



# The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program:

A roadmap to successful  
implementation

This guidebook is a project of the Sunflower Seeds,  
a community action team of the  
Riley Institute's Diversity Leaders Initiative

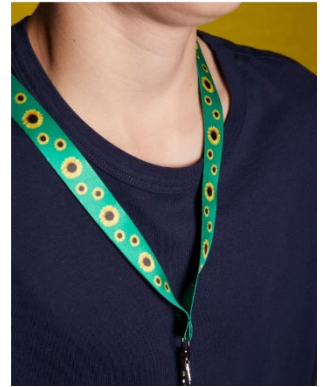
## Roadmap Overview

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## What is the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program?

Initiated in the United Kingdom, the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program (HDSP) is designed to support individuals who have hidden disabilities (e.g., hearing impairment, autism, Alzheimer’s disease, PTSD) and might benefit from additional support, patience, and understanding in navigating their environment. Originally implemented in airports, this program is now recognized across the globe and in a wide range of sectors, including retail, universities, theme parks, supermarkets, theaters, and health care. It is a low-cost, simple program that is straightforward in its execution. Here is how it works:

Under the Sunflower Program, *any* individual can go to a customer service desk at an airport, hotel, tourist destination, retailer, etc. and request a sunflower lanyard, pin, or bracelet to indicate they would benefit from additional support in their journey. The same Sunflower logo, which features a yellow flower on a green background, is used across all organizations internationally so that it is easily recognized by all involved. When worn, the Sunflower emblem indicates to staff that the wearer may have a hidden disability and/or may benefit from extra support. All staff associated with an organization, especially those who have direct interaction with visitors or customers, receive basic training so that they are aware of the program and are ready and willing to support Sunflower wearers. Simply knowing that an individual



has a hidden disability can increase understanding and patience, thereby reducing frustrations and conflicts and creating a more positive experience for all. No extra services or privileges are offered to Sunflower wearers; they simply benefit from the additional grace offered when providers are aware of their needs.

It is important to note that no documentation is needed to acquire a Sunflower emblem, and no individual is ever required to wear the Sunflower. The Sunflower program is a voluntary, opt-in program that allows individuals to signal their need for extra time, patience, and understanding. To facilitate the process, organizations may choose to designate select employees as “Sunflower Ambassadors” who wear a yellow sunflower on a *white* background to indicate to patrons that they are available for additional support.



# Why Adopt the Sunflower Program?

We all want to create inclusive communities where people feel welcome, valued, and supported. Organizations are required by law to treat people with disabilities fairly and offer appropriate accommodations. The Sunflower Program facilitates and enhances this process with very low cost, time, and effort. It improves perceptions of customer service and helps organizations fulfill their missions of serving all customers, including those with invisible disabilities.

Individuals with disabilities comprise the largest minority in the world, and most people are connected to disability in some way – either personally or through a family member or loved one. The Sunflower Program requires a minimal investment for maximal payoff and offers a competitive advantage for organizations. It is an increasingly popular, international program that connects all of us and has been implemented in hundreds of airports, retailers, hotels, theme parks, and tourist destinations across the globe.

## THE HIDDEN DISABILITIES SUNFLOWER

**HOW DID IT BEGIN?**  
The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower was first launched at Gatwick Airport in May 2016.

**WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?**  
The answer was to create a lanyard with a simple sunflower design on a green background.

**WHY WAS IT LAUNCHED?**  
London Gatwick Airport asked "How can we recognise that one of our passengers may have a non-obvious disability?".

**WHY A LANYARD?**  
It was intended to be a subtle but visible sign enabling airport staff to recognise that the wearer (or someone with them) may require some extra help, time or assistance when moving through the airport.

Living with hidden disabilities can make daily life more demanding for many people, but it can be difficult for others to recognise, acknowledge or understand the challenges faced.

**CAMHS**  
PROFESSIONALS

## How To Get started

Here are the steps we recommend to get your Sunflower Program rolling:

- Visit the [Hidden Disabilities website](#) (HDSP) to register your organization.
- Connect with Lynn Smith and Ruth Rabet, both of whom work with HDSP and can provide guidance for your organization. They offer brief, informative training videos (8 min total) that you can use to prepare your staff for program implementation.
- Meet with local advocacy groups to get insight from community members and consider partnerships for rolling out the program
- Develop a proposal to share with your leadership, marketing team, and stakeholders. Include a timeline for implementation in your proposal. Time for roll out is 2 – 6 months for most organizations.
- Order the lanyards, pins, or wristbands from HDSP that you will distribute free of charge to participating individuals. Consider whether you want select employees or ask for volunteers to serve as Sunflower Ambassadors and order the “I Support Sunflower” items for those employees.
- Training must take place before you announce the program to the public. Think carefully about when and how you will implement training with your staff. It is essential that all staff members, especially those who interact directly with customers or visitors, are aware of the program and know how to offer support to participants.
- Prepare a press release and develop a media plan for your launch. The program only works if both your staff and your patrons are aware of it. Work with local media outlets to alert the public. Create a page on your website that explains the program and provides guidance to those who would like to use it. Develop banners, posters, or electronic bulletin boards to use within your organization to promote the program.
- Make sure it is obvious to the public where they can acquire a Sunflower item within your organization.
- Launch, tend your garden, and bloom!



## Recommendations for Success

- **Training is key.** Training is essential and must take place for **all** staff. HDSP offers short, simple training videos that are ready to use for all organizations. These brief (8 min total) videos describe the Sunflower Program, explain what a non-visible disability is, and demonstrate how to approach and support people who are wearing a Sunflower lanyard.
- **Make training easy for employees.** One simple way to implement training is to include it in the onboarding/badging process for new employees. For current employees, setting up a video station in a break room or offering “lunch and learn” sessions can be effective.
- **Focus on program visibility.** Posters and flyers about the program should be placed in high-traffic areas so that they are visible to employees and patrons alike.
- **Get buy-in from all team members.** For example, airports will need to have buy-in from all vendors and contractors, including TSA, retailers, food vendors, airline staff, rental car companies, and support personnel. It is essential that any frontline workers who interact with patrons are aware of the program and educated on the ways to offer appropriate support.
- **Respect the privacy of your patrons with disabilities.** Patrons should not be required to provide documentation about their disability, nor should they be asked about their specific disability. This is an opt-in program, with no requirements. You do not want people to have to disclose their disability or offer proof. Individuals with disabilities should not be required to wear a sunflower; it is their choice.
- **Do not offer special privileges or services to Sunflower wearers.** This is an opt-in program, with no requirements or restrictions. The system can be vulnerable to abuse if special benefits are offered to Sunflower wearers. If Sunflower patrons simply receive extra patience and understanding, their visit with you will be more enjoyable and issues of abuse will be minimal.
- **Make the distribution center for Sunflower materials highly visible,** for example at information or customer service desks. For airports, be sure travelers can get their materials before they go through security. This allows patrons to pick them up in advance of their travel.
- **Take advantage of the periodic workgroups offered by HDSP.** These workgroups bring together different organizations who are implementing the program to share stories of success and strategies for addressing challenges. You will gain access to these workgroups when you register your organization with HDSP.
- **For cities, Destination Marketing Organizations can serve as a conduit** for restaurants, hotels, shops, and attractions that want to implement the program. Here are effective city-wide examples: <https://tinyurl.com/samplecity1>, <https://tinyurl.com/samplecity2>, or <https://tinyurl.com/samplecity3>
- **Make a plan for sustainability.** Ongoing training and marketing are important for success. Sustainability can be as simple as asking team members to review the brief videos on an annual basis and continuing to post information about the program for team member and patrons.
- **Consider a plan to assess outcomes.** At a minimum, provide opportunities for Sunflower wearers to give feedback about the program. Their stories can catalyze change.

## FAQs for Launching and Sustaining the Program

- **How much does the program cost to implement?**

Costs will vary depending upon the size of your organization, but the primary expenditures for any organization include the Sunflower materials (lanyards, pins, etc.), membership in HDSP ([memberships](#) that include training range from \$350 to \$1750 annually), and any marketing or promotional materials that you use. The first year is typically the most expensive as organizations raise awareness of the program. Our survey of participating airports suggests that the program can be maintained at airports for as little \$2500 - \$5000 per year. For smaller businesses the cost will be considerably less.

- **Can I customize Sunflower materials for my organization?**

Yes, to some extent. Because this is an international program used by airports, businesses, hotels, and service providers across the globe, consistent use of the yellow sunflower on the green background is important. That said, HDSP can work with you to add a company logo or personalization to the materials you order.

- **How can I increase the awareness of the program among my team members?**

Some organizations have found it helpful to go beyond the short training videos and provide a small “information package” to employees about the program. The package might include a bookmark with key information about the program, along with a white “I Support Sunflower” pin or lanyard for employees to wear. In addition, it helps to make the training accessible by offering it online or developing “lunch and learn” sessions.

- **How can I increase the awareness of the program among my patrons and the general public?**

Don't be shy about reaching out to local newspapers and television stations about your launch. The Sunflower Program offers news outlets an opportunity to share a positive story about the way businesses and organizations are implementing inclusive, supportive policies and practices. Because people with disabilities comprise the largest minority group, your efforts will be well-received and could offer you a competitive edge. For all these reasons, promote the program on your website and onsite as well.

- **How can I build networks to strengthen my program?**

All participating organizations are featured on the “[Find the Flower](#)” page HDSP website. Use that site to connect with other local or regional programs that offer the Sunflower Program and consider building a local network of organizations that support and promote disability awareness. Be sure that your local non-profits (e.g., groups that support individuals with autism, hearing impairment, Alzheimer's, non-native speakers, veterans, diabetes, etc.) are aware of your efforts. They can increase awareness of the program and can also offer important insights for success.