients often report that people think they are faking their hearing loss or failing to try hard enough to hear. Many hard of hearing individuals will *nod their head* and appear to understand what is said when in fact they do not. This behavior is

common because they do not want to appear “difficult” or “uncooperative” or are ashamed of their deficient hearing. Attorneys should note that many of these clients constantly struggle to hear and are often left out of conversations. As result they may miss large sections of dialogue without always reporting that they could not “hear” what was relayed. Constantly trying to hear and participate in conversations can often lead to fatigue or frustration which can lead to misunderstandings. Phone conversations or group dialogue may be especially difficult for these clients, and they must constantly remind others to speak louder, clearer or at a slower pace. To learn more about the communication difficulties encountered by those who are Hard of Hearing refer to resources available by Hearing Loss of America (Citation 13) and The Association of Late-Deafened Adults (ALDA) (Citation 14).

Endnotes

1. <https://www.nad.org/resources/advocacy-letters/>
2. 28 CFR § 36.303 (2019)
3. John Fallahay, The Right to a Full Hearing, Improving Access to the Courts for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, 2000,pg 33
4. The term “Deaf Community” is generally known to mean that segment of the deaf population who uses ASL as their primary language. There is a distinction made by the members of the Deaf and hard of hearing community as to “(d)eaf” people--who do not communicate in ASL, and those “(D)eaf” people who do.
5. Harlan Lane, The Mask of Benevolence, Disabling the Deaf Community, 1993, pg 45
6. Jack R. Gannon, Deaf Heritage, A History of Deaf America, 1981, pg 365 (edited)

7. Similar to Spanish or Italian, ASL is taught and accepted as a foreign language by universities and colleges in the United States.
8. <https://rid.org/>
9. John Fallahay, The Right to a Full Hearing, Improving Access to the Courts for People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, 2000, page 34
10. Sharon Caserta, Jacksonville Area Legal Aid: Handbook on the Use of ASL Interpreters, 2005
11. A transliterator is one who does not sign in ASL but conveys a message from spoken English into a manual code for English such as PSE or Signed English. This task contrasts with interpreting because interpreting requires working between two languages e.g. spoken English and ASL
12. Accessibility Needs of Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Late Deafened Persons in Florida: A Report on Requirements, Current Status and Recommendations. Glossary of Terms, Florida Coordinating Council of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Revised 2015
13. www.hearingloss.org
14. <https://alda.org/>

Outreach and Services to Diverse Communities with Special Needs

Culturally Competent Outreach and Services for Latino Special Needs Trust Beneficiaries

Introduction

According to US Census figures from 2023-2024, the Hispanic population in the United States is approximately 19.1% to 19.5% of the total U.S. population. This figure represents the nation's largest ethnic minority, with the Census Bureau estimating the population to have reached over 65 million people in 2023.

Therefore, Latino and Hispanic families make up a growing portion of individuals and families served by special needs trusts (SNTs). Trustees have a unique opportunity to reach out and support this population, but effective outreach requires cultural awareness, trust-building, and responsiveness to the specific needs of Latino beneficiaries and their families.

1. Building Trust and Relationships

Latino families often view disability services through the lens of their home countries, family, community, and faith. Trustees who demonstrate respect, empathy and caring will strengthen their ability to serve.

Strategies:

- **Be personal and relational:** Take time to learn about the beneficiary's home country, family structure, values, and goals
- **Understanding nuance-**Spanish speaking clients are not monolithic, and there are many distinctions between country of origin, economic and educational backgrounds and dialects.

- **Acknowledge roles of various family members:** Many decisions are made collectively, not individually. Be prepared to engage parents, adult children, siblings, or extended relatives.
- **Respect cultural values:** Values such as *familismo* (family loyalty), *respeto* (respect), and *personalismo* (warm, personal interaction) may strongly influence decision-making.
- **Households with mixed immigration status-**According to the National Research Center on Hispanic Children, the vast majority (93%) are U.S-born. Nonetheless, the immigrant experience remains central to many Latino children's households; slightly more than half (53%) of Latino children live with at least one foreign-born parent, and research estimates that approximately [one-quarter of Latino children](#) have at least one parent who is an unauthorized immigrant. Confidentiality is more important than ever.

2. Language Access and Communication

As expected, language can be a major barrier to trust. Even bilingual families often prefer important financial and legal information in Spanish to avoid misunderstanding as their knowledge of English may not be comprehensive enough for key legal and government benefit rules.

Strategies:

- **Offer documents in Spanish:** Trust materials, instructions, and key notices should be available in both English and Spanish.
- **Provide interpretation services:** Use trained interpreters—not family members—whenever possible to discuss financial or legal details.

- **Use plain language:** Avoid jargon; explain financial and legal concepts with relatable examples.
- **Leverage multiple modes of communication:** Latino families may be more responsive to phone calls, WhatsApp messages, or in-person meetings than email and snail mail.

3. Outreach Approaches

Effective outreach is proactive. Many Latino families are unfamiliar with special needs trusts and may not know how trustees can help.

Strategies:

- **Community partnerships:** Collaborate with local disability nonprofits, churches, parent groups, and cultural organizations.
- **Educational workshops:** Offer bilingual sessions on what an SNT is, how it works, and what services it can provide.
- **Cultural events:** Participate in Latino community fairs, disability resource expos, or health fairs.
- **Trusted messengers:** Work with *promotores de salud* (community health workers) or parent advocates who are trusted in Latino communities.

4. Addressing Barriers

Latino families may face unique barriers in accessing SNT services. Trustees should anticipate and address these challenges.

Common Barriers and Solutions:

Barrier	Solution
Limited knowledge of trusts	Provide bilingual, plain-language guides; hold Q&A sessions.
Immigration concerns	Emphasize that trust benefits are not immigration-dependent and do not affect status.
Distrust of financial/legal systems	Highlight nonprofit or community partnerships; share success stories.
Limited transportation	Offer phone or video meetings; consider home visits in some cases.
Stigma around disability	Frame trust services as supportive of dignity, independence, and family well-being.

5. Best Practices for Service Delivery

To ensure Latino beneficiaries feel supported, trustees can implement service practices that go beyond the minimum.

Recommendations:

- **Hire bilingual staff** or ensure access to interpreters.
- **Be flexible** with meeting times in the evenings or weekends to accommodate work schedules
- **Offer culturally relevant supports**, such as facilitating access to bilingual aides, referrals to local Spanish-speaking agencies or appropriate community activities.

- **Highlight independence and dignity**, which resonates across cultures.
- **Develop long-term relationships** rather than transactional interactions.

Trustees who approach Latino beneficiaries with respect, cultural awareness, and proactive outreach can bridge gaps and provide life-changing support. By prioritizing communication, trust-building, and community engagement, trustees can ensure that Latino families fully benefit from special needs trusts.

Resources

- **National Alliance for Hispanic Health** – www.hispanichealth.org
- **Disability Rights California** – www.disabilityrightsca.org (bilingual resources)

Latino Family Support Organizations (local chapters vary; e.g., Fiesta Educativa in California)