

Section 1:

The Start of Your Journey

What is a disability?

An individual with a disability is defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment. An impairment is a physical or mental anatomical, physiological, or psychological abnormality. A qualified diagnosis must come from clinical or diagnostic techniques or testing completed by a physician or specialist in the field. For more information on what qualifies as a disability visit www.ada.gov.

I am concerned my loved one has a disability. What do I do?

Meet with your family physician and share your concerns with them on the possibility of a disability. Often families will utilize the internet to complete research and to self-diagnose. It is important to seek confirmation from a physician who will direct you to the appropriate specialist. When you apply for services, you will have to provide documentation confirming the diagnosis from a physician or specialist. A specialist's documentation can carry more weight in the decision-making process for services or during the application process for government programs. When applying for government programs, you must provide medical evidence of the impairment.

How do I get a diagnosis for a disability?

During your visit with the specialist, they will complete a series of tests to diagnose the disability. It is not uncommon for other underlying diagnoses to show up during the testing process and the first specialist may direct you to other specialist for further testing.

Some clinical and diagnostic techniques and testing may include behavioral observation, blood test, genetic testing, newborn screening, prenatal (i.e., Amniocentesis or Chorionic Villus Sampling), ultrasound, etc.

A common test given to individuals is the Intelligence Quotient (IQ). IQ testing evaluates abstract thinking, academic learning, experimental learning, judgment, problem solving, and reasoning. Initial testing and recertification requirements for the state of Iowa vary by the diagnosis and Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) waiver requirements. For more information on IQ testing requirements speak with your physician, specialist, or case manager.

Is my loved one protected with their disability?

Individuals diagnosed with a disability are protected under federal law. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law by President George H. W. Bush in 1990. This major civil rights bill prohibits discrimination based on disability in the private and government sectors. ADA enacted a comprehensive set of national goals to ensure individuals with disabilities enjoy equality of opportunity, full community participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency.

In 2008 President George W. Bush signed a revision expanding the term of disability to broaden the definition resulting in protection for more Americans under the ADA and other federal disability nondiscrimination laws.

More information on ADA is provided in the K-12 Education and Post-Secondary Alternatives sections of this guide.

