

# “May I Help You?”

## Understanding Accessible Customer Service



Thank you to the City of Mississauga for giving us permission to adapt their  
handbook for our use.

## Background

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA) was passed by the Ontario legislature with the goal of creating standards to improve accessibility across the province.

The AODA allows the government to develop specific standards of accessibility that are designed to help make Ontario more accessible.

One of the specific standards that has been developed, and made law, is the Accessible Customer Service Standard. This standard details specific requirements for all service providers.

## The City of Kawartha Lakes Policy Statement

The Corporation of the City of Kawartha Lakes is committed to providing quality goods and services that are accessible to **all persons**. The Corporation of the City of Kawartha Lakes will strive to provide its goods and services in a manner that respects the **dignity and independence** of each individual; that **integrates** each individual as fully as practicable into the method of service delivery; and that ensures that people with disabilities will be given an **equal opportunity** to use and benefit from the goods, services and areas that are provided by the Corporation of the City of Kawartha Lakes.

## 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 accommodation. For example, a person who is visually impaired 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 in finding a route they can use. Accessible customer service is **good** customer service – courteous, helpful and prompt.

## Implementation of the City Policy

### Guide Dogs, Service Animals

If a person with a disability is accompanied by a guide dog or other service animal, the City will permit the person to enter the premises with the animal and keep it with him or her, unless the animal is otherwise excluded by law from the premises. If the service animal or guide dog is excluded by law from the premises, the City will look to other available measures to enable the person with a disability to obtain, use or benefit from the City's goods and services.

### “Service Animal” is:

An animal which is specially trained to assist an individual with disabilities.

An animal is a “service Animal” if it is readily apparent that the animal is used by a person with a disability for reasons relating to his or her disability, for example a guide dog wearing a harness.

If it is not readily apparent that the animal is a Service Animal, then a letter from a physician or nurse confirming that the person requires the animal for reasons relating to the disability is required.

## **Support Persons**

If a person with a disability is accompanied by a support person, they are permitted to enter the premises together and are not prevented from having access to each other while on the premises. The City may require a person with a disability to be accompanied by a support person while on its premises, but only if 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.

**“Support Person”** means:

In relation to a person with a disability, another person who accompanies him or her in order to help with communication, mobility, personal care or medical needs or with access to goods or services.

May be a paid professional, a volunteer, a family member or a friend.

The applicable rate payable by a support person for admission to public areas in facilities owned and operated by the City in connection with a person’s presence at the premises shall apply.

## **Operational Procedures of the City Policy**

### **Feedback Mechanism**

The public can provide feedback on the accessibility of the provision of goods and services by the City:

by mail addressed to:

City of Kawartha Lakes, City Hall

Accessibility Feedback, Accessibility Coordinator,

P.O. Box 9000, 26 Francis Street, Lindsay, Ontario K9V 5R8

by phone at: (705) 324-9411 or 1-888-822-2225 ext. 1185

or in person at one of the City of Kawartha Lakes Service Centres

or by email at: [bcondie@city.kawarthalakes.on.ca](mailto:bcondie@city.kawarthalakes.on.ca)

Feedback will be responded to within five (5) to seven (7) business days of its receipt by the City.

### **Assistive Devices**

If a person with a disability requires assistive devices to access goods or services of the City, they are allowed to use such devices.

Assistive devices include, but are not limited to, wheelchairs, walkers, white canes used by people who are blind or who have low vision, note taking devices, portable magnifiers, recording machines, assistive listening devices, personal oxygen tanks and devices for grasping, pool lifts, and TTY machines.

## **Disruption of Services**

People with disabilities may often go to 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. Notice can be provided on the City's website, by telephone, or in writing. In the event of an unexpected disruption in service, provide notice in a variety of ways and as quickly as possible.

If there is a temporary disruption in a particular facility or service used to allow a person with a disability to access goods or services, the City will give notice of the disruption to the public by posting the reason for the disruption, the anticipated duration of the disruption, and alternative facilities or services that may be available. This posting will be in a conspicuous place on the premises of the City, or by other reasonable methods in the circumstances. If the disruption is anticipated, the City will provide a reasonable amount of advance notice of the disruption. If the disruption is unexpected, notice will be provided as soon as possible.

## **What Else Can I Do?**

Always start with people first. In language, that means saying "person with a disability", rather than "a disabled person". In any interaction, it means addressing the person's access and accommodation needs, rather than focusing on the disability.

Let's take some time to understand the definition of different disabilities and some tips to assist you in providing accessible customer service.

## **How to Welcome People with Disabilities**

People with disabilities have dreams, hopes and goals. They have problems, challenges and needs.

Just like you and me.

Treat people with disabilities with patience, understanding and courtesy.

After all, isn't that how you like to be treated?

Here are some general tips to help you welcome people with disabilities.

- Don't make assumptions about what type of disability or disabilities a person has.
- Some disabilities are not visible. Be patient. People with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- If you're not sure what to do, ask, "Can I help?"
- If you can't understand what someone is saying, just politely ask again.
- Ask before you offer to help — don't just jump in. People 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 the person, 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.
- Don't touch or address service animals — they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Ask permission before touching a wheelchair or a piece of equipment.

## **How to Talk to People with Disabilities on the Phone**

Here are some tips on talking to people with disabilities on the phone:

- Speak normally, clearly and directly.
- Don't worry about how their voice sounds. Concentrate on what's being said.
- Be patient, don't interrupt and don't finish your customer's sentences. Give the person time to explain.
- Don't try to guess what the person is trying to say. If you don't understand, don't pretend. Just ask again.
- If you're not certain what the person said, just repeat or rephrase what you've heard.
- If the person is using an interpreter or a TTY line, just speak normally to the person, not to the interpreter.
- If the person has great difficulty communicating, make arrangements to call back when it's convenient to speak with someone else.

## **How to Welcome People with 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.

Here are some tips on welcoming people who have physical disabilities:

- Speak normally and directly to your customer. Don't speak to the person who is with them.
- People with physical disabilities often have their own ways of doing things. Ask before you help.
- Be patient. People will identify their needs to you.
- Don't touch assistive devices, including wheelchairs, unnecessarily unless it's an emergency.
- Provide the person information about accessible features of the immediate environment (automatic doors, accessible washrooms, etc.).
- Remove obstacles and rearrange furniture to give them clear passage.

## **How to Welcome People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing**

People who have hearing loss may be Deaf or hard of hearing. Like other disabilities, hearing loss has a wide variety of degrees. Some people who are Deaf or hard of hearing may use assistive devices to communicate.

Tips on welcoming people who are Deaf or hard of hearing:

- Always ask how you can help. Don't shout.
- Attract the person's attention before speaking. The best way is a gentle touch on the shoulder or gently waving your hand.
- Make sure you are in a well-lighted area where the person can see your face.
- Look at and speak directly to the person. Address them, not their interpreter.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier, for example a pen and paper.
- Don't put your hands in front of your face when speaking.
- Be clear and precise when giving directions, and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Make sure you have been understood.
- Don't touch or address service animals — they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Any personal (e.g., financial) matters should be discussed in a private room to avoid other people overhearing.
- Be patient. Communication for people who are deaf may be different because their first language may not be English. It may be American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ).

If the person uses a hearing aid, try to speak in a quiet area. Background noise can be distracting.

## **How to Welcome People with Vision Disabilities**

*Vision disabilities reduce a person's ability to see clearly.* Very few people 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 can see the outline of objects while others can see the direction of light.

Vision disabilities can restrict a person's abilities to:

- read signs
- locate landmarks, or
- see hazards.

It may be difficult to tell if a person has a vision disability. Some people with vision disabilities use a service animal or a white cane. Others may not.

Tips on welcoming people with vision disabilities:

- Identify yourself when you approach the person and speak directly to them.
- Speak normally and clearly.
- Never touch the person without asking permission, unless it's an emergency.
- If you offer assistance, wait until you receive permission.
- Offer your arm (the elbow) to guide the person and walk slowly.
- Don't touch or address service animals — they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- If you're giving directions or verbal information, be precise and clear. For example, if you're approaching a door or an obstacle, say so.
- Don't just assume the person can't see you.

- Don't leave the person in the middle of a room. Show them to a chair, or guide them to a comfortable location.
- Identify landmarks or other details to orient the person to the environment around them.
- Don't walk away without saying good-bye.
- Be patient. Things may take a little longer.

## **How to Welcome People Who are Deaf-Blind**

A person who is deaf-blind cannot see or hear to some extent. This results in greater difficulties in accessing information and managing daily activities. Most people who are deaf-blind will be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional who helps with communicating.

Intervenors are trained in special sign language that involves touching the hands of the client in a two-hand, manual alphabet or finger spelling. They may guide and interpret for their client.

Here are some tips on serving customers who are deaf-blind:

- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do. Some people who are deaf-blind have some sight or hearing, while others have neither.
- A person who is deaf-blind will probably tell you how to communicate with them by giving you an assistance card or a note.
- Speak directly to the person as you normally would, not to the intervenor.
- When you approach a person who is deaf-blind, make sure you identify yourself to the intervenor.
- Don't touch or address service animals — 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.

## **How to Welcome People with Speech or Language Impairments**

Some people have problems communicating. It could be due to cerebral palsy, hearing loss, or another condition that:

- makes it difficult to pronounce words
- causes slurring or stuttering
- prevents someone from expressing themselves or understanding written or spoken language.

Some people who have severe difficulties may use communication boards or other assistive devices.

Here are some tips on welcoming people with speech or language impairments:

- Just because a person has one disability doesn't mean they have another. For example, if a person has difficulty speaking, don't assume they have an intellectual or developmental disability as well.
- If you don't understand, ask the person to repeat the information.
- If you are able, ask questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
- Be patient and polite, and give the person whatever time they need to get their point across.
- Don't interrupt or finish the person's sentences. Wait for them to finish.

- Patience, respect and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.

## **How to Welcome People with 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 their ability to learn. You may not be able to know that someone has this disability unless you are told, or you notice the way they act, ask questions or use body language.

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

Here are some tips on welcoming people who have an intellectual or developmental disability:

- Don't assume what a person can or cannot do.
- Use plain language and speak in short sentences.
- Make sure the person understands what you've said.
- If you can't understand what's being said, don't pretend. Just ask again.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.
- Be supportive and patient.
- Speak directly to the person, not to their companion or attendant.

## **How to Welcome People with Learning Disabilities**

Learning disabilities can cause many different communications difficulties for people. The difficulties can vary in degree, but they all can interfere with a person's ability to receive, express, or process information. You may not be able to know that someone has one of these disabilities unless you are told, or you notice how people act, ask questions or use body language.

Here are some tips on welcoming people with learning disabilities:

- Patience and a willingness to find a way to communicate are your best tools.
- When you know that someone with a learning disability needs help, ask how you can best help.
- Speak normally and clearly, and directly to the person.
- Take some time — people with some kinds of learning disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond.
- Try to find ways to provide information in a way that works best for them. For example, have a paper and pen handy.
- If you're dealing with a child, be patient, encouraging and supportive.
- Be courteous and patient. The person will let you know how to best provide service in a way that works for them.

## **How to Welcome People with Mental Health Disabilities**

People with mental health disabilities look like anyone else. You won't know that a person has a mental health disability unless you're informed of it.



Usually it will not affect how you interact with the person. But if someone is experiencing difficulty in controlling their symptoms or is in a crisis, you may need to help out. Be calm and professional and let the person tell you how you can best help.

Here are some tips on welcoming 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 confident and reassuring. Listen carefully and work with the person to meet their needs.
- If someone appears to be in a crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.

### **Conclusion:**

Most importantly **relax!** People with disabilities are generally aware they may need some accommodations and will work with you. Just remember to ask how you can help.

It is important to recognize that there are available internal and external resources for you to use to assist you in delivering service to persons with disabilities:

- Speak to your Team Leader, Supervisor and/or Manager
- Review the Government of Ontario Website: <http://www.accesson.ca>
- Review the City Website: <http://www.city.kawarthalakes.on.ca/residents/accessibility>
- The Bell Relay Service Operator is available to assist in placing or receiving calls to/from persons who use a TTY. There is no charge for local calls. To place a call through the BCRS (Bell Canada Relay Service), call: 1-800-855-0511. The Bell Relay Operator will ask if you have used this service in the past. If you have not, they will provide you with simple instructions on how to use the service.
- Book a Sign Language Interpreter\* through the Ontario Interpreting Services at the Canadian Hearing Society at: 1-888-363-0373

Contact: Barb Condie, Accessibility Coordinator @ 705-324-9411 ext. 1185

\*The City is responsible for providing Sign Language Interpretation to provide information that is accessible to the public. Our written materials, forms and communications are in English and this is generally the second language for persons who are Culturally Deaf in The City of Kawartha Lakes. Prior to scheduling a meeting with a person who is Culturally Deaf, it is advisable to book the Interpreter first since their schedules can be very busy. If you have any written materials that will be used at the meeting, send them to both the Interpreter and the person who is Culturally Deaf prior to the meeting. This will give them time to review the materials and ensure accurate Interpretation. Remember, at the meeting, you will be speaking to your customer, not the Interpreter.