

Creating a Welcoming Community for Friends with Disabilities

Are you interested in creating a welcoming community in your state? Here are some things you might consider and some tips from Hangout Hive, a proud project of the Learning Disabilities Association of Maryland since 1999.

Since 1963, LDA has provided support to people with learning disabilities, their parents, teachers and other professionals with cutting edge information on learning disabilities, practical solutions, and a comprehensive network of resources.

1. Announcing the community and inviting people to join.

Today, there are so many ways to announce the start of a new community. What works best for you and for prospective members? Social media? Email? Professional organizations, special education communities, libraries, schools, local colleges?

The *Hangout Hive* began in 1999, and different options were available. The Washington DC area had radio programs and local newspapers where we could place free public announcements. We asked libraries and schools to display our brochures and posters. We started with a group of 4 adults who met in a member's condo each week.

2. Who are your community members and how do they join?

Who can be a part of the new community? Do you want membership to include all disabilities or a specific one? Learning Disabilities, Autism, Developmental Disabilities? And what ages? teens, adults? How can someone become a member?

Hangout Hive chooses not to discriminate based on disability. We do require members to be at least 21 years old. Our minimum requirements for membership are here: [join_requirements](#)

We have a membership application on our website [register](#). The Leadership Team (four annually elected members) receives each application and decides whether the applicant is eligible.

3. Do you want to have a mentor for the group?

A mentor guides the group and helps resolve issues. This person might be a parent, for example. They could be volunteers or paid. Which fits your situation? What qualities are you looking for in a mentor?

Hangout Hive has hired a young professional mentor part-time. She meets with the group for monthly meetings, occasional events and answers phones/texts. She works out difficulties between members, clarifies responsibilities, and can be consulted when there are decisions to be made. Hiring a mentor usually means fundraising. You may also find a sponsoring organization that funds the group.

4. *How are activities chosen?*

Who will plan activities for the group? How will time and place be communicated?

Each month, *Hangout Hive* members suggest restaurants, fairs, parades, and places to go on the weekends. The suggestions are presented to members in a questionnaire. They vote for the events they like. The events that receive the most votes are chosen for the month. The Social Events Coordinator (an elected member of the group) then announces the event to members by email: where to meet and when, and tracks who has signed up.

Each activity has a host member who welcomes participants. All members are responsible for purchasing their own food and finding transportation to the event.

5. *Are there fees for membership? If so, how are they used?*

Do you want to collect membership dues? If so, what would be the right amount? How would you use this money?

The *Hangout Hive* has an annual membership fee of \$5. Members vote on how this money is spent. For example, it might be used to purchase a wedding present for a member or to provide food for the monthly meeting.

6. *How are responsibilities divided among members? Do you envision elections for key roles?*

As the group matures and more people join, you will need to give some thought to how responsibilities are shared among members. Should there be specific roles and responsibilities that individual members take on? Should these be elected positions?

Hangout Hive votes annually on four positions: President, Vice President, Secretary and Social Event Coordinator. Each has specific responsibilities and this leadership group meets regularly.

- President: Contributes to monthly meetings, introduces new ideas and talks about resolving old difficulties. Present at most activities.
- Vice President: Supports the President in these responsibilities.
- Secretary: Takes minutes of the meeting
- Social Event Coordinator: Oversees events.

Some Final Thoughts

Those are the big questions. Smaller ones include, for example, choosing a place to meet. The *Hangout Hive* meets in a condo party room one night a month. Group meetings can be in a home, a library, or a party room. Depending on your budget and the availability of space in your area, you might use the space for free or rent it.

Don't feel that all decisions must be made before starting a group. The group brings people together to laugh, to learn, and to enjoy life. For us, each year brought new situations, new decisions, and new appreciation for our group.

You will create your own community based on your own inclinations. Be confident and have fun!

And lastly—check out the *Hangout Hive* promotional video on YouTube. If you need a little inspiration to move forward, listen to what members have to say about why the group is important to them: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFfuOm_vdng

This is a condensed version of **Gather: A Do-It-Yourself Kit for Creating your Own Community.**
<https://damd.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/GatherSocialGroupToolKit.pdf>

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