

Set Etiquette: Cast and Crew Using Wheelchairs

Inclusion and Representation for Actors with Disabilities

[SAG-AFTRA's Performers with Disabilities Committee](#) works to increase employment opportunities and improve working conditions for performers with disabilities. This includes encouraging casting directors to include actors with disabilities in both character and background roles, even when the role does not explicitly reference disability. Setting inclusion goals is a great way to start the process.

[Disabilities in Media and the Global Alliance for Disability in Media & Entertainment](#)

[\(GADIM\)](#) offers recommendations for representing disabilities on screen:

- **Use accurate depictions.** Wheelchairs should be used only when the character or story requires it; avoid using them as a prop or aesthetic device.
- **Include disabled creatives.** Employ disabled actors and crew when possible, and consult with disability consultants for authenticity.
- **Avoid stereotypes.** Do not portray disabled characters in ways that reinforce stigma or pity.

Employing actors with disabilities might even benefit a production. Their characters can add an extra layer of interest to audiences, and the on-set actors have a special abilities, says Natalie Noblitt, Inclusivity Media advisory team member and disability right advocate.

“Filmmakers will find that people with disabilities are natural problem solvers and often work harder than most to prove they can do their job well,” she says. “While it may seem like it takes extra time to plan for someone with disabilities, you'll also find they are used to being very adaptable.”

Tips for Filmmakers Shooting with Cast and Crew Using Wheelchairs

I. Plan for Wheelchair Accessibility During Pre-Production

- **Learn all needs in advance.** Talk to disabled crew or talent to understand their specific requirements and preferences. Or work with agents and managers to put the requirements and preferences into contracts.
- **Integrate accessibility from the start.** Design set layouts with wide walkways, clear pathways (including paths that have cables), appropriate ramps, curb cuts where necessary, assistive technologies, bathrooms, props, and accessible seating before production begins. Ensure lighting, camera angles, and set pieces do not obstruct movement or visibility for wheelchair users. Make sure all locations where the actor will be filming are wheelchair accessible.
- **Ensure lodging, base camp, vehicles and trailers are accessible.** Even setting up a tent or spare room on the set devoted to wheelchair accessibility is an option.
- **Initiate crew and cast training.** Plan to provide briefings on respectful interaction and set navigation for wheelchair users.

II. Practice Respectful Interaction

- **Ask before helping.** Always check if the person using a wheelchair needs assistance before offering help. Unsolicited help can be intrusive or unnecessary.
- **Do not touch or pat.** Wheelchairs are part of the person's space, so avoid touching them without permission. And do not belittle or patronize the person by patting them on the head.
- **Maintain social norms.** Offer a handshake or other social greetings, even if mobility is limited, to acknowledge them as a person. Speak directly to the person in the wheelchair, not to their guardian or assistant. Maintain eye contact and perhaps sit down or kneel to do so.
- **Respect personal space:** Keep a respectful distance and avoid making the wheelchair a focus of conversation unless the person initiates it.

III. Extend Courtesy on the Set

- **Clearly communicate.** Use clear, direct language when giving instructions, and avoid a patronizing tone.
- **Avoid last-minute changes.** Rearranging after filming is more time-consuming and disruptive than planning ahead.
- **Set up accessible craft services and catering areas.** This should be closer to where the cast and crew in wheelchairs will be gathering during breaks in filming.
- **Ensure accessibility requirements are documented and followed.** This might entail hiring a set disability coordinator.
- **Be flexible.** Adjust schedules or locations if needed to accommodate mobility needs.

Natalie says actors should remember they always have an advocate during a production – their agents or managers. One call and these professionals can talk to the production team about any accessibility issues.

Sources and Resources:

[Variety and Easter Seals Disability Services Support Inclusion initiative:](#) Information and resources for casting directors, actors with disabilities, writers, directors, producers, studios, networks, below-the-line professionals, and all entertainment industry professionals

[FilmFatales: "Accessibility on Set"](#)

[Cinematography World: "How to help remove barriers facing disabled people on set"](#)

[Disabled World: "Wheelchair Etiquette: Respectful Interaction Guidelines"](#)