

# TIPS FOR PROVIDING Accessible Customer Service

## Did you know?

- 1.5 million people in Ontario have a disability
- “Disability” may include:
  - physical impairment
  - sensory impairment
  - cognitive or intellectual impairment
  - mental or developmental disorder
  - various types of chronic diseases
- People with disabilities travel, shop and do business just like everyone else
- Excellent customer service includes treating all customers equitably, with respect and dignity, and with courtesy.

## Background

The City of London is committed to providing quality goods and services which are accessible to all persons we serve. To do this, we must recognize the diverse needs of all of our customers – including the needs of people with disabilities.

In 2008, the Government of Ontario launched the accessible customer service standard under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*. Its goal is to ensure that people with disabilities get the same level of customer service as everyone else.

This guide will give you tips on how best to interact with a person with a disability, so that you can provide excellent customer service to all City of London customers.

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<sup>1</sup> Information adopted from the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario.

## Customer Service Tips

- Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Patience, optimism, consideration and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.
- Don't make assumptions about what type of disability or disabilities a person has.
- Some disabilities are not visible. Take the time to get to know your customers' needs.
- Be patient. People with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- If you can't understand what someone is saying, just politely ask again.
- Ask before you offer to help — don't just jump in. Your customers with disabilities know if they need help and how you can provide it.
- Find a good way to communicate. A good start is to listen carefully.
- Look at your customer, but don't stare. Speak directly to a person with a disability, not to their interpreter or someone who is with them.
- Use plain language and speak in short sentences.
- If you're not sure what to do, ask your customer, **"How may I help you?"**

## Interacting with People with Disabilities

Being able to interact and communicate with people with disabilities is a big part of providing accessible customer service. Sometimes the best approach is to ask a person with a disability how you can best communicate with them. Here are some tips:

### People who are deafblind

A person who is deafblind may have some degree of both hearing and vision loss. Many people who are deafblind will be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional support person who helps with communication.

#### Tips to remember ...

- Speak directly to your customer, not to the intervenor.
- A customer who is deafblind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them, perhaps with an assistance card or note.

### People who have hearing loss

People who have hearing loss may be Deaf, oral deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing. These are terms used to describe different levels of hearing and/or the way a person's hearing was diminished or lost.

#### Tips to remember ...

- Attract the customer's attention before speaking. Try a gentle touch on the shoulder or wave of your hand.
- Make sure you are in a well-lit area where your customer can see your face and read your lips.
- If your customer uses a hearing aid, reduce background noise or move to a quieter area.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier (for example, using a pen and paper).

## Interacting with People with Disabilities (cont'd)

### People who have physical disabilities

There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities. Only some people with physical disabilities use a wheelchair. Someone with a spinal cord injury may use crutches while someone with severe arthritis or a heart condition may have difficulty walking longer distances.

#### Tips to remember ...

- If you need to have a lengthy conversation with someone who uses a wheelchair or scooter, consider sitting so you can make eye contact at the same level.
- Don't touch items or equipment, such as canes or wheelchairs, without permission.
- If you have permission to move a person's wheelchair, don't leave them in an awkward, dangerous or undignified position, such as facing a wall or in the path of opening doors.

### People who have vision loss

Vision loss can restrict someone's ability to read, located landmarks or see hazards. Some customers may use a guide dog or a white cane, while others may not.

#### Tips to remember ...

- Don't assume the individual can't see you. Many people who have low vision still have some sight.
- Identify yourself when you approach your customer and speak directly to them.
- Ask your customer if they would like you to read any printed material out loud to them (for example, a menu or schedule.)
- When providing directions or instructions, be precise and descriptive.
- Offer your elbow to guide them if needed.

## Interacting with People with Disabilities (cont'd)

### People who have learning disabilities

The term “learning disabilities” refers to a variety of disorders, such as dyslexia, that affect how a person takes in or retains information. This disability may become apparent when a person has difficulty reading material or understanding the information you are providing.

#### Tips to remember ...

- Be patient – people with some learning disabilities may take a little longer to process information, to understand and to respond.
- Try to provide information in a way that takes into account the customer’s disability. For example, some people with learning disabilities find written words difficult to understand, while others may have problems with numbers and math.

### People with speech or language impairments

Cerebral palsy, hearing loss or other conditions may make it difficult for a person to pronounce words or may cause slurring. Some people who have severe difficulties may use a communication board or other assistive devices.

#### Tips to remember ...

- Don’t assume that a person with a speech impairment has another disability.
- Whenever possible, ask questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no”.
- Be patient. Don’t interrupt or finish your customer’s sentences.

## Interacting with People with Disabilities (cont'd)

### People who have mental health disabilities

Mental health issues can affect a person's ability to think clearly, concentrate or remember things. Mental health disability is a broad term for many disorders that can range in severity. For example, some customers may experience anxiety due to hallucinations, mood swings, phobias or panic disorder.

#### Tips to remember ...

- Treat a person with a mental health disability with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Be confident, calm and reassuring.
- If a customer appears to be in crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.

### People who have intellectual or developmental disabilities

Developmental or intellectual disabilities, such as Down Syndrome, can limit a person's ability to learn, communicate, do everyday physical activities and live independently. You may not know that someone has this disability unless you are told.

#### Tips to remember ...

- Don't make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do.
- Use plain language.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.

## What is an assistive device?

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. Personal assistive devices can include things like wheelchairs, hearing aids, white canes or speech amplification devices.

### **How to interact with people who use assistive devices**

- Don't touch or handle any assistive device without permission.
- Don't move assistive devices or equipment, such as canes and walkers, out of your customer's reach.
- Let your customer know about accessible features in the immediate environment that are appropriate to their needs (e.g., public phones with TTY service, accessible washrooms, etc.)

## What is a service animal?

People with vision loss may use a guide dog, but there are other types of service animals as well. Hearing alert animals help people who are deaf, deafened, oral deaf, or hard of hearing. Other service animals are trained to alert an individual to an oncoming seizure.

### **How to interact with people with disabilities who require the assistance of a guide dog or other 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. If you're not sure if the animal is a pet or a service animal, ask your customer.

## What is a support person?

Some people with disabilities may be accompanied by a support person, such as an intervenor. A support person can be a personal support worker, a volunteer, a family member or a friend. A support person might help your customer with a variety of things from communicating, to helping with mobility, personal care or medical needs.

### **How to interact with people with disabilities who require the assistance of a support person**

- If you're not sure which person is the customer, take your lead from the person using or requesting the goods or services, or simply ask.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to their support person.

## More Information

For more information on the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, or the accessible customer service standard, visit [www.accessON.ca](http://www.accessON.ca)

For more information on the City of London's policies for providing accessible customer service, visit [www.london.ca/accessibility](http://www.london.ca/accessibility)

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