

RESPONDING TO AND ASSISTING PEOPLE WITH UNIQUE NEEDS

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BEHAVIOR VS. CAUSE?

Behavior is the primary area of concern for staff, not the cause of that behavior. Be cautious about assuming that you know the reason for someone's unusual behavior—it can be caused by any one or a combination of factors:

- mental illness
- drug/alcohol use
- medical problems
- recent trauma
- previous unpleasant experience with your office, or other government entities
- frustration over their current situation

For your purposes, it is probably not relevant what the cause is. Instead, your concern is about the client's ability to interact with you and get their needs met in a way that:

- Maintains safety for all involved
- Is satisfying to the client
- Causes a minimum of disruption to your work
- Causes a minimum of disruption to other clients

Remember: you probably see people every day who have various challenges in all of the above areas, but their *behavior* does not reflect those problems while in your presence.

OBSERVATION

The most helpful skills in determining how to work with unique clients are the powers of observation that we all possess. Start out by maintaining awareness of your work area and co-workers, particularly if you are in a setting where there is a single employee who is the point of contact for people entering the workplace.

As you are working with the client, use all your observing skills and senses:

- Cleanliness of clothes? Of person?
- Appropriate clothing for the weather? Multiple layers? Overly suggestive?

- What are they carrying (i.e., multiple bags, cart, etc.)
- Hospital wristband?
- Signs of injury or illness?
- Speech? Make sense? Responding to something other than you?

COMMUNICATION

The first thing to determine is whether or not you are going to be able to communicate with this person. Approach it the same way you would anyone with a potential communication challenge (language, hearing impairment, etc.). Start with some simple and straightforward questions, and gauge the response.

Remember, even if someone is "responding to internal stimuli" (which means that they appear to be responding to something that you cannot see or hear), that doesn't mean that they can't be redirected back to your conversation.

If you have determined that you are unable to communicate at all with this person, and you are unable to encourage them to move on (or you have concerns about their safety if they were to leave), contact police to assess them for a police officer hold.

If you are able to communicate with this person, despite those challenges in communication, consider the following guidelines:

- Try to reduce stimuli as much as is reasonably and safely possible (i.e., don't carry on your conversation at the counter when there are other people waiting in line)
- Good manners go a long way; be respectful and polite
- Often, people who are perceived of as having mental health issues are treated in a condescending or dismissive manner; they may simply be seeking contact in a setting where they know they will have to be treated "like everyone else" (hence, libraries, government offices, etc. vs. stores or other private businesses)
- Allow a reasonable period of time for the person to tell their story—sometimes that is all that is needed
- Work with the client to identify the goal for today ("I can tell that you've spent a lot of time working on this issue, and that we probably won't be able to resolve the entire thing today, but I think we can tackle one piece of it. How about if we start with.....")
- Once you've identified that goal, **STICK WITH IT**; don't get off track ("I certainly understand that there is a lot to work on here, but I really want to try and help you resolve this one part that we decided on...")

OTHER GENERAL GUIDELINES

- Trust your "gut feelings", particularly about possibility of impulsive behavior or dangerousness.
- Appoint a single contact person for returning clients; have a backup person assigned. If there is someone who has particularly good rapport with the customer, use that person when at all possible. It may mean having someone step out of their job description, but since it is primarily the relationship that will be most important in having a successful contact, it is always best to use that rapport.
- Keep an informal file of dates of contact, and what was done with each contact.
- Unless the client brings up the issue of medication, do not ask them if they take medication—it can be experienced as demeaning or disrespectful.
- Be mindful of people's privacy; even if your customer chooses to bring up issues concerning their medical or mental health issues, it is your responsibility to try to guard their privacy so that other customers do not overhear.