



**GUIDELINES
FOR
ASSISTING VISITORS
WITH
DISABILITIES
AT
LINCOLN PARK ZOO**

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ASSISTING VISITORS WITH DISABILITIES AT LINCOLN PARK ZOO

From the moment visitors enter the gates until they leave the grounds, it is the role of every employee, volunteer, and docent to be sensitive and aware of how our environment impacts all individuals, including those with disabilities, who visit Lincoln Park Zoo. Some disabilities are visible and readily apparent, but many other disabling conditions are invisible.

Lincoln Park Zoo makes a concerted effort to make its grounds, pathways, buildings, exhibits and programs accessible to all visitors. In 1997-1998, the zoo completed a Transition Plan for Universal Access, a document that assessed every public area on zoo grounds in terms of barriers or design issues related to accessibility. Recommendations for change are included in this plan.

The Education Department is overseeing another initiative that really governs issues related to universal access at the zoo — the Hands-On Zoo program. Under this initiative, staff, docents, and volunteers are trained to more effectively communicate and interact with visitors with special needs; zoo maps and guidebooks are translated into Braille; videos are scripted for open captioning; and educational programs are modified or developed to reflect a multi-sensory approach to meet the needs of diverse audiences. Many other program elements are under consideration and development, including the use of audio-tours and addition of Braille to some of the graphics.

The purpose of this booklet is to help you to better understand people and some of the disabilities you may encounter and to allow you to interact more meaningfully with visitors who have disabilities.

The answer may be as simple as directing visitors to the nearest accessible restaurant or accessible bathroom or it may be more complex but to visitors, including those with disabilities, you make the difference in their experience at and perception of Lincoln Park Zoo.



**What is
mental illness?**

The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill defines mental illness as:

- “A group of disorders causing severe disturbances in thinking, feeling and relating. They result in substantially diminished capacity for coping with the ordinary demands of life. Mental illness can affect persons of any age — children, adolescents, adults and the elderly — and can occur in any family.”

You will not recognize people with mental illness as they enter the gate. Ninety-eight percent of those considered mentally ill are indistinguishable from the general population. Mental illness can be categorized as *acute*, lasting a defined period of time but ending in complete recovery, or *chronic*, with ongoing or repeated episodes. For the purposes of these guidelines we will only consider the chronic population as they are more likely to require adaptation.

You may from time to time observe certain behaviors such as: sitting for a long time without movement, talking to themselves, acting in ritualistic ways (repeating an action over and over), hyperactivity, agitation and/or apathy.

Medication can cause these visitors to frequently drink water, exhibit erratic muscle and mouth movements, show decreased ability to control their saliva, pace, appear fatigued and have an increased sensitivity to sunlight.



Assisting visitors with mental illness at Lincoln Park Zoo...

What can I do for these visitors?

Sending pre-visit materials to let them know what to expect in advance of their visit may be helpful. (Some may be downloaded from the website, lpzoo.com).

The more structure built in to the experience, the better the outcome.

Keep experiences short in duration. Give simple, specific information.

Move group to the quietest area possible at the exhibit.

Encourage, but do not demand, participation.

Firmly and respectfully deal with inappropriate behavior. Set limits.

Visitors with chronic mental illness may experience hallucinations or delusions. They may want to tell you about them. Be polite and calmly tell the visitor that you do not hear or see what they are describing. Do not joke or use sarcasm.

Before visitors leave, make sure to ask...

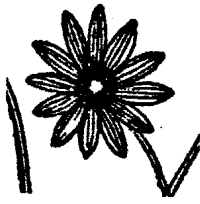
May I answer any more questions about the exhibit/program?

May I direct you to the next location?

Do you need assistance to find the bathroom, restaurant, exit, other?

And always...

Thank you for visiting Lincoln Park Zoo.



Scenario #3

Situation You are the tour guide for a group of seniors visiting the zoo today. Among the group are two who use walkers and two using wheelchairs. Your offer to get wheelchairs for the two individuals with walkers is declined.

What can I do to plan ahead for these visitors?

What can I do while our visitors are touring or visiting exhibits?

What is the best way to interact with a visitor with this disability?