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Illustration on the cover of the Employee Sensitivity Awareness Training Course manual



Best Way to Help Disabled Persons: Show Patience and Respect

- Metro's sensitivity awareness training focuses on understanding daily challenges facing people with disabilities

By NED RACINE

(Oct. 27, 2006) In an age when technology offers an increasing number of aids to people with disabilities, Chip Hazen, Metro's ADA Compliance Officer, told attendees of a recent course that the most valuable tools for employees working with disabled fare passengers might be practicing patience and showing respect.

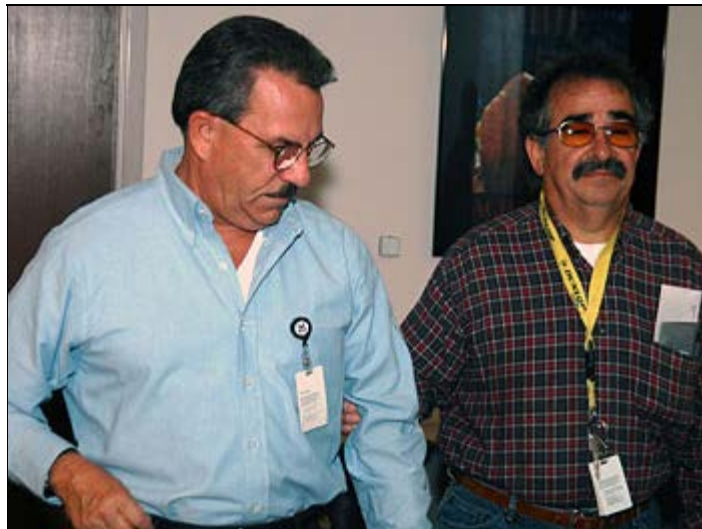
Hazen, who is the staff liaison to Metro's Accessibility Advisory Committee, conducted the Metro class, "Employee Sensitivity Awareness Training," to increase employee understanding of issues raised by the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The course, offered twice each quarter, uses role-playing to present effective ways of working with persons with disabilities.

"The class is meant to bring the first level of sensitivity" to an employee, explained Hazen. "It's not specifically geared to those people who come into constant daily contact with someone with disabilities. It's not geared to our operators. It's designed to get someone thinking about how to work with peers and customers with disabilities."

Role-playing for the 21 course attendees included helping a person in a wheelchair overcome a high ticket counter, communicating with a Metro passenger who is smoking near a No Smoking sign and guiding a vision-impaired person asking for directions to a restroom.

As he led the class through the role-playing, Hazen explained that effectively helping a person with disabilities requires reacting to the person as an individual, not as part of a class of people. He also encouraged class

members to see physical spaces through the disabled person's eyes.



Robert Ketring leads Richard Flores as part of a role-playing exercise during Metro's "Employee Sensitivity Awareness Training" course held Oct. 17. The course, given twice each quarter, presents effective ways to aid people with disabilities. (Photo by Ned Racine)

'Tools' for assisting the disabled

Hazen, who serves as chair of the Californians for Disability Rights Foundation, described four "tools" anyone can use when assisting a Metro customer with a disability:

- Show respect to the person you are trying to help.
- Practice patience when helping a disabled person.
- Avoid assuming you recognize a person's disability.
- React to the person, not the disability.

"Look the [disabled] person in the eye," Hazen told the class. "You'd be surprised how much they appreciate that, appreciate being treated like everyone else."

Hazen stressed the importance of working with persons with disabilities by citing the approximately 35,000 boardings by passengers in wheelchairs that occur each month on the Metro system.

The "Employee Sensitivity Awareness Training" course defines a disability as an impairment that limits a major life activity. This broadly defines the variety of disabilities customers bring to the Metro system and the difficulty in ascertaining the level of each person's disability.

For example, a hearing-impaired person might rely on lip reading, although most lip readers can understand only 50 percent of what's being said. Only two percent of the blind use guide dogs. Passengers with speech impediments might unintentionally sound angry.

70 percent have hidden disabilities

A person with a mobility impairment might appear to be physically sound but have limited use of a limb. In fact, of Metro's disabled fare customers, 70 percent have hidden disabilities, adding to the complexity of aiding them.

Not surprisingly, Hazen, who has 30 years of experience in the transportation field, finds the most frequent problem Metro faces in dealing with persons with disabilities stems from employees not accepting that a person with a disability is disabled.

Hazen said that if a disabled person shows a disabled ID card, "The operator should accept that card. Operators should not prejudge that person. The operator is trying to make a judgment call on something outside his or her realm."

Hazen advised course attendees to identify themselves to the person with a disability and offer to help. "Don't assume the person wants help," He said. "They are just as proud as you are."

Julianne Fowler, Senior Development and Training Specialist, adopted "Employee Sensitivity Awareness Training" from material created by the March of Dimes.

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