

## ACCESSIBLE CUSTOMER SERVICE

### **Introduction to the Customer Service Standard – Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation**

Accessible customer service is about treating every customer with the same consideration and respect, understanding that not all disabilities are visible, and that people with disabilities may have different needs. It can be as easy as asking “How can I help you?” and making small changes to your practices.

Many of us will experience temporary or permanent disability at some point in our lives. Currently, about 1 in 7 people in Ontario has a disability. That’s approximately 2 million people. That number is expected to increase as the population ages, as will the need for accessibility.

In fact, it’s estimated that by 2031, people at risk of disability and people with disabilities will represent 40% of total income in Ontario. That’s approximately \$536 billion dollars. With that much spending power, it’s essential for a business or organization to be providing an accessible customer service experience. It’s the right thing to do, and it’s the smart thing to do.

In this module, you will learn about the customer service standard and how to interact with people with various types of disabilities.

#### **Who is a customer?**

A customer can be anyone who is accessing your organization’s goods, services or facilities. They may include paying and non-paying members of the public, and individuals your organization might call customers, such as clients, members, patrons or patients. Customers can also be other businesses or organizations (also referred to as third parties).

#### *DEFINITION OF DISABILITY AND BEING ALERT TO BARRIERS*

#### **Who are people with disabilities?**

When we think of disabilities, we tend to think of people who use wheelchairs and who have physical disabilities that are visible and obvious. But disabilities can also be non-visible. We can’t always tell who has a disability. A disability can be temporary or permanent, and many of us will experience a disability at some point in our lives.

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 uses the same definition of disability as the Ontario *Human Rights Code*, which includes physical disabilities as well as vision, hearing, speech, developmental, learning and mental health disabilities.

#### **Be alert to barriers to accessibility**

Some people see disabilities as the barrier, but actually it’s the environment that presents barriers.

When you think about accessibility, it’s important to be aware of both visible and non-visible barriers. For example, physical or structural barriers, such as stairs or doorways, often come to mind first. But sometimes a certain process or policy can create barriers unintentionally. Or providing information in a format that may not be accessible to everyone can create a barrier.

Attitudinal barriers stem from the way people think or behave. They can be based on stereotypes or simply lack of understanding. But attitude and how we do things are within our power to change.

## *CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARD – THE REQUIREMENTS*

1. Consider a person's disability when communicating with them and communicate with a person with a disability in a way that takes into account their disability.
2. Allow people with disabilities use their personal assistive devices when accessing your goods, services or facilities and identify the availability, if any, of other helpful measures your organization offers for people with disabilities to access your goods, services or facilities.
3. Allow people with disabilities bring their service animals with them into areas open to the public or third parties. In situations where the animal is prohibited by another law, provide another way for the person to access your goods, services or facilities.
4. Allow people with disabilities bring their support persons with them while in areas open to the public or third parties.
5. Let the public know when facilities or services that people with disabilities usually use are temporarily unavailable (for example, an elevator or accessible washroom that is out of service). Notice must include the reason for the disruption, how long it will last and any alternatives, if available.
6. Set up a process for receiving and responding to feedback about the way your organization provides customer service to people with disabilities, including what action will be taken if a complaint is received. Ensure your feedback process is accessible by providing accessible formats or communication supports.
7. Train all employees and volunteers on providing accessible customer service and how to interact with people with various types of disabilities. Keep a record of the training provided.

In order to promote accessible customer service and to meet these requirements, the Company has implemented a Customer Service Accessibility Policy confirming these commitments. A copy of the Policy is available on request.

### **TIPS TO SERVING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Openly communicating and responding to our customers' needs is the key to excellent customer service for all. Accessible customer service is about not making assumptions about what a person can or cannot do because of their disability, inclusion – making everyone feel welcome and included and understanding that people with disabilities may have different needs.

#### **Use the right words**

- Use “disability” not “handicapped.”
- Remember to put people first. Say “person with a disability” rather than “disabled person.”
- Reference specific disabilities when appropriate, such as a person with a developmental disability, a person who is blind or has vision loss, or a person who uses a wheelchair.
- Avoid sympathetic phrases such as victim of, suffers with, confined to a wheelchair, physically challenged, or stricken with a particular illness or disability.

Now, let's take a look at tips and good practices for serving people with different types of disabilities.

#### **People with Physical or Mobility Disabilities**

Only some people with physical or mobility disabilities use a wheelchair. Someone with arthritis may use a cane or walker, while someone with a heart or lung condition may not use a mobility device but may have difficulty walking longer distances.

### **Tips:**

- Don't touch or move a person's equipment (for example, wheelchair or walker) without permission and 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.
- 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.
- If it applies, inform the customer of the accessible features in the immediate area (such as automatic doors, accessible washrooms, elevators or ramps).
- Think ahead and remove any items that may cause a physical barrier, such as boxes left in an aisle.

### **People with Vision Loss**

Vision loss can restrict someone's ability to read documents or signs, locate landmarks or see hazards. Some people may use a guide dog, a white cane, or a support person such as a sighted guide, while others may not.

### **Tips:**

- When you know someone has vision loss, don't assume the person can't see you. Not everyone with vision loss is totally blind. Many have some vision.
- Identify yourself when you approach and speak directly to your customer if they are with a companion and let them know when you are leaving.
- Ask if they would like you to read any printed information out loud to them.
- Offer your elbow to guide them if needed. If they accept, lead – don't pull.

### **People with Hearing Loss**

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

A person with hearing loss might use a hearing aid, an amplification device or hearing ear dog. They may have preferred ways to communicate, for example, through sign language, by lip reading or using a pen and paper.

### **Tips:**

- Once a customer has self-identified as having hearing loss, make sure you face the customer when talking and that you are in a well-lit area so the person can see you clearly.
- As needed, attract the person's attention before speaking. Try a gentle touch on the shoulder or wave of your hand.
- Don't assume that the customer knows sign language or reads lips.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier (for example, using a pen and paper).

## **People with Developmental Disabilities**

Developmental disabilities (such as Down syndrome) or intellectual disabilities can mildly or profoundly limit a person's ability to learn, communicate, do every day physical activities or live independently.

### **Tips:**

- Don't make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do.
- Don't exaggerate your speech or speak in a patronizing way.
- Use plain language.
- If you're not sure of what is being said to you, confirm by summarizing or repeating what was said, or politely ask them to repeat it – don't pretend if you're not sure.

## **People with Mental Health Disabilities**

Mental health disability is a broad term for many disorders that can range in severity. A person with a mental health disability may experience depression or acute mood swings, anxiety due to phobias or panic disorder, or hallucinations. It may affect a person's ability to think clearly, concentrate or remember things. You may not know someone has this disability unless you are told. Stigma and lack of understanding are major barriers for people with mental health disabilities. If you sense or know that a customer has a mental health disability, treat them with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else. Respond to the person's immediate behaviour and needs. Don't be confrontational. If needed, set limits with the person as you would others.

## **People Who Use Service Animals**

There are various types of service animals who support people with various types of disabilities. For example, a person with vision loss may use a guide dog, hearing alert animals help people with hearing loss and other service animals are trained to alert a person to an oncoming seizure, or to assist people with autism, mental health disabilities, physical disabilities and other disabilities.

An animal is considered a service animal if:

- you can easily identify it's a service animal through visual indicators, such as when it wears a harness or vest, or
- the person with a disability provides documentation from a regulated health professional that confirms they need the service animal for reasons relating to their disability.
- Don't touch or distract a service animal. It's not a pet, it's a working animal and has to pay attention at all times.
- If you're not sure if the animal is a pet or a service animal, ask your customer. You may ask to see their documentation from a regulated health professional.
- The customer is responsible for the care and supervision of their service animal. However, you can provide water for the animal if a customer requests it.

**If another person's health or safety could be seriously impacted by the presence of a service animal, such as a severe allergy:**

Consider all options and try to find a solution that meets the needs of both people. For example:

- creating distance between the two people
- eliminating in-person contact
- changing the time the two receive service
- any other way that would allow the person to use their service animal on the premises

**Recap – General Tips**

Here are some general tips to keep in mind when serving people with disabilities:

- Ask before you help. Don't assume the person needs it.
- If you're not sure what to do, ask the customer, "How can I help you?" The customer knows if they need help and how you can provide it.
- Don't make assumptions about the type of disability a person has or about what accommodation needs they may have. Your assumptions may be wrong.
- Some disabilities are not visible and customers are not required to tell you about their disabilities.
- Speak directly to the customer, not to their support person or companion.
- Take the time to get to know the customer's needs and focus on meeting those needs just as you would with any other customer.
- Listen carefully. If you're not sure what the customer is saying, confirm by summarizing or repeating what was said to you, or politely ask them to repeat it.
- Be patient. People with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to respond or do things.
- Use appropriate language and terminology when referring to people with disabilities.