

What Does Meaningful Accessibility Look Like?

People often associate accessibility with features like automated doors, ramps, elevators, and accessible parking spots. However, meaningful accessibility goes far beyond these measures. Creating settings that allow everyone to fully, safely, and comfortably participate is what it means to be truly accessible. It entails acknowledging that disabilities come in many forms, including visible and invisible, as well as permanent and temporary.

Accessibility for people with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) often involves basics that many people take for granted: clean air and environments free from exposures to chemicals of concern.

Removing Barriers

Fundamentally, accessibility involves locating and eliminating barriers that keep people from engaging in daily activities. These could be environmental, social, informational, physical, or attitudinal. The following are common obstacles for people with MCS:

- Fragrant products in public areas, workplaces, and medical facilities.
- Poor Indoor Air Quality (IAQ).
- Strong chemical emissions from disinfectants and cleaning supplies.
- Contaminants in the environment, including pesticides.
- Furnishings and building materials that emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs).

These barriers can deny people access to jobs, healthcare, education, community events, and other crucial aspects of daily life.

From Awareness to Inclusion

While raising awareness is a necessary first step, real accessibility requires taking action. By adopting fragrance-free policies, choosing the lowest-emission products, enhancing

ventilation, offering remote participation options, and consulting with people who have lived experience, organizations can promote accessibility.

Accessibility shouldn't be contingent on a person's capacity to consistently articulate or defend their needs. Instead, organizations ought to incorporate inclusive practices from the start into their planning, policies, and decision-making procedures.

The Significance of Environmental Accessibility

One aspect of inclusion that is frequently disregarded is environmental accessibility. The quality of the air people with MCS breathe can affect their ability to access healthcare, enter buildings, attend meetings, and engage in community activities.

Everyone benefits when environments are made healthier. Enhancing indoor air quality, reducing exposure to hazardous chemicals, and adopting fragrance-free practices can improve the health of staff members, clients, students, patients, and guests.

Listening to Lived Experience

We can't achieve meaningful accessibility without taking careful note of those who face these barriers every day. People with MCS provide invaluable insights into the difficulties they encounter and how their experiences can be improved. Their stories contribute to the development of best practices, policies, and accessibility guidelines. Accessibility initiatives become more successful, useful, and inclusive when organizations work closely with individuals who have lived experience.

An Ongoing Commitment

Accessibility is not a one-time task or a list to finish. It is a continuous effort to establish settings in which everyone can engage safely and equally. Our approaches to accessibility must change as our knowledge of disability, health, and inclusion grows. Communities that are

truly inclusive can be achieved by taking into account social, physical, and environmental barriers.

The Path Forward

It's essential that we understand that accessibility is not just about being able to enter a space; it's about being able to fully participate once you're there. This includes having access to safer surroundings, less hazardous exposures, and cleaner air for people with MCS. We can all live in healthier, more accessible communities if we collaborate to remove barriers and put inclusion first.