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## Creating Sensory-Friendly Public Environments to Support Access to Community Participation

### Introduction & Background

Many individuals with neurological differences and are hypersensitive to sensory input (i.e. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression), are overwhelmed and unable to access many environments<sup>1</sup>. For example, malls, department stores, and grocery stores are highly inaccessible and overwhelming to some due to bright lights, loud noises, and a disorganized layout. A sensory-friendly environment is a space that has been adapted or changed to create a more calming and less overwhelming environment for the senses<sup>2</sup>. This includes what you see, hear, smell, touch, taste, as well as the sense of movement, balance and internal bodily senses. Considering these senses, creating a sensory friendly environment could include dimming the lights, reducing noise, offering seating, limiting smells (i.e., perfume or room spray), removing clutter and offering accessible toilets<sup>1</sup>. Some sensory-friendly hours exist, however, no policy currently requires this. Creating policy that supports sensory-friendly environments is crucial to increasing access and inclusion to community environments to all, including those with neurological differences. Our target audience is the Los Angeles Department of Building and Planning. As occupational therapists with experienced knowledge in sensory processing and community integration, we urge policy be created that requires public environments (grocery stores, malls and department stores) to follow sensory-friendly design principals.

### Supported Policy/Rationale

#### Universal Design (UD)

- U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy supports UD<sup>6</sup>
  - UD is an “effective strategy for increasing the inclusion of people with disabilities, in both the workplace environment and workforce system”
- Principles of UD related to creating a sensory-friendly environment:
  - Flexibility in Use: accommodation of individual preferences and abilities
  - Perceptible Information: communication of necessary information effectively, regardless of ambient conditions or one’s sensory abilities
- UD can be a useful management strategy to meet legal obligations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)<sup>2</sup>
- The ADA often promotes accessibility for a specific group of people, such as individuals with wheelchairs and vision impairments, however, lacks inclusion of other disabilities (i.e., Deaf or hard of hearing people, neurodivergent individuals, and individuals with mental health challenges). ADA requirements are useful in a very limited capacity, further indicating a need for a broader philosophy like UD that promotes accessibility for larger disabled communities.<sup>7</sup>

#### United Nations Commission for Social Development - Sustainable Development Goals for 2030<sup>4</sup>

- Businesses and organizations who create sensory-friendly environments support the UN SDG<sup>3</sup>

1. Reduce inequalities/Foster inclusivity - sensory-friendly environments increase access and inclusion to community participation
2. Good health and well-being - making health and wellness care sensory friendly, accessible and inclusive directly supports good health and well-being
3. Sustainable cities and communities - sensory-friendly environments help decrease noise and light pollution

## Conclusion

Sensory friendly spaces have a vital role in promoting inclusion, providing developmental benefits, reducing stress, fostering family involvement and community building, offering educational opportunities, and promoting well-being. By incorporating sensory-friendly design principles, communities can create more accessible and enriching spaces for all community members to enjoy. Investing in sensory environments is not only beneficial for individuals with sensory differences but it also enriches the overall community experience because more community members are able to engage in their environment.

## References

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