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PART I: Purpose of This Guide

People with sensory, social, and learning disabilities have the capacity to participate in a range of community activities when provided the opportunity and appropriate supports. When individuals with these disabilities participate in the community, the benefits include greater community, civic, and social participation as a person transitions from childhood into adulthood with the potential of creating a long-standing patron.

Sensory, social, and learning disabilities tend to be invisible to the observer, and are sometimes called "hidden disabilities." Society often has expectations for how people ought to behave in certain settings. When people with hidden disabilities act differently in a social situation, they are at risk for not being welcomed in community or public places. With this in mind, program adaptations can provide creative and innovative expansions of your accessibility program. These adaptations create a welcoming environment for persons with sensory, social, and learning needs.

This guidebook is intended to help you identify the qualities and resources to consider when creating a relaxed and friendly theater experience for persons with sensory, social, and learning disabilities. The guidebook offers options and is a starting point for implementing sensory friendly performances recognizing theaters have different sizes, capacities, and commercial or non-commercial needs. Performing arts organizations may be at different stages of sensory friendly program development. Therefore, not all of the suggestions in this guidebook may work for every organization. However, the suggestions provide a place to begin evaluating the needs, opportunities, facilitators, and barriers in developing access for persons with sensory, social, and learning disabilities.

What are sensory friendly inclusive performing arts opportunities?

A sensory friendly performance is a family experience fostering attendance and meaningful experiences at performing arts venues. A sensory friendly performance may involve adapting the house rules for a particular performance, adapting the audience environment, creating alternative ticketing and seating arrangements, as well as pre-theater preparatory activities for the person with a sensory, social, or learning disability so the person begins to understand and anticipate what might happen at a performing arts experience. The term "sensory friendly" is a common term for events and experiences at theaters and museums. This is the term used for this guidebook. However, some of the examples and options offered in this guidebook often extend beyond the sensory experience.

From the stage through the lobby

This guidebook is not advocating that an established or existing performance, script, or stage design be changed. Although there are some theaters that may choose to do so. Programming for persons with sensory, social and learning needs can include special performances as well as adaptations to the environment or structure of the theater experience that are useful for all patrons. Environmental adaptations emphasized for sensory friendly performances frequently occur from the edge of the stage where the audience begins to the lobby and front of the house. Adaptations can be implemented in specially scheduled performances or included to varying degrees into the regular performance schedule.



A sensory friendly performance is a family experience fostering attendance and meaningful experiences at performing arts venues.

PART II: Individuals Who Benefit From Sensory Friendly **Performing Arts Opportunities**

The experience of attending a performing arts venue typically requires an ability to communicate effectively with personnel and other audience members and follow social conventions for expected behaviors, such as sitting in one's seat and clapping or laughing at appropriate times during the performance. Cognitive skills are used to attend to, understand, and appreciate the performance. Thus, people with learning, sensory, and social disabilities may have difficulty attending a performing arts production without support.

Learning, sensory, and social disabilities are frequently seen in people with a variety of conditions such as autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disability, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders, or traumatic brain injuries. Individuals with these disabilities may interact with others in unusual or different ways and have repetitive behaviors that might be perceived by other patrons as disruptive. These repetitive behaviors can include twirling in circles, or flapping arms while jumping up and down. Difficulties with change and transitions are often common.

Many individuals with these conditions may respond to sensory information in their environment in unusual ways. Sometimes, people are overly sensitive to sensory information such as lights, sounds, smells, or touch. Some of these individuals do not particularly like sensory information; consequently they want to control the amount of information they perceive. They prefer predictability and benefit from knowing the expectations. Alternatively, they may look for opportunities to increase sensory stimulation, such as touching everything within reach, stomping their feet while walking or purposefully bumping into objects. Or some individuals may have a minimal response to sensory information.

Cognitive and attention disabilities may also be associated with these conditions. For example, people may have difficulty understanding emotions represented on stage or following the sequence of events in the performance. Their emotional reactions may not be consistent with the message in the performance or they may have an emotional reaction to something in the venue that is less obvious to other patrons. With all of these conditions, symptoms and behaviors can vary widely.

People with learning, sensory, and social disabilities may have difficulty attending a performing arts production without support.



HOW MIGHT SOCIAL AND COGNITIVE DISABILITIES MANIFEST THEMSELVES IN A PERFORMING ARTS SETTING?

Social and Cognitive Disabilities	Manifestation in Performing Arts Setting	
Difficulty understanding others' desires and needs	 May not realize their own behavior has potential to impact the theater experience for others in the audience. 	
Difficulty understanding and showing emotion	 May react to emotional content of performance differently than rest of audience. For example, the person may laugh at a sad moment during the production. 	
Limited eye contact, few hand and body gestures, and limited facial expression	 May show enjoyment of theater experience in different ways. For example, he or she may not clap or smile in appreciation. 	
Limited imaginative or symbolic thinking	May not understand abstract or symbolic content in performance.	
Repetitive speech patterns	May repetitively utter a phrase, hum, or make noises during a performance.	
Repetitive movement patterns	 May frequently move or repetitively move body or arms and hands during a performance. May have a desire to pace or move freely during the performance. 	
Repetitive use of objects	May be holding or fidgeting with an object during the performance.	
Rigidity in following routines	 May be reactive if there is a change to what he or she expected from the theater experience. 	
Difficulty with transitions and change	 May show disruptive behaviors during unstructured and transitions times, such as entering and leaving the theater or intermissions. 	
Fixated interests that may be highly specialized and developed	 May express interest or react to content in performance at unexpected times. Fixated interest may be disruptive to other theater goers if the person is repeatedly talking about the object of interest or unable to move away from the fixated interest. 	
Overly sensitive to sensory information	 In the tactile (touch) domain, he or she may avoid being touched or being near others in crowds. In the auditory domain, a person may be reactive to noises of a particular type (not necessarily just loud). In the vestibular (movement) domain, a person may not like the sensation of escalators or elevators. In the visual domain, an individual may be overwhelmed by bright lights. In the olfactory domain, an individual may find particular smells aversive. People with over-responsive patterns of sensory processing may be easily overwhelmed or quickly experience discomfort if an environment is highly stimulating. 	
Limited response to sensory information	 May not be attending to entire performance or respond to others. Does not respond to his/her name or appears to not hear you at times. Appears unaware of other members of the group. 	
Seeks out sensory experiences	 In the proprioceptive (body awareness) domain, the person might seek heavy pressure proprioceptive stimuli by stomping their feet while walking, purposefully bumping into objects or moving around during a performance. In the vestibular (movement) domain, the person might crave movement during the performance. In the tactile (touch) domain, an individual might seek intense touch pressure, or touch everything within his or her reach. 	

PART III: Knowledgeable Advisors Who Can Help in Creating Sensory Friendly Programming

Individuals with Disabilities and their **Families**

It is important to include the perspectives of family members and individuals with disabilities in your accessibility efforts. They can be helpful in providing their insights and feedback on materials and resources that you have developed, evaluating new shows or exhibits, and by being a part of your advisory committee or a focus group. This information will enable you to gain an insider perspective, help shape public experiences, and allow them an opportunity to share their skills and expertise.

Occupational Therapists

Occupational Therapists help people of all different ages participate in the daily activities that are important to them. For a parent of a child on the autism spectrum, this might include an activity such as enjoying a family outing to the theater. Occupational Therapists have a background in biological and behavioral sciences and think carefully about creating a good fit between the person and the environment to optimize the person's ability to function in everyday life. In helping create a sensory friendly theater experience, an Occupational Therapist could:

- Analyze environmental factors that affect children who have highly sensitive sensory systems and make suggestions for modifying these factors (e.g., lighting, sound, space needs).
- Offer suggestions of objects and strategies that can be calming or sound attenuating (i.e. fidgets, ear phones, movement).
- Create pre-visit stories, visual schedules, and training materials to help prepare the child for going to the theater.

Special Educators

Special education teachers have training to facilitate the education of students with a variety of disabilities to addresses the students' individual differences and needs. In helping create a sensory friendly theater experience, Special Educators could:

- Modify materials that are developed for performances.
- Pre-teach the content of the performance if coming as a school group.
- Modify the content of the performance for the child into a simpler explanation.

Speech/Language Therapists

Speech/Language Therapists focus on optimizing an individual's ability to speak, use and understand language. In helping create a sensory friendly theater experience, the Speech/Language Therapist could:

- Write pre-visit stories that can include specific details of situations or what to expect during an outing to the theater about an activity (i.e. getting to the theater, expectations during the performance).
- Develop visual supports or picture books that can facilitate understanding of the experience.





PART IV: Pre-Visit Strategies and Materials to Create a Meaningful Experience

Priming

Priming is a method of presenting information about a situation prior to the event in order to prepare for participation in a task within the situation. Priming activities are often a short presentation of information either through written, visual, auditory, or video format to help people prepare for and predict future events (Koegel et al., 2003; Schriebman, Whalen & Stahmer, 2000). Encouraging persons to explore the theater's online resources and photo galleries may be useful in preparing for a visit.

Picture Schedules

A picture schedule is a visual communication tool using drawings or photographs to convey a sequenced order of events or situations. Picture schedules increase predictability and help the person anticipate events, time, space, or activities (Lequia, Machalicek & Rispoli, 2012).

Picture schedules support communication between people, and are not intended to replace direct verbal communication.







Theater usher





Ticket scanner





Example: A picture schedule can convey the sequence of activities such as obtaining tickets from the box office, entering the lobby/ theater, finding a seat, to the beginning of the show.

Pre-Visit Stories/Social Stories™

Social StoriesTM are trademarked by Carol Gray (The Gray Center, 2012). Similar to picture schedules or priming, a social story is a short written story that shows information about a social situation. The story can describe specific information about an activity, situation and event, or convey information about behavioral expectations often associated with the social situation.

Social stories can be individualized to a person or a particular situation such as describing information about where and when a person should go to the restroom. Social stories provide readers with a description of the expectations before an activity occurs.

Research documents the effectiveness of social stories for children and youth on the autism spectrum (Kokina & Kern, 2010). For this population, social stories have been effective in helping with structuring and completing homework, decreasing inappropriate and undesirable behaviors, improving appropriate play, social interactions, and participation in desired activities.





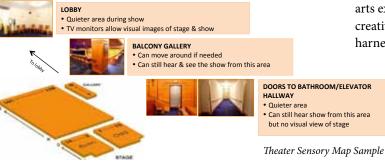
"Meet Your Seat"

Prior to the performance, invite families and children with disabilities to come in advance to "Meet Your Seat". This priming strategy enables families to prepare their children for the venue, the actual theater, and the seating. Being in the space ahead of the performance allows families to determine the best place to sit to optimize a successful experience for their child and the entire family.

Environmental Mapping

Designating where everything is located in advance for families attending a performance can eliminate the stressors of getting to the theater, parking, anticipating the layout of the theater, or finding the bathrooms.

- Create a tip sheet on the path to the performance and what will be encountered if coming from the parking area or arriving by other forms of transportation. Include directions for getting to the lobby of the theater.
- Let families know where the bathrooms are located. the water fountain, and any exits.
- Identify a quiet space where people can go to get away from the crowd or noise.
- Make sure that "escape" routes are explicit so people can exit easily with the least disruption.



Prior to the performance invite families and children with disabilities to come in advance to "Meet Your Seat".

School and Community Pre-Visit Programs

Programs or view books of a performance or event produced by an organization can serve as preparatory priming activities for persons to become familiar with information related to the theater space or performance.

School and community pre-visit programs, created by a collaborative team including your organization's staff, families, schools, teachers, and therapists, can be used to prime, supplement, and reinforce a meaningful performing arts experience. Examples of pre-visit experiences may include:

- Short pre-shows in a familiar setting to increase familiarity with the content or experience.
- Themed activities related to theater experiences or show content such as reading books related to the show.
- Arts and crafts activities based on the show's stage props or design.
- Web searches on specific content related to the historical events of a show.
- Opportunities to touch and interact with artifacts and items related to a performance such as props, instruments, and costumes.

Additionally, school and community pre-visit programs can be used to reinforce continued learning and positive arts experiences after a specific performance. The creativity and innovation of education staff should be harnessed to develop materials and tools for learning.

PART V: Considerations Specific to Theaters

Before setting up your sensory friendly performances, determine what features will make the environment more welcoming to families, how to make information available to the public, and when to train the staff.

Selecting and Scheduling Performances

Selecting the show involves considerations such as the length of the performance, the content of the show, and the date or time of the show. The age and functional level of the audience will influence the decisions about which show to make sensory friendly. Children with basic abilities or younger children may gain more benefit from a show with simpler content, whereas, children with more advanced abilities or older children may gain more benefit from a more complex show. Considerations should be given to the families ability to travel to the show. An early morning show may be challenging if children have difficulty or need additional time to adjust to community travel.

Intermission

For some patrons, removing an intermission may help by eliminating difficult transitions or disruptions whereas for others, an intermission may provide a needed break for people who need to move around or unable to sustain attention for extended periods of time.

A community advisory board made up of families and knowledgable advisors can assist with the particular issues and challenges with length, scheduling, intermission, and content of the show.

House Rules

Consider the "traditional" theater rules and determine which can be relaxed to provide a more welcoming experiences for families at sensory friendly performances:

- Can a patron sit or stand in the aisle?
- If the performance includes music, can a patron get up and dance to the rhythm?
- Other than the aisle, are there other spaces where a patron can walk around if movement is needed? If so, designate where in the program or on a venue map.
- Are patrons permitted to enter and exit the theater as they need to throughout the performance?

Seating and Ticketing

Advanced thought needs to be given to the seating and ticketing processes for your performances. Consider discussing these topics with your knowledgeable advisors and your internal staff.

General Admission or Reserved Seating

Consider the pros and cons of reserved and general admission seating:

- General admission seating allows for more choice in the moment for families who are less familiar with the theater and are unsure of where they will be comfortable.
- Reserved seating allows families to select seating that will best meet their needs and ensures that those seats will be available should they arrive late.

Capacity

- Limiting the number of ticket/seat sales (not filling the house) allows space for movement and provides comfort for children who need larger personal areas.
- Blocking a section or rows allows for families to make a quick exit.
- Leaving front rows available.

Ticket Sales

Consider these questions:

- How will patrons purchase tickets? Online, over the phone, in person, by subscription?
- How will patrons know which performances will be sensory friendly? Clearly indicate which performances are sensory friendly on your website and in other materials.

Remember to train your Box Office staff so they can give patrons the information they need to make an informed decision as to whether a sensory friendly performance is right for their family.

Discounted Ticket Programs

Let patrons know if there are discounted ticket programs or other opportunities that may help defray the cost of attending a performance.

Refund Policies

Some patrons may hesitate to attend a show if they think they will have to leave the performance early and forfeit the fee. Consider how your refund policy may impact families attending these performances and determine in advance whether your organization will make any exceptions for sensory friendly performances.

Environmental Modifications

Modifications to the audience experience of sound and light in the theater, to the extent possible, can make the experience more successful for persons with sensory, social, and learning disabilities. Meet with the production and artistic staff including stage managers, lighting, and sound crew to discuss potential modifications. If the performance is interactive, consider how that can be managed so as not to overwhelm or startle the audience. Whenever possible, include information about sound and lighting in your pre-visit materials. Consider "rehearsing" these sounds and lights with the audience prior to the start of the performance.

Sound

- Work with the sound engineer to keep sounds at a consistent level.
- Identify any unpredictable loud sounds such as thunder clap, cymbal, door slams, etc. Develop a means to notify the audience of these sounds during the performance, such as using a visual indicator like a glow stick, so patrons can use their own sensory behavior strategies.



Lighting

• Work with the lighting engineer or designer to minimize strobe or flashing lights.

- Identify any unpredictable lighting surprises such as strobes, lightning bolts, etc. Develop a means to notify the audience of these lights during the performance, such as using a visual indicator like a glow stick, so patrons can use their own sensory behavior strategies.
- Keep house lights up or slightly raised to avoid total darkness. If this is not an option, provide parent with small pen light so they can exit more easily if needed.

Quiet Spaces

Identify quiet spaces within the theater complex where families can take a break during the performance if needed.

Staff Training

Staff training is a crucial component of an accessibility program. Staff may encounter persons with a social or learning disability and not realize a different approach to communication and interaction may be warranted.

Staff training may include:

- General knowledge about people with an autism, intellectual disability, and other social cognitive disorders including the common behavioral, communication, and social challenges.
- Knowledge of basic communication and interaction strategies with people with social and learning disabilities, and their families.
- Knowledge of modifications and adaptations to support sensory friendly programming.
- Value for inclusive performing arts experiences for all persons regardless of ability level.

Be sure to train all staff and volunteers who interact with patrons. People with social, learning, and cognitive disabilities will come to performances other than those your organization has designated as sensory friendly and your staff should be prepared to make them feel welcome. Evaluate the effectiveness of your training and repeat and reinforce as needed.

Performing Artist Preparations

The performers may have varying exposure to audiences with social and learning disabilities. Prior to a sensory friendly event, performers should be informed that the audience behavior may be different than expected.

Explain the adaptations to the audience house rules, and the potential for environmental modifications such as lighting and noise. The performers may have suggestions related to environmental modifications and other nontypical protocols that can be included during a sensory friendly performance.

Performers may want to have opportunities for direct audience interaction either prior, during or after the show. Pre- or post- show meet and greets with performers could be beneficial for both the performers and audience. These interactions can prime audience members prior to the show, or reinforce learning during or following the show. These can be wonderfully meaningful and positive interactions to decrease anxiety or increase interest in performing arts experiences for the person with social and learning disabilities. Interactive performances involving participation from the audience either from their seats or being invited on the stage may require thoughtful reflection on how to introduce these moments to the audience.

During the Show Strategies

The following is a list of **sensory tools** that may be used by people who experience high sensitivity to sensory stimuli.

- Earplugs decrease overall volume for people who are sensitive to loud noises.
- Headphones are helpful for those people who are sensitive to excessive noise. Headphones may be used to tone down sound, or when paired with performer's microphone via a theater's assistive listening system, headphones can help people to better focus and attend to a performance by blocking extraneous background noise.



• Seat cushions can be used to help people feel more "secure" by providing greater support in one's seat. In addition to providing height, seat cushions that provide side support and a snug fit are useful for people who have challenges with balance. Theaters that utilize bench seats should consider stadium cushions that provide back support.



• Manipulatives are objects that people often hold to keep their hands busy while attending to something else. Manipulatives can increase one's ability to maintain focus and attention during performances. These may include items such as crayons with coloring books/doodle pads, pocket-size Etch-A-Sketch®, small hand held objects for fidgeting, or small sensory boards that contain various textures to touch.



Photo credit: R. Ideishi

Communication and Marketing

A key component of sensory friendly performances is communicating and marketing understandable information that conveys the features of a sensory friendly performances. This information should be clearly highlighted on the organization's website and marketing materials.

When creating flyers or e-invitations or e-newsletters; families will be most attracted to the accommodations and adjustments to the performance. Consider highlighting:

- Environmental modifications, including lighting, sound, and relaxed house rules.
- Any pre-visit materials or programs that are available, such as "Meet your Seat" events, social stories, and tip sheets.
- A contact phone number and email address should a patron have questions.
- Links to maps of your theater, and especially maps and directions for parking and transportation.

Use terms, such as, sensory friendly performance, theater accessible to all children and their families, relaxed theater environment, or theater in a safe and accepting environment in your communications.

Utilize resources in your local area to spread the word:

- Connect with special education schools or your local school district's special education office to find parent listservs, newsletters, email lists, etc.
- Contact local chapters of organizations that focus on specific issues such as autism or intellectual disabilities for newsletters and emails lists for local families.

If you are partnering with a school or another organization for training and support, highlight the partnership on website marketing materials. Many families will trust known organizations that serve their needs or interests, and the friendly welcoming culture that may be associated with the known organization.





Promotions and advertising should reflect sensory friendly programs are welcoming of family and friends.

PART VI: Program Evaluation

Finally, we need to acknowledge the importance of evaluating these accessibility and inclusion initiatives. This is another area where professionals and researchers can provide input and expertise. Collaboration between academic/professional researchers and cultural institutions' research and evaluation team should be formed, if possible.

The evaluation measures should be appropriate to the needs of the organization and families. Outcomes, such as social engagement, might be defined, observed and measured differently for people with learning and social disabilities. Careful attention should be paid to what is a meaningful outcome for a person with learning or social disabilities, a family, and an organization. Persons with disabilities, families and organizations may define success differently. For example,

- Social engagement from an organization's perspective might be the frequency of attendance at theater events.
- Social engagement for a person with a learning or social challenge might be the ability to hand the ticket to the usher staff.

Evaluations can focus on the process of creating sensory friendly theater experiences and/or the outcomes of these experiences.

- Process evaluation provides information about the program development and implementation of a process or program. A process evaluation might include a family review of materials and program plans, or survey of the organizational staff or administrators related to the potential impacts of the program.
- Outcome evaluation is intended to determine whether a program met its goals. An outcome evaluation might include family's feedback of their experience following the sensory friendly performance to determine is the theater experience was successful. The questions can focus on general satisfaction or specific accommodations the organization is interested in such as whether blocked or staggered seating was preferable.

The evaluations should seek information from multiple perspectives including the family, the organization's staff (e.g. education staff, usher and visitor services, ticketing), and teachers from a school group.

Guiding questions or issues to consider

The areas you may want to assess in your evaluation might include:

- 1. What worked well in past theater experiences?
- 2. What did not work well in past theater experiences?
- 3. What was the impact of the pre-visit strategies on the audience?
- 4. What was the impact of the environmental modifications on the audience?
- 5. Were there any changes to the organization's staff knowledge and behaviors following staff training and sensory friendly experiences?
- 6. What were the reasons for participating in modified performing arts experiences?
- 7. What was the response of other audience members to any modifications in the experience (e.g., lights, sound, intermission, alternative seating plans)?



Quick Checklist for Preparing a Sensory Friendly Performance

V	To do list:	Suggested timeline:
	Engage appropriate colleagues in a conversation about the feasibility of developing sensory friendly performances.	
	Select the production that will feature sensory friendly performance(s) and date/time	
	Create sensory friendly advisory group	
	Identify alternative ticketing process, if needed	As far in advance as possible
	Consider whether a subscription series will be offered	
	Discuss marketing plan and determine how patrons will identify performances that are sensory friendly through your website and in-print materials	
	Convene an advisory group to develop plan and tasks for a sensory friendly performance (e.g. which materials to create, seating plan, training, and preview dates)	4 months prior to show
	Continue advertising and marketing of performance	3 months prior to show (and on-going)
	Identify needs, potential outcomes, and creation of evaluation content and process	2 months prior to show
	Create preparation materials	2 months prior to show
	Preview the performance show production (discuss performance and house modifications with crew and staff)	Within 2-3 weeks prior to show
	Discuss performer preparations and potential performance rehearsal with modifications	Within 2 weeks prior to show
	Disseminate preparation materials to families, teachers, or schools	2 weeks prior to show
	Offer family pre-visit theater opportunities (e.g., Meet Your Seat)	1-2 weeks prior to show
	Disseminate and collect pre-evaluation data (online or paper evaluations)	Approx. 2 weeks prior to show
	Provide house staff, box office, and security staff education about the show and house modifications and, knowledge of individuals with sensory, cognitive, and learning disabilities	1 week prior to show or day of show
	Sensory Friendly Performance	Day of show
	Disseminate and collect post-evaluation data	2 weeks following the day of show
	Review and follow up discussion	Subsequent to show and evaluation analysis

PART VII: Resource Organizations

American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA)

4720 Montgomery Lane Bethesda, MD 20814 (301) 652-2682; TDD: (800) 377-8555 www.aota.org

Autism Society

4340 East-West Hwy, Suite 350 Bethesda, MD 20814 (800) 328-8476 (voice/relay) www.autism-society.org

Autism Speaks

1 East 33rd Street, 4th Floor New York, NY 10016 (212) 252-8584 (voice/relay) Family Services Autism Response Team (ART) members are specially trained to connect families with information, resources and opportunities. (888) 288-4762 (voice/relay) (888) 772-9050 (En Español) familyservices@autismspeaks.org www.autismspeaks.org

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/ **Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)**

8181 Professional Place, Suite 150 Landover, MD 20785 (301) 306-7070 (voice/relay) www.chadd.org

National Association of Special Education Teachers

1250 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 200 Washington D.C. 20036 (800) 754-4421 (voice/relay) www.naset.org

National Dissemination Center for Children with **Disabilities (NICHCY)**

1825 Connecticut Ave. NW Washington, DC 20009 (800) 695-0285 (voice/relay/TTY) (202) 884-8200 (voice/relay/TTY) nichcy@fhi360.org www.nichcy.org

The Arc

1825 K Street NW, Suite 1200 Washington, D.C. 20006 (202) 534-3710 (voice/relay) (800) 433-5255 (voice/relay) www.thearc.org

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