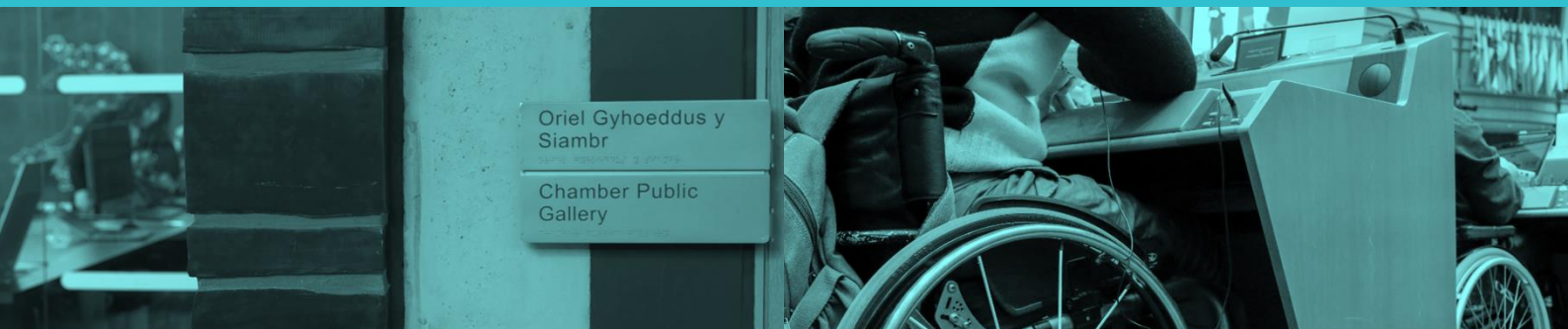


## Disability Inclusive Communication Guidelines for Parliaments

### Linguistic Principles



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## About the CPA

The **Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)** connects, develops, promotes and supports parliamentarians and their staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the enduring values of the Commonwealth. The CPA collaborates with parliaments and other organisations, including the intergovernmental community, to achieve its statement of purpose. It brings parliamentarians and parliamentary staff together to exchange ideas among themselves and with experts in various fields, to identify benchmarks of good practices and new policy options they can adopt or adapt in the governance of their societies.

The CPWD network provides a means of supporting the capacity of parliamentarians with disabilities to be more effective in their roles and helping to improve the awareness and ability of all parliamentarians. The network also encourages all parliamentarians to include a perspective mindful of disabilities in all aspects of their role - legislation, oversight and representation - and helping parliaments to become institutions that are sensitive to issues surrounding disabilities.

## About the authors

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## Overview

There has been growing public appreciation in recent years of disability as a vital and necessary component of equitable and inclusive political participation.<sup>1</sup> As stated in Article 29(a) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), states shall “Ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives.”<sup>2</sup>

These Guidelines describe challenges that persons with disabilities (PWDs) face and provide guidance on what steps parliaments should take to ensure that their communications are more inclusive and considerate of people with various types of disabilities.

This document can be read separately or in combination with the CPA’s Disability Inclusive Communication Guidelines for Parliaments on *Facilities of Inclusion*. If you have already read the *Facilities of Inclusion* guidelines, you can skip ahead to page 8.

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<sup>1</sup> ODIHR, O., 2019. Guidelines on Promoting the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities. Accessible from: [https://www.tandis.odihr.pl/bitstream/20.500.12389/22513/2/22513\\_EN.pdf](https://www.tandis.odihr.pl/bitstream/20.500.12389/22513/2/22513_EN.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, 2007, Convention on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Page 21. Accessible from: <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>

## Foreword

As the 55<sup>th</sup> Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, a Regional Representative for Canada on the CPA's International Executive Committee and as a parliamentarian who has been involved in the activities of the Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) network since it was first proposed in 2017, I am delighted to present the *Disability Inclusive Communication Guidelines for Parliaments: Linguistic Principles* document.



Following its conception at the CPA Conference for Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities Conference, hosted by the Nova Scotia House of Assembly from 31 August to 1 September 2017, the CPwD network has supported Commonwealth parliamentarians with disabilities in discharging their parliamentary duties. A fundamental requirement of all parliaments, in ensuring that they are accessible to PWDs, is that their communication with and about PWDs is inclusive and respectful. Effective representation of PWDs should go beyond the numbers of parliamentarians with disabilities in a legislature to address what can be done to have a more equitable environment for all persons within the institution.

Giving a meaningful voice to PWDs in parliaments and legislatures leads to improvements in the following three functions of a parliament. Oversight will be more comprehensive; representation will be more equitable, and legislating will be more sensitive.

  
Braille

Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff that do not live with disabilities must ask themselves how they would like to be addressed if they were a PWD, but also, what positive role they can play in fighting prejudices, stigmas and stereotypes there are around disabilities in their communications.


These guidelines have been designed to provide a starting guide for what language and services can enable and enhance the participation of PWDs in parliament. Though the Commonwealth has a deeply diverse range of parliaments, both in their cultures and resources, taking inspiration from these guidelines to be more inclusive to PWDs is a positive step any parliament can take. The range of case studies used in the guidelines emphasises how achievable it can be for legislatures to improve their approachability for PWDs no matter their size.

I hope that these guidelines will assist in guiding parliaments towards more inclusive communications and I am hopeful that they can engender a greater representation of PWDs across your parliament.



Hon. Kevin Murphy, MLA

55<sup>th</sup> Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly and  
a CPA Canada Regional Representative of the CPA  
International Executive Committee



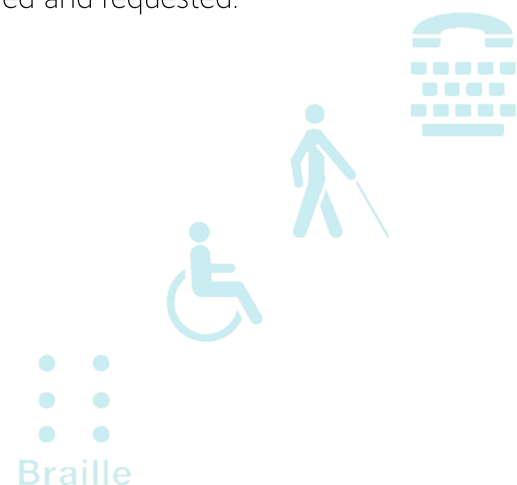
## About the Guidelines

Based on standards established in international commitments on the rights of PWDs, these *Disability Inclusive Communication Guidelines for Parliaments* are aimed at providing a practical resource for Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Members to ensure that their parliamentarians and parliamentary staff with disabilities can fully and effectively participate in their respective parliamentary practices and procedures, as well as day-to-day working life.

Although these Guidelines are intended for the use of parliaments, other audiences may benefit from this handbook as well. Some examples of these stakeholders include potential partners with legislatures in their efforts towards this cause, such as disability rights organisations, policy experts and academics.

This guide is intended for English and not for other languages used in Commonwealth jurisdictions.

The CPA Secretariat would be very happy to work with parliaments and parliamentarians to provide these guidelines in a more accessible format, where required and requested.



## Why Parliaments?

Parliaments are critical participants in efforts to advocate for and support under-represented communities, since they are often regarded as the pinnacle of political participation. In this role, it is particularly important as well as beneficial for Parliaments to follow opportunities to engage PWDs as Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff. Though parliaments may have different levels of resources, there are many pan-Commonwealth strategies that any legislature can deploy which these guidelines explore.



Plans for an addition of an external elevator to the Parliament of Gibraltar, source:

<https://www.yourgibraltartv.com/society/20316-parliament-lift-to-be-fitted-on-western-side>

These guidelines are focused on the creation of an accessible and participatory environment within parliaments for PWDs. While references are made to PWDs who have become parliamentarians, readers looking for further information on the electoral process may wish to look at the ODIHR’s *Handbook on Observing and Promoting the Electoral Participation of Persons with Disabilities* (2017).

Another resource on this topic is *Equal Access: How to Include Persons with Disabilities in Elections and Political Processes* (2014), by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI). For information on the promotion of PWDs’ political participation in areas such as political parties, the ODIHR’s *Guidelines on Promoting the Political Participation of Persons with Disabilities* (2019) is a good resource on the topic.





## Appropriate Terminology and Language

Building a language of respect, professionalism, empathy and compassion with PWDs is a first step that, when taken by legislatures, can have an immediate impact in overcoming barriers to the inclusion of PWDs in parliamentary life. The words we use and the way we portray individuals with disabilities matters.<sup>3</sup> The guidelines in this section can be considered when communicating with or about parliamentarians, parliamentary staff and other PWDs in parliament.

### Reaching Consensus

There are many discussions with the disabilities community over differences that exist in the phrases used to discuss and address PWDs. For example, to some, *differently* or *otherwise* abled is used as opposed to *persons with disabilities*. The guidelines in this document seek to start the conversation of what agreements can be reached within Commonwealth parliaments on how to progress the language used. It is for each legislature to take to work in a sympathetic and collaborative manner to reach an appropriate vocabulary.

### Words to Use ✓ and Avoid ✗

It is difficult to reach consensus on language that should be used with regards to disabilities, however, there can be general agreement on some basic guidelines. Avoid passive, victim-oriented words. Use language that respects disabled people as active individuals with

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<sup>3</sup> N/A, 2018. Guidelines for Writing About People with Disabilities. ADA National Network. Accessible from: <https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing>

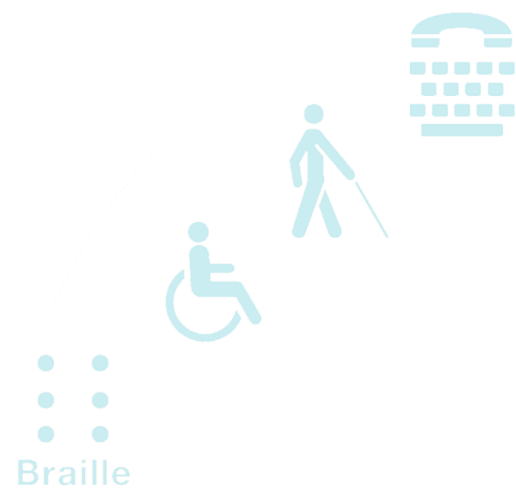
autonomy over their own lives. It is important to emphasise that the individual is a ‘person’ first and foremost. A way to ensure that this is done is by using names or job titles in the first instance when introducing an individual.

The following table provides some examples of inclusive language that can be used in situations where necessary<sup>4</sup>:

Context	Refrain from using	Use Instead
Talking about or to a person with a disability	Cripple, [The] handicapped, [the] disabled	Person with a disability
	Afflicted by, suffers from, victim of	Has [name of condition or impairment]
Conversing about or to an individual with a mobility disability	Wheelchair-bound or confined	Wheelchair user
Incidents relating to persons with epilepsy	Fits, spells	Seizures

<sup>4</sup> N/A, 2018. Inclusive language: words to use and avoid when writing about disability. UK Department for Work & Pensions, Office for Disability Issues. Accessible from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication/inclusive-language-words-to-use-and-avoid-when-writing-about-disability>

Discussing mental health	<b>Mentally handicapped/defective</b>	Person with a learning disability (or disabilities)
	<b>Mental patient, insane</b>	Person with a mental health condition
Speech or communicative disabilities	<b>Deaf, mute</b>	Person with a hearing impairment or user of sign language
Discussions on persons with medical conditions	<b>Depressive, diabetic epileptic</b>	Person with epilepsy, diabetes, depression or someone who has epilepsy, diabetes or depression



## Group terms and labels

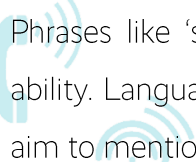
The word ‘disabled’ is a description, not a group of people. ‘Persons with disabilities’ is more appropriate and respectful than ‘the disabled’ as a collective term. However, there are some examples of where a PWD may describe themselves by their disability as it is part of their identity. People with hearing impairments are an example of this, with many people with hearing impairments, whose first language is BSL, considering themselves part of ‘the deaf community’ – they may describe themselves as ‘Deaf’, with a capital D.<sup>5</sup>

Medical labels such as epileptic or paraplegic should be avoided as these say little about people as individuals and tend to reinforce the stigma of PWDs as ‘patients’, unwell or as having an affliction.

It is important to refrain from automatically referring to ‘disabled people’ in all communications – many people who require special services as a result of their disability do not identify with this term. An alternative terminology to use would be ‘people with health conditions’ or impairments. As always, context is important so the individual developing the communications should judge which is more appropriate by consulting with PWDs beforehand.



### + Positive not negative -



Phrases like ‘suffers from’ suggests discomfort, hopelessness and emphasises a lack of ability. Language used when addressing or discussing PWDs should be more positive and aim to mention the person as living with their impairment. Wheelchair users provide a good

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<sup>5</sup> Action on Hearing Loss, British Sign Language. Accessible from: <https://actiononhearingloss.org.uk/information-and-support/deaf-awareness/british-sign-language/>

example of this, as many wheelchair users prefer not to view themselves as ‘confined to’ because of the incapability that this implies. This inference suggests that the individual may be incapable in other areas as well, which builds a stigma around any conditions that require a person to use a wheelchair. Mindful of this, mentioning wheelchair usage as a mobility aid instead, is a more positive approach.

In summary, use language that maintains the integrity of individuals as human beings by avoiding language that (a) equates persons with their condition (e.g. epileptics, the deaf), (b) has superfluous, negative overtones (e.g. stroke victim or sufferer ), or (c) is regarded as a slur (e.g. cripple).<sup>6</sup>

## Everyday phrases

It is common for people with disabilities to be comfortable with the words used to describe daily living that are not technically for themselves. For instance, people with visual impairments may be *‘pleased to see you’* and people who use wheelchairs do *‘go for walks’*. The impairment that they live with just means that these acts differ technically, but the overall intention remains the same as it does for those without disabilities. Therefore, if you are a non-disabled person interacting with a PWD who does use these phrases, it is appropriate for you to, for instance, ask a wheelchair-user if they would like to ‘go for a walk’.

There are many examples of phrases in everyday life that people use where there are these technical discrepancies. For instance, it is common for a person to state that they are ‘glad

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<sup>6</sup> Cavender, A., Trewin, S. and Hanson, V., 2008. General writing guidelines for technology and people with disabilities. ACM SIGACCESS Accessibility and Computing, (92), pp.17-22. Accessible from: <https://adata.org/factsheet/ADANN-writing>

to hear’ from someone, even if they are communicating via e-mail or text message. The point is, despite these phrases being technically ambiguous, the intention is understood.

Common phrases that may associate impairments with negative things should be avoided though, for example ‘*deaf to our pleas*’ or ‘*blind to the facts*’. The use of an impairment in these examples is derogatory and pushes an inaccurate stereotype of PWDs as incapable.

## **Case Study: Parliament of the Republic of South Africa**

The South African Federal Parliament has its own *Policy on Facilities for Members with Special Needs*<sup>7</sup>, established in 2006. This policy seeks to remove barriers and equalize opportunities for Members with special needs and to provide for incidental matters with a host of provisions for Members with disabilities, including coverage of travel costs for Member’s assistants to and from Cape Town where the parliament is located. The current policy is in the process of being reviewed to make it even more inclusive and sensitive to the needs of Members of Parliament with disabilities.

**2. Definition of terms**

**Paraplegia** involves a loss of sensation and movement in the legs and in part or the entire trunk. This varies according to the level of the injury. Generally, the lower the injury, the less the loss of movement and sensation. Paraplegia usually results from an injury to the spinal cord in the mid and lower back.

**Quadriplegia** normally means a loss of sensation and movement in all four limbs and the trunk. This generally results from a spinal cord injury to the neck. However, the loss of sensation and movement may not be complete with some sensation and movement being retained in parts of the arms and legs.

**Blind** means the inability to see or the loss or absence of perception of visual stimuli.

**Visually impaired** means reduced or weakened sight.

**Partially sighted** means not completely blind.

**Deaf** means partial or total inability to hear. A condition in which the sense of hearing in one or both ears is not functional.

**Other special needs** include but are not limited to severe arthritis and conditions requiring use of walking aids.

**Official business** means any activity that is related to the business of the Houses and committee meetings.

**Member** means a Member of Parliament.

**Presiding Officers** mean the Speaker of the National Assembly and the Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces.

**Assistant** means a person assisting the Member with special needs.

‘Definition of terms’ section of the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa’s Policy on Facilities for Members with Special Needs, 2006

<sup>7</sup> Zero Project, South Africa’s equal access for Members of Parliament. Accessible from: <https://zeroproject.org/policy/south-africa/>

## Recommended Reading

There are several good examples of useful resources on the topic of linguistic communications with persons with disabilities in various contexts. *Inclusive Language in Media: A Canadian Style Guide* (2017)<sup>8</sup> is a good resource that explores in depth what approach should be taken with persons with disabilities in the public eye. A founding document on the matter of referring to individuals as being ‘with’ a disability would be *Person-First and Identity-First Language: Developing Psychologists’ Cultural Competence Using Disability Language* (2015)<sup>9</sup>. Of course, the CPA’s other *Disability Communications Guidelines* on ‘Facilities of Inclusion’, are another publication we would recommend. This document provides guidance on the infrastructure aspect of communication with or about PWDs in parliaments.

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<sup>8</sup> Accessible from: [http://www.humber.ca/makingaccessiblemedia/modules/01/transript/Inclusive\\_Language\\_Guide\\_Aug2017.pdf](http://www.humber.ca/makingaccessiblemedia/modules/01/transript/Inclusive_Language_Guide_Aug2017.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Accessible from: <https://content.apa.org/record/2015-03427-001>



*“Disability is a cross-cutting issue which can impact the lives of anyone at any time or place. Therefore, policies should be aligned with this reality. A parliamentarian’s role also does not end with elections; it begins after ensuring the theme ‘nothing about us without us’ is made central to decision-making.”*

- Kerryann Ifil,  
Former President of the Senate of  
Barbados





The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) will continue to work with its membership of over 180 Commonwealth parliaments and legislatures and with international partners to support the work of parliaments and parliamentarians.

If you would like to support the international work of the CPA in providing advice and guidance to Commonwealth parliaments and parliamentarians on communications guidelines for persons with disability, then please contact the CPA Secretariat at [hq.sec@cpahq.org](mailto:hq.sec@cpahq.org).



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