

## **BEST PRACTICE:**

### **Accessible and Welcoming Service to All People Who Have a Disability**

#### **BACKGROUND**

The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, (AODA) was passed by the Ontario legislature with the goal of creating standards to improve accessibility for all people across the province of Ontario. Under the Act, The Ontario government is putting the following five accessibility standards in place: Customer Service, Employment, Information and communications, Transportation and Built environment.

The *Accessible Customer Service Standard* takes effect January 1, 2012 and applies to all people or organizations in Ontario that provide goods or services and have one or more employees. It affects the private, non-profit and public sectors setting standards for all service providers, businesses, industry etc. The standards remove barriers for people who have disabilities allowing all people equal opportunity to access goods and services. The remaining standards will be implemented over the next several years.

The *Accessible Customer Service Standard* requires written policies, procedures and practices in place to:

1. Communicate and interact with people who have a disability in a manner that takes into account any accommodations that are required due to their disability.
2. Allows a person who has a disability to:
  - a) bring a support person with them to access Agency goods and services in premises open to the public,
  - b) use assistive devices like wheelchairs, walkers, hearing aids, etc., and
  - c) have their guide dog or service animal remain with them when visiting the Agency premises open to the public.
3. Advise customers when accessible services are temporarily unavailable
4. Invite customers to provide feedback
5. Train employees about accessible customer service
6. Let customers know how to access the Agency's accessibility policies and procedures in accessible formats like large print, if requested.

Community Living Essex County is committed to being responsive to the diverse needs of all by providing to the best of its ability barrier free access to services, supports and employment in the most accessible environment possible and based on the key principals of dignity, independence, integration and equal opportunity. The Agency will comply with the requirements of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, 2005, (AODA), the Ontario Human Rights Code and other legislative requirements.

#### **What is Accessible Customer Service?**

Accessible customer service can mean many things. Mostly, it is the understanding that each individual may need a slightly different type of response from us that will accommodate their unique style of communication and interaction.

For example, a person who has a visual impairment may need to have information read aloud to them; an individual with a learning disability may need to have instructions written down; and someone who uses a wheelchair may need help finding a route they can use.

“Accessible customer service is **good** customer service” - courteous, respectful, helpful and prompt.

### **What is expected of me by Community Living Essex County?**

If you always start with the person first ... you will never go wrong!

The Agency’s goal is to provide goods and services in a manner that respects the dignity and independence of persons with disabilities by providing a person who has a disability equal opportunity and benefit as people who do not have a disability.

Use respectful inclusive language that emphasizes the person rather than a medical diagnosis. In any interaction it means addressing the person first then their request for service and incorporating accommodations in YOUR actions to assist the customer to get what they want.

Employees should also tell their manager of any physical, technical, communication method, policy or practice that poses a barrier for a person who has a disability.

The following definitions may be helpful:

**Accessibility:** The opportunity for a person who has a disability to obtain, use and benefit from services or goods.

**Assistive Device:** An item or device that helps a person accomplish day to day activities (i.e., wheelchair, hearing aids, special eating utensils)

**Communication:** The process or method used to transfer information from one person to another.

**Disability:** The Ontario Human Rights Code and the AODA defines disability as:

- a) any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical co-ordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device,
- b) a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability,
- c) a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language,
- d) a mental disorder, or
- e) an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997*; (“handicap”)

**Service Animals:** Any animal that has been trained to perform tasks that assist people who have a disability. The international assistance animal community has categorized three types:

- Guide Animal - to guide the blind

- Hearing Animal - to signal the hearing impaired
- Service Animal - to do work for persons with disabilities other than blindness or deafness

**Support Person:** A person who accompanies a person who has a disability in order to help with communication, mobility, access to goods and services etc.

### **Helpful Hints for Good Customer Service**

In some situations, you may be uncomfortable answering questions or otherwise helping visitors who you may not know. Following are various conditions and some helpful tips to help you provide accessible service.

**PHYSICAL** ability includes a wide range of functional limitations from minor difficulties in moving or coordinating one part of the body to muscle weakness, tremors, and paralysis.

Physical differences can be caused by many things such as congenital causes (e.g., Muscular Dystrophy) and/or acquired causes, such as tendonitis.

Differences in physical ability may affect a person's ability to:

- Perform manual tasks such as holding a pen, turning a key, or gripping a doorknob
- Move about independently
- Control the speed or coordination of movements
- Reach, pull or manipulate objects
- Have strength or endurance

#### **Best practices:**

Remember that there are many types and degrees of physical ability.

Here are some tips:

- Speak using a normal voice and directly to the person. Don't address issues of the person to someone who is with them. Use normal vocal tone and rhythm. Please be patient and allow the person time to respond as muscular control for speech may come into play for that person.
- People with different physical abilities often have their own preferred way of doing things. Ask before you help.
- Wheelchairs and other mobility devices are part of the person's personal space – do not touch, move, or lean on them.
- Provide the person information about accessible features of the immediate environment (automatic doors, accessible washrooms, etc.) in a respectful and discrete manner.
- Keep all interior ramps and corridors free of clutter.
- If a counter is too high or wide, step around it to provide service.
- Respectfully and privately offer seating for those that cannot stand in line.
- Be patient. People will identify their needs and requests to you.

**HEARING** impairments can cause problems in distinguishing certain frequencies, sounds or words. A person who is hearing impaired may be unable to:

- Use a telephone without Bell Relay assistance
- Understand speech in environments with “white noise”, or noisy environments
- Communicate vocally or pronounce words clearly enough to be understood by strangers

**Best practices:**

Like other disabilities, there are a wide variety of degrees of hearing impairment. Remember, talk to the person first.

Here are some tips:

- Attract the customer’s attention before speaking. The preferred way is a gentle touch on the shoulder if you are standing close or by gently and discretely waving your hand.
- Always ask how you can help. Don’t shout. Speak clearly.
- Be clear and precise when giving directions and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Make sure you have been understood – do not make assumptions.
- Face the person and keep your hands and other objects away from your face and mouth.
- People with hearing impairments may use sign language and will require an interpreter to communicate to a person whose hearing is not affected. Always direct your attention and words to the person - not the interpreter.
- Any personal (e.g., financial) matters should be discussed in a private room to avoid other people overhearing.
- If the person uses a hearing aid, try to speak in an area with few competing sounds.
- If necessary, write notes back and forth to share information.
- Don’t touch service animals - they are working and have to pay attention at all times.

**DEAF - BLINDNESS** is a combination of hearing and vision loss. The result for the person who is deaf-blind is significant difficulty accessing information and performing daily activities. Deaf-blindness may interfere with communication, learning, orientation and mobility.

People who are deaf-blind may communicate using various sign language systems, Braille, telephone devices, communication boards or some of these in any combination.

Many people who are deaf-blind use the services of an Intervener who is a professional who helps with communication. An Intervener may relay information, facilitate auditory and visual information and act as a sighted guide for a person. Interveners are trained in special sign language that involves touching the hands of the person in a two-hand, manual alphabet or finger spelling. They may guide and interpret for their client.

**Best practices:**

Here are some tips:

- Do not assume what a person can or cannot do. Some people who are deaf-blind have some sight or hearing, while others may have neither.
- A person who is deaf-blind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them or give you an assistance card or a note explaining how to communicate with them.
- Do not touch or address a person’s guide dog or service animal - they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Never touch a person who is deaf-blind suddenly or without permission unless it’s an emergency.
- Understand that communication can take some time - be patient.
- Direct your attention to the person, not the intervener.

**VISUAL** impairments reduce one's ability to see clearly.

Very few people are totally without sight. Many have limited vision such as tunnel vision, where a person has a loss of peripheral or side vision, or, a lack of central vision, which means they cannot see straight ahead. Some can see the outline of objects while others can see the direction of light.

Vision loss can result in:

- Difficulty reading or seeing faces
- Difficulty maneuvering in unfamiliar places
- Inability to differentiate colours or distances
- A narrow field of vision
- The need for bright light, or contrast
- Night blindness

**Best practices:**

Vision disabilities can restrict the person's abilities to read signs, locate landmarks or see hazards. In some cases, it may be difficult to tell if a person has a vision disability. Others may use a guide dog or a white cane.

Here are some tips:

- Verbally identify yourself before making any physical contact such as shaking hands.
- If the person uses a guide dog or service animal, do not touch or approach the animal - it is working.
- Verbally describe the setting, location and things like the paperwork or forms as necessary to your discussion.
- Offer your arm to guide the person. Ask the person if they may have a preference as to what side you stand, or which arm you might offer. Do not grab or pull at the person's arm, hand, shoulder.
- Never touch the person without asking permission, unless it is an emergency.
- Don't leave the person in the middle of a room. Offer them a seat and then show them to the chair or guide them to a comfortable location.
- Don't walk away without saying good-bye.

**INTELLECTUAL** or developmental disabilities may be caused by genetic factors, exposure to environmental toxins, brain trauma or other unknown causes. A person with an intellectual disability may require accommodation with:

- Spoken and written information
- Conceptual information
- Perception of sensory information
- Memory

**Best practices:**

This category of disability can mildly or greatly affect a person. It is as varied as we are as people. You may not be able to know that someone has this disability unless you are told, or you notice the way people do something, ask questions or use body language.

Treat the person as anyone else. They will appreciate your treating them with respect – just like anyone would!

Here are some tips:

- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do.
- Use clear language – some people call it Simple English.
- Be prepared to explain and provide examples regarding information.
- Remember that the person is an adult and unless you are informed otherwise, can make their own decisions.
- Be patient and verify their and your understanding.
- If you cannot understand what is being said, don't pretend. Just ask again.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.
- Speak directly to the person - not to their companion or assistant.

**COMMUNICATION** differences may involve the partial or total loss of the ability to speak.

Typical this includes different ability with:

- Pronunciation
- Pitch and loudness
- Hoarseness or breathiness
- Stuttering or slurring

**Best practices:**

Some people have problems communicating. It could be the result of cerebral palsy, hearing loss, or another condition that makes it difficult to pronounce words, causes slurring or stuttering, or not being able to express oneself or understand written or spoken language. Some people who have severe difficulties may use communication boards or other assistive devices.

Here are some tips:

- If possible, meet and interact in a quiet environment
- Give the person your full attention. Don't interrupt to finish their sentences.
- Ask them to repeat if necessary, or to write their message.
- If you are able, ask questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
- Verify their and your understanding.
- Patience, respect and willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools!

**LEARNING** disabilities are defined by a wide range of different learning styles.

People with a learning disability take in and process information and may express knowledge in different ways, (e.g., the person may have superior speaking abilities but may require accommodation with written words).

Learning disabilities can result in:

- Difficulties in reading, remembering the information one reads
- Problem solving
- Time management
- Following directions
- Generally processing information

**Best practices:**

Remember that learning disabilities are invisible, and that ability varies greatly between people.

Here are some tips:

- Respond to any request for verbal information
- Provide any forms in “check box” format where available.
- Fill in forms and documents with courtesy.
- Allow extra time to complete tasks if necessary.

**MENTAL HEALTH** issues include a variety of disorders however there are three main types that the medical community identify: 1) Anxiety, 2) Mood and 3) Behavioural. More importantly, mental health issues can affect any one of us in a great number of ways – some very minimally and some a little more complex.

**Best practices:**

Remember that mental health issues are invisible, and that ability varies greatly between people. Sometimes a person’s responses to stressful situations may help us to recognize the existence of mental health issues.

Here are some tips:

- Treat each person as an individual. Ask what would make him/her the most comfortable and respect his/her needs to the maximum extent possible.
- Try to reduce stress in situations i.e., extending timelines when able.
- Stay calm and courteous, even if the person acts in a way that makes them look anxious i.e., nervous ticks or pacing,
- Focus on the service they need and how you can help.
- Always be open to the possibility that the person may need to come back at a time when they determine it is best for them.

**Disabilities related to a Person’s Senses**

**The sense of....**

**SMELL** may involve the inability to sense smells or a hypersensitivity to odours and smells. A person may have allergies to certain odours, scents or chemicals or may be unable to identify dangerous gases, smoke, fumes and spoiled food.

**TOUCH** can affect a person’s ability to sense texture, temperature, vibration or pressure. Touch sensations may be reduced or heightened resulting in a hypersensitivity to touch, temperature, or the opposite, numbness and the inability to feel touch sensations.

**TASTE** can limit the experience of the four primary taste sensations: sweet, bitter, salty and sour. A person may be unable to identify spoiled food or noxious substances.

**Clear Print Guidelines**

Readability shouldn’t be an afterthought when producing materials. It should be the first step in making your service, location or information accessible to everyone.

Keep Clear Print Guidelines in mind as you create documents that the general public will read.

## **Contrast**

Use high contrast colours for text and background.

Good examples are:

- Black or dark blue text on a white or yellow background,
- White or yellow text on a black or dark blue background.

## **Type Colour**

Printed material is most readable in black and white.

If using coloured text, restrict it to things like titles, headlines or highlighted material.

## **Point Size**

Bigger is better. Keep your text large; preferably between 12 and 18 points, depending on the font (point size varies between fonts).

Consider your audience when choosing point size.

## **Leading**

Leading is the space between lines of text and should be at least 25 to 30 percent of the point size.

This lets readers move more easily to the next line of text.

Heavier typefaces will require slightly more leading.

## **Font Family & Font Style**

Avoid complicated or decorative fonts.

Choose standard fonts with easily recognizable upper- and lower-case characters.

## **Font Heaviness**

Choose fonts with medium heaviness and avoid light type with thin strokes.

When emphasizing a word or passage, use a bold or heavy font. Italics or upper-case letters are not recommended.

## **Letter Spacing**

Don't crowd your text: keep a wide space between letters.

Choose a monospaced font rather than one that is proportionally spaced.

## **Margins & Columns**

Separate text into columns to make it easier to read, as it requires less eye movement and less peripheral vision.

Use wide binding margins or spiral bindings if possible.

Flat pages work best for vision aids such as magnifiers.



### **Paper Finish**

Use a matte or non-glossy finish to cut down on glare.

Reduce distractions by not using watermarks or complicated background designs.

### **Clean Design & Simplicity**

Use distinctive colours, sizes, shapes on the covers of materials to make them easier to tell apart.

### **Talking About People, Abilities and Disabilities: Choosing the Right Words**

Words can influence and reinforce the public's perception of people with disabilities. They can create either a positive view of people or an indifferent or a negative depiction.

Here are some general tips that can make your communication and interactions with or about people with all types of disabilities more successful:

- Remember to put people first. It is proper to say, "person with a disability", rather than "disabled person".
- If you don't know someone, it's better to wait until the person describes their situation to you, rather than to make your own assumptions.

### **Notice of Disruptions of Service: What happens if for some reason we can't serve a person with a disability?**

It is possible that from time to time there will be disruptions in service, such as renovations that limit access to an area, or technology that is temporarily unavailable. If a disruption in service is planned and expected, it is important to provide reasonable notice.

People with disabilities may often go through a lot of trouble to access services, such as booking transit or arranging a ride. By providing notice, you can save that person an unnecessary trip.

In the event of an unexpected disruption in service of a location normally available to the public, notice should be provided in a variety of ways and as quickly as possible. The public will be notified by posting it on a prominent place on the physical premises, posting on the Agency's website or any other reasonable means in the circumstances. The manager must be notified immediately in the event of an unexpected disruption.