

Some customer service tips from the AODA website  
[www.ontario.ca/page/how-train-your-staff-accessibility](http://www.ontario.ca/page/how-train-your-staff-accessibility)

## **Training tips**

Here are a few tips for interacting with people who have various disabilities.

### **People with physical/mobility 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:**

- ask before you help; people with disabilities often have their own way of doing things
- 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 (e.g., canes, 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
- 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, locate landmarks or see hazards. Some customers may use a guide dog or a white cane, while others may not.

Not everyone with vision loss is totally blind. Many have some vision.

#### **Tips:**

- when you know someone has vision loss, don't assume the individual can't see you; many people who have low vision still have some sight
- identify yourself when you approach and speak directly to the customer
- ask if they would like you to read any printed material out loud to them (e.g., a menu or schedule of fees)
- when providing directions or instructions, be precise and descriptive
- offer your elbow to guide them if needed. If they accept, lead – don't pull
- if you need to leave the customer, let them know by telling them you'll be back, or saying goodbye
- don't leave the customer in the middle of the room – guide them to a comfortable location

### **People with hearing loss**

People who have hearing loss may be deaf, deafened or hard of hearing. They may also be oral deaf – unable to hear, but prefer to talk instead of using sign language. These terms are used to describe different levels of hearing and/or the way a person's hearing was diminished or lost.

**Tips:**

- once a customer has identified themselves as having hearing loss, make sure you are in a well-lit area where they can see your face and read your lips
- as needed, attract the customer's attention before speaking; try a gentle touch on the shoulder or wave of your hand
- if your customer uses a hearing aid, reduce background noise or if possible, move to a quieter area
- if necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier (e.g., using a pen and paper)
- speak directly to your customer – not to their sign language interpreter – if they are accompanied by one

**People who are deafblind**

A person who is deafblind has some degree of both hearing and vision loss. People who are deafblind are often accompanied by an intervenor, a professional support person who helps with communication.

**Tips:**

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

**People with speech or language disabilities**

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

**Tips:**

- don't assume that a person who has difficulty speaking doesn't understand you whenever possible, ask questions that can be answered with "yes" or a "no"
- read visible instructions for communication devices, if the person uses one be patient; don't interrupt or finish your customer's sentences
- confirm what the person has said by summarizing or repeating – don't pretend if you're not sure
- speak directly to the customer and not to their companion or support person

### **People who have learning disabilities**

The term “learning disabilities” refers to a range of disorders. One example is dyslexia, which affects 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:**

- 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 works for your customer (e.g. some people with learning disabilities find written words difficult to understand, while others may have problems with numbers and math)
- be willing to rephrase or explain something again in another way

### **People who have developmental disabilities**

Developmental disabilities (e.g. Down syndrome) or intellectual disabilities, can mildly or profoundly limit a person’s ability to learn, communicate, do every day physical activities and live independently. You may not know that someone has this disability unless you are told.

#### **Tips:**

- don't make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do
- use plain language
- provide one piece of information at a time
- ask the customer if they need help reading your material or completing a form

### **People who have mental health disabilities**

Mental health disability is a broad term for many disorders that can range in severity. It can affect a person’s ability to think clearly, concentrate or remember things. A person with a mental health disability may experience depression or acute mood swings, anxiety due to phobias or panic disorder, or hallucinations.

You may not know someone has a mental health disability unless you are told. Stigma and lack of understanding are major barriers for people with mental health disabilities.

#### **Tips:**

- 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
- be confident, calm and reassuring
- respect your customer’s personal space
- limit distractions that could affect your customer’s ability to focus or concentrate – loud noise, crowded areas and interruptions could cause stress

### **People who use assistive devices**

An assistive device is a piece of equipment a person with a disability uses to help them with daily living (e.g., a wheelchair, screen reader, hearing aid, cane or walker, an oxygen tank).

#### **Tips:**

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

If your organization offers any equipment or devices that can help customers with disabilities access your services, make sure you and your staff know how to use them. It could be helpful to have instruction manuals handy or an instruction sheet posted where the device is located or stored.

Some examples of assistive devices that your organization might offer include:

- mobility device, such as a manual wheelchair or motorized scooter
- lift, which raises or lowers people who use mobility devices
- technology that makes it easier for people with disabilities to communicate or access information, such as certain computer software, an amplification system or a TTY phone line
- accessible interactive kiosk, which might offer information or services in braille or through audio headsets

### **People who use service animals**

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

The law requires you to allow service animals on the parts of your premises that are open to the public. In cases where another law prohibits a service animal from entering certain areas (e.g. a service animal would not be allowed in the kitchen of a cooking school), provide another way for the person to access your goods, services or facilities.

While service animals may be prohibited from certain areas, service dogs are allowed in areas where food is sold, served or offered for sale. This includes a restaurant's public dining room.

**Tips:**

- don't touch or distract a service animal, it is not a pet, it is 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 can provide water for the service animal if your customer requests it, but the customer is responsible for the care and supervision of the animal
- if the service animal is prohibited by another law, explain why to your customer and discuss other ways to serve them, e.g. leaving the dog in a safe area or serving your customer in another area where the animal is allowed

**People with a support person**

A support person may accompany some people with disabilities. A support person can be a paid personal support worker, an intervenor, a volunteer, a family member or a friend. A support person might help your customer with communication, mobility, personal care or with accessing your services.

Welcome support people to your workplace or business. They are permitted in any part of your premises that is open to the public. If your organization is one that charges admission, such as a movie theatre, provide advance notice about what admission fee or fare will be charged for a support person.

**Tips:**

- if you're not sure which person is the customer, take your lead from the person using or requesting your goods, services or facilities, or simply ask
- speak directly to your customer, not to their support person
- if your organization charges an admission fee or fare, be familiar with its policy on fees or fares for support persons

**When it may be necessary to require a support person**

There are certain cases when it might be necessary for a person with a disability to be accompanied by a support person on your premises. You must first discuss the situation with the person and consider available evidence before you determine that:

- a support person is necessary to protect the health or safety of the person with a disability or the health or safety of others on the premises; and
- there is no other reasonable way to protect the health or safety of the person with a disability and that of others on the premises

In such a situation, you must waive the admission fee or fare for the support person, if one exists.

**People accessing goods, services or facilities**

If you notice that your customer is having difficulty accessing your goods, services or facilities, a good starting point is to simply ask "How can I help you?"

Your customers are your best source for information about their needs. Being flexible and open to suggestions will help create a good customer experience. A solution can be simple and they will likely appreciate your attention and consideration.