

Accessibility Guide

Tips on interacting with people
with disabilities

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Inspired by the initial work done at The Ottawa Hospital...
With our grateful acknowledgement

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The Customer Service Standard

Ontario's accessible customer service standard is now the law. It came into force on January 1, 2008. People, businesses and other organizations that provide goods or services to the public or to other businesses or organizations in Ontario ("providers") now have legal obligations under the standard. The standard is aimed at making their customer service operations accessible to people with disabilities.

General tips when serving people with disabilities

- Treat a person with a disability as you would a person without a disability
- It's about respect.
- If you're not sure what to do, ask your customer - "May I help you?"
Your customers with disabilities know if they need help and how you can provide it.
- Speak directly to the person with a disability, not to his or her support person or companion.
- Avoid stereotypes and make no assumptions about what type of disability or disabilities the person has. Some disabilities are not visible and customers are not required to give you information about any disabilities they may have.
- Take the time to get to know your customer's needs and focus on meeting those needs just as you would with any other customer.
- Be patient - People with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond. A good start is to listen carefully.
- Choose the right words see Appendix A.
- If you cannot understand what your customer is saying, politely ask them to repeat themselves.
- Don't touch anything; service animals, assistive devices, including wheelchairs
- Ask first.



1. Serving clients with a visual impairment

Vision loss reduces a person's ability to see clearly. Few people with vision loss are totally blind. 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 people can see the outline of objects while others can see the direction of light. Vision loss can restrict your customers' abilities to read signs, locate landmarks or see hazards. Some of these customers may use a guide dog or white cane, but others may not. Sometimes it may be difficult to tell if a person has vision loss.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- Braille
- Large print
- Magnification devices
- White cane
- Guide dog
- Support person

General tips when serving people with a visual impairment

- Don't assume the individual can't see you.
- Don't touch your customer without asking permission.
- Offer your elbow to guide the person. If he or she accepts, walk slowly, but wait for permission before doing so. Lead – don't pull.
- Identify landmarks or other details to orient your customer to the environment around him or her.
- Don't touch or speak to service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Don't leave your customer in the middle of a room. Show him or her to a chair, or guide them to a comfortable location.
- If you need to leave your customer, let him or her know you are leaving and will be back.
- Identify yourself when you approach your customer and speak directly to him or her, even if he/she is accompanied by a companion.
- There is generally no need to raise your voice because the person does not necessarily have hearing loss. Say your name even if you know the person well as many voices sound similar.
- Be clear and precise when giving directions, e.g., two steps behind you, a meter to your left, etc. Don't use "over there" or point in the direction.



- If you're uncertain about how to provide directions, ask the person how to do so.
- Do not be afraid or embarrassed to use words such as "see", "read" and "look." People with vision loss also use these words.
- When providing printed information, offer to read or summarize it.



2. Serving clients who are deaf, oral deaf, deafened or hard of hearing

People who have hearing loss may be deaf, oral deaf, deafened or hard of hearing.

- **“Deaf”** describes a person who is profoundly deaf. The term is used to describe a person who has severe to profound hearing loss, with little or no hearing.
- **“Oral deaf”** is a term describing a person who was born deaf or became deaf before learning to speak, but is taught to speak and may not typically use American Sign Language.
- The term **“deafened”** describes a person who has lost their hearing slowly or suddenly in adulthood.
- The term **“hard of hearing”** describes a person who uses their residual hearing (hearing that remains) and speech to communicate.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- Hearing aid
- Paper and pen
- Personal amplification device (e.g. Pocket Talker)
- Phone amplifier
- Relay Service
- Teletypewriter (TTY)
- Hearing ear dog
- Support person such as a sign language interpreter

General tips when serving people who are deaf or hard of hearing

- Attract the customer’s attention before speaking. Generally, the best way is by a gentle touch on the shoulder or with a gentle wave of your hand.
- Ask how you can help. Don’t shout.
- Move to a well-lit area, if available, where your customer can see your face.
- Don’t put your hands in front of your face when speaking. Some people read lips.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier, for example, using a pen and paper.
- Be patient if you are using a pen and paper to communicate. American Sign Language may be your customer’s first language. It has its own grammatical rules and sentence structure.



- Look at and speak directly to your customer. Address your customer, not the interpreter or support person.
- Be clear and precise when giving directions, and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Confirm that your customer understands you.
- If the person uses a hearing aid, reduce background noise or move to a quieter area, if possible, so the person can hear or concentrate better.
- Don't assume that the customer knows sign language or reads lips.



3. Serving clients who are deaf blind

A person who is deaf blind can neither see nor hear to some degree. This results in difficulties in accessing information and managing daily activities. Many people who are deaf blind will be accompanied by an intervener, a professional who helps with communicating.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- Braille
- Large print
- Print on paper Communication boards
- Hearing aid with built-in FM system
- Magnification devices
- Teletypewriter (TTY)
- White cane
- Service animal
- Support person / intervener

General tips when serving people who are deaf blind

- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do. Some people who are deafblind have some sight or hearing, while others have neither.
- A customer who is deafblind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with him or her or give you an assistance card or a note explaining how to communicate with him or her.
- Identify yourself to the intervener when you approach your customer who is deafblind, but then speak directly to your customer as you normally would, not to the intervener.
- Don't touch or address service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Don't suddenly touch a person who is deafblind or touch them without permission.



4. Serving clients who have physical disabilities

There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities, and not all require a wheelchair. People who have arthritis, heart or lung conditions or amputations may also have difficulty with moving, standing or sitting. It may be difficult to identify a person with a physical disability.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- Elevator
- Mobility device (i.e. wheelchair, scooter, walker, cane, crutches)
- Support person

General tips when serving people who have physical disabilities

- Speak naturally and directly to your customer, not to his or her companion or support person.
- If you need to have a lengthy conversation with someone in a wheelchair or scooter, consider sitting so that you can make eye contact.
- Ask before you help. People with physical disabilities often have their own ways of doing things.
- Respect your customer's personal space. Do not lean over him or her or on his or her assistive device.
- Don't move or touch items or equipment, such as canes and walkers, out of the person's reach.
- If you have permission to move a person in a wheelchair, remember to:
 - Wait for and follow the person's instructions
 - Confirm that your customer is ready to move
 - Describe what you're going to do before you do it
 - Avoid uneven ground and objects
- Don't leave the person in an awkward, dangerous or undignified position such as facing a wall or in the path of opening doors.
- Let your customer know about accessible features in the immediate area (i.e. automatic doors, accessible washrooms, elevators, ramps, etc.).



5. Serving clients who have mental health disabilities

Mental health disabilities are not as visible as many other types of disabilities. You may not know that your customer has a mental health disability unless you're informed of it.

Examples of mental health disabilities include thought disorders (i.e. schizophrenia), mood disorders (i.e. bipolar illness – mania and depression, phobias and anxiety).

A person with a mental health disability may have difficulty with one, several or none of these:

- Inability to think clearly
- Hallucinations (i.e. hearing voices, seeing or feeling things that aren't there)
- Depression or acute mood swings (i.e. from happy to depressed with no apparent reason for the change)
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty remembering
- Apparent lack of motivation

If someone is experiencing difficulty controlling his or her symptoms, or is in a crisis, you may want to help out. Be calm and professional and ask your customer how you can best help.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- Service animal
- Support person

General tips when serving people who have mental health disabilities

- Treat a person with a mental health disability with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Be patient.
- Be confident and reassuring. Listen carefully and work with your customer to try to meet their needs.
- If someone appears to be in a crisis, ask him or her to tell you the best way to help.
- Do not hesitate to ask for help if the crisis appears to be beyond your ability to manage alone. Ensure safety for everyone.
- Remain calm and professional if and when the person appears to be in a crisis
- Ask the person how you can help them in a manner that is acceptable and non-threatening to them



6. Serving clients who have intellectual or developmental disabilities

People with intellectual or developmental disabilities may have difficulty doing many things most of us take for granted. These disabilities can mildly or profoundly limit the person's ability to learn, communicate, socialize and take care of their everyday needs. You may not know that someone has this type of disability unless you are told.

As much as possible, treat your customers with an intellectual or developmental disability like anyone else. They may understand more than you think, and they will appreciate that you treat them with respect.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- Communication board
- Speech generating device
- Service animal
- Support person

General tips when serving people who have intellectual or developmental disabilities

- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do.
- Use plain language and speak in short sentences.
- To confirm if your customer understands what you have said, consider asking the person to repeat the message back to you in his or her own words.
- If you cannot understand what is being said, simply ask again.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.
- Be supportive and patient.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to their companion or support person.



7. Serving clients who have cognitive impairments

People who suffered a traumatic brain injury, such as one resulting from a vehicle collision, or who have been exhibiting changes in their cognitive abilities due to dementia may have special needs in terms of communication. For example, their memory of some events, especially more recent ones, may not be as good. As well, their ability to reason and to link ideas together may be compromised.

People who present cognitive deficits are not necessarily elderly as a traumatic brain injury can happen at any age and dementia can also occur in people in their 40s or 50s. It is best not to assume that an older person automatically has memory problems.

General tips when serving people who have a cognitive impairments:

- Present information in a simple format
- Do not over explain as too much information may be overwhelming
- Provide written support to help the person remember what was conveyed; write it down for them or have them write it down in their book or computer



8. Serving clients who have learning disabilities

The term “**learning disability**” describes a range of information processing disorders that can affect how a person acquires, organizes, expresses, retains, understands or uses verbal or non-verbal information.

Examples include dyslexia (problems in reading and related language-based learning); dyscalculia (problems in mathematics); and dysgraphia (problems in writing and fine motor skills).

It is important to know that having a learning disability does not mean a person is incapable of learning. Rather, it means they learn in a different way.

Learning disabilities can result in different communication difficulties for people. They can be subtle, such as difficulty reading, or more pronounced. They can interfere with your customer’s ability to receive, express or process information. You may not know that a person has a learning disability unless you are told.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- Alternative technology for writing
- Calculator
- Scanning or reading technology
- Tape recorders, mini pocket recorders

General tips when serving people who have learning disabilities

- When you know someone with a learning disability needs help, ask how you can help.
- Speak naturally, clearly, and directly to your customer.
- Allow extra time if necessary - people may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- Remember to communicate in a way that takes into account the customer’s disability.
- Be patient and be willing to explain something again, if needed.



9. Serving clients who have speech or language impairments

Some people have problems communicating because of their disability. Cerebral palsy, hearing loss or other conditions may make it difficult to pronounce words or may cause slurring or stuttering. They also may prevent the person from expressing themselves or prevent them from understanding written or spoken language.

Types of assistance your customer might use:

- Communication board
- Paper and pen
- Speech generating device
- Support person

General tips when serving people who have speech and language impairments

- Don't assume that because a person has one disability, they also have another. For example, if a customer has difficulty speaking, it doesn't mean they have an intellectual or developmental disability as well.
- Ask your customer to repeat the information if you don't understand.
- Ask questions that can be answered "yes" or "no" if possible.
- Try to allow enough time to communicate with your customer as they may speak more slowly.
- Don't interrupt or finish your customer's sentences. Wait for them to finish.



Serving clients with disabilities over the phone

- Speak naturally, clearly and directly.
- Don't worry about how the person's voice sounds. Concentrate on what they are saying.
- Don't interrupt or finish your customer's sentences. Give your customer time to explain or respond.
- If you don't understand, simply ask again, or repeat or rephrase what you heard and ask if you have understood correctly.
- If a telephone customer is using an interpreter or a Relay Service, speak naturally to the customer, not to the interpreter.
- If you encounter a situation where, after numerous attempts, you and your customer cannot communicate with each other due to the customer's disability, consider making alternate arrangements.

Assistive devices

An assistive device is a tool, technology or other mechanism that enables a person with a disability to do everyday tasks and activities such as moving, communicating or lifting. It helps the person to maintain their independence at home, at work and in the community.

Commonly used assistive devices

There are a variety of assistive devices that some of your customers may use, depending on their disability. Many will be personal assistive devices, meaning they are owned and brought along by the individual, while others may be provided by your organization. The following are examples of some devices you may come across when serving your customers with disabilities:

- Digital audio player
- Magnifier
- White cane
- Hearing aid
- Teletypewriter (TTY)
- Mobility device
- Personal oxygen tank
- Communication boards
- Speech generating devices



Guide dogs and other service animals

Think of a service animal as an animal with a job to do for a person with a disability. Examples include guide dogs and animals trained to alert an individual to an oncoming seizure and lead them to safety. (See *Appendix B*)

The customer service standard requires you to let people with disabilities use their service animals on the parts of your premises open to the public or to third parties unless the animal is otherwise excluded by law from the premises.

General tips on interacting with a client who uses a service animal

- Remember that a service animal is not a pet. It is a working animal.
- Avoid touching or addressing service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Avoid making assumptions about the animal. Not all service animals wear special collars or harnesses. If you're not sure if the animal is a pet or a service animal, ask your customer.

Remember your customer is responsible for the care and supervision of their service animal. You are not expected to provide care or food for the animal. However, you could provide water for the animal if your customer requests it.

Support Persons

A support person is an individual hired or chosen to accompany a person with a disability to provide services or assistance with communication, mobility, personal care, medical needs or access to goods or services. The support person can be a paid personal support worker, volunteer, a friend or a family member. He or she does not necessarily need to have special training or qualifications.

General tips on interacting with a client who has a support person

- A customer with a disability might not introduce their support person. If you are not sure which person is the customer, take your lead from the person using or requesting your goods or services or simply ask.
- Once you have determined who your customer is, speak directly to them, not to their support person.
- Be familiar with your organization's policies, practices and procedures about providing accessible customer service.



Appendix A:

Talk about disabilities – Choose the right word

Words can influence and reinforce the public’s perception of people with disabilities. They can create a positive view of people with disabilities, or a negative view. Here are some tips that can help make your communication and interaction with people with all types of disabilities more successful:

- Use “disability” or “disabled,” not “handicap” or “handicapped.”
- Don’t use terms such as “retarded,” “dumb,” “psycho,” “moron” or “crippled.” These words are very demeaning and disrespectful to people with disabilities.
- Remember to put people first. It is proper to say “person with a disability,” rather than “disabled person.”
- If you are not sure about a disability, it’s better to wait until the individual describes their situation to you rather than make your own assumptions. Many types of disabilities have similar characteristics and your assumptions may be wrong.

For more information, visit www.AccessON.ca

Appendix B:

Service animals

| Service Animal | Key Tasks | Users |
|--|---|--|
| Autism assistance or service dog. | Keeps a child from running into danger and provides assistance when sensory stimulus is heightened. Dog is attached to the child’s waist by a belt and a leash held by an adult | People with autism or other developmental/ intellectual disabilities |
| Guide dog, dog guide or seeing eye dog | Follows directions of owner, alerts owner to changes in elevation (e.g., curbs, stairs) and obstacles | People with vision loss |



| Service Animal | Key Tasks | Users |
|---|--|---|
| Hearing ear, hearing, sound alert or hearing alert dog, cat or animal | Alerts owner to sounds often by a nudge or pawing and leads him/her to the source of the sound. May use a special signal to alert owner to fire alarm | People who are Deaf, oral deaf, deafened or hard of hearing |
| Psychiatric service dog | Retrieves and prompts the person to take medicine, retrieves or activates medical alert, leads person out of crowds, etc. | People with mental health disabilities |
| Service or mobility dog or animal, special skills dog or animal (Small ponies or miniature horses are used but are not as common). | May pull wheelchairs, carry objects, pull items, turn handles or push buttons such as door openers. Larger dogs may provide balance support. | People with physical disabilities |
| Seizure, seizure alert, seizure assist or seizure response dog or animal | Steers owner from danger during a seizure, activates medical alert Can alert owner to an oncoming seizure | People who have epilepsy or other seizure disorders |



References

Customer Service Standard

<http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/mcass/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accesson/compliance/customer/>

The Guide to the accessibility standards for customer service

http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/mcass/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accesson/compliance/customer/compliance_guidelines.htm

Summary of requirements

http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/mcass/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accesson/compliance/customer/customer_summary.htm

Serve-Ability (on line program)

<http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/mcass/serve-ability/splash.html>