



***GUIDELINES FOR
DELIVERING ACCESSIBLE
CUSTOMER SERVICE***

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

Summary of the key Accessible Customer Service Standard requirements

1. Establish policies, practices and procedures on providing programs or services to people with disabilities.
2. Communicate with a person with a disability in a manner that takes into account his or her disability.
3. Set a policy on allowing people to use their own personal assistive devices to access our programs and use our services.
4. Allow people with disabilities to be accompanied by their guide dog or service animal, unless the animal is excluded by law.
5. Permit people with disabilities who use a support person to bring that person with them while accessing programs or services.
6. Train staff, volunteers, contractors and any other people who interact with the public or other third parties on our behalf on a number of topics as outlined in the customer service standard.
7. Establish a process for people to provide feedback on how we provide programs or services to people with disabilities and how we respond to any feedback and take action on any complaints.
8. Provide notice when facilities or services that people with disabilities rely on to access or use our programs or services are temporarily disrupted.

What is Accessible Customer Service?

The Riverwood Conservancy (TRC) is committed to providing programming/ volunteer opportunities to persons with disabilities in a manner that:

- Respects their **dignity** and **independence**;
- Is **integrated** as fully as practicable into the method of service delivery;
- Ensures reasonable efforts are made to provide an **opportunity equal** to that given to other participants or volunteers to take part in our programs; and
- Allows persons with disabilities to benefit from the same services, in the same place, and in a similar way to other participants/volunteers.

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 blind 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.

Who are TRC's "Customers"?

- Children participating in education or garden programs
- Anyone participating in our Discovery@Riverwood programs
- Volunteers assisting with TRC programs
- Invited guests

TRC does not own Riverwood, therefore our customers are those who volunteer with us or attend our programs, not the general public.

Health and Safety at Riverwood

TRC's health and safety policy mandates that TRC management and staff will "make every reasonable effort to provide a safe and healthy working environment." The Board of Directors has directed that "every reasonable and necessary precaution [be taken] to ensure the protection of [TRC] staff and volunteers and program participants."

TRC staff members provide information to volunteers and program participants about weather and trail conditions and alter programs as needed. For example, high winds or icy trails may mean a shift in the location of the activity, keeping participants on the upper terraces. On occasion, however, a location shift may not be feasible and could possibly preclude participation by someone with a disability. For example, a Discovery walk could be difficult for someone with mobility problems due to the terrain. When this occurs, the leader will suggest an alternate route, if there is one.

What 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 service needs, rather than focusing on the disability.

Following are definitions of different disabilities and some tips to assist you in providing accessible customer service.

A Disability as defined by the AODA includes:

- Any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness;
- A condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability;
- A learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language;
- A mental disorder; or,
- An injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997 (“handicap”).

Hearing Disabilities

Definition:

- Deaf – severe to profound hearing loss
- Hard of Hearing – a person who uses his or her residual hearing and speech to communicate
- Deafened – caused to hear poorly or not at all

Tips for Interacting with Visitors:

- Attract visitor’s attention before speaking – gentle touch on the shoulder or wave of your hand
- Look directly at the person
- May have to use pen and paper
- Speak clearly, keep your hands away from your face
- Reduce background noise
- Ensure appropriate lighting

Deafblind Disability

Definition:

- Cannot see or hear to some degree
- Many will be accompanied by a support person (a professional who helps with communication by using sign language that involves touching the hands of the visitor)

Tips for Interacting with Visitors:

- Speak directly to the visitor, not the support person
- Identify yourself to the support person

Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities

Definition:

- Intellectual development and capacity that is below average
- Can mildly or profoundly limit ability to learn, communicate, do everyday activities and live independently
- May be an invisible disability
- They may understand you more than you know

Tips for Interacting with Visitors:

- Don't assume what visitor can or cannot do
- Use plain language
- Take your time, be patient
- Ask: "Do you understand this?"
- Provide one piece of information at a time – step-by-step instruction
- Offer information in simpler concepts

Learning Disabilities

Definition:

- Affects how person acquires, interprets, retains or takes in information
- In many cases individual has average or above-average intelligence
- May affect:
 - language-based learning
 - mathematics or writing, fine motor skills

Tips for Interacting with Visitors:

- Take some time, be patient
- Demonstrate a willingness to assist
- Speak normally, clearly and directly to the visitor

- Provide information in a way that works for the visitor (e.g., pen and paper)
- Be prepared to explain any materials you provide

Mental Health Disabilities

Definition:

- Defined as the absence of psychological well-being and satisfactory adjustment to society
- Some common features of mental health disabilities are:
 - phobias, panic attacks
 - hallucinations
 - mood swings or bipolar disorders

Tips for Interacting with Visitors:

- Treat visitor with the same level of respect and consideration
- Be confident and reassuring
- Do not be confrontational
- If the visitor is in crisis, ask how best to help
- Take visitor seriously
- Don't take things personally

Speech or Language Disabilities

Definition:

- May have problems with communication
- May have difficulty pronouncing words, slurring or stuttering
- May use communication boards or other assistive devices

Tips for Interacting with Visitors:

- Don't make assumptions
- Give whatever time they need to get their point across
- Ask questions that can be answered "yes" or "no", if possible
- Don't interrupt or finish the visitor's sentences
- May have to use pen and paper
- Say: "I don't understand, can you repeat that?"

Physical or Disabilities Affecting Mobility

Definition:

- May restrict a person in the following ways:
 - control or speed of movements
 - coordination and balance
 - ability to grasp some objects
 - ability to walk long distances
 - ability to sit or stand for prolonged periods
- Can be present at birth, result from disease, injury or be temporary

Tips for Interacting with Visitors:

- Speak directly to the person
- Ask before you help
- Respect personal space
- Don't move any items they may have
- Describe what you are going to do beforehand
- Don't leave your customer in an awkward, dangerous or undignified position

Vision Disabilities

Definition:

- Most individuals who are legally blind have some remaining vision – very few are totally blind
- Low or no vision can restrict ability to read signs, locate landmarks or see hazards
- May use guide dog or white cane
- May need to view written documents in large print, or with the help of a magnifier

Tips for Interacting with Visitors:

- Don't assume visitor can't see you
- Speak directly to visitor
- Offer your elbow to guide
- If they accept, walk slowly, wait for permission
- Identify landmarks
- Be precise and descriptive with information
- Don't leave visitor

Most importantly, recognize your nervousness and relax. People with disabilities are generally aware that they may need some accommodations and will work with you. Just remember to ask how you can help.

How should I interact with persons with disabilities who use assistive equipment, the assistance of a service animal or a support person?

Assistive Equipment is:

Devices that people may bring with them or that are already on the premises and are used to assist persons with disabilities in carrying out activities or in accessing services.

Assistive devices include, but are not limited to:

- Wheelchairs
- Walkers and Rollators
- 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
- Devices for grasping

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 TRC requests a letter from a physician or nurse confirming that the person requires the animal for reasons relating to the disability may be needed.

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 programs or services. A support person may be a paid professional, a volunteer, a family member or a friend.

What are some assistive devices people with disabilities use and how should I interact with those who use these assistive devices?

There are a variety of assisted devices that people may use, depending on their disability.

People with Vision Loss

- Digital audio player – enables people to listen to books, directions, art shows etc.
- Magnifier – makes print and images larger and easier to read
- Portable global positioning systems (GPS) – helps orient people to get to specific destinations
- White cane – helps people find their way around obstacles

People who are deaf, deafened, oral deaf, hard of hearing

- Hearing aid – makes sounds louder and clearer
- Personal amplification device (e.g. pocket talker) – boosts sound closest to the listener while reducing background noises.
- Phone amplifier – makes voices louder on the telephone
- Teletypewriter (TTY) – helps people who are unable to speak or hear communicate by phone. The person types the message on the TTY keyboard and the messages are sent using telephone lines to someone who has a TTY or to an operator (Bell Relay Service) who passes the message to someone who does not have TTY.
- Support person such as a sign language interpreter

People with Physical Disabilities

- Elevator
- Mobility device (e.g. wheelchair, scooter, cane, crutches) helps people who have difficulty walking
- Personal oxygen tank – helps people breathe
- Support person
- Calculator
- Scanning or reading technology
- Tape recorders, mini-pocket recorders – records information for future playbacks

People who have Learning Disabilities

- Alternative technology for writing – electronic notebook or laptop computer – used to take notes and to communicate
- Personal data managers – stores, organizes and retrieves personal information
- Calculator
- Scanning or reading technology
- Tape recorders, mini-pocket recorders – records information for future playbacks

People who have Intellectual/Development Disabilities

- Communication board (e.g., Boardmaker) – used to pass on a message by pointing to symbols, words or pictures
- Speech generating device – used to pass on a message using a device that “speaks” when a symbol, word or picture is pressed
- Service animal or support person

Ways TRC Accommodates People with Disabilities

Riverwood is a rare city property that features natural areas and a variety of terrains. The City of Mississauga has worked hard to make changes where possible to accommodate people with disabilities. TRC is also committed to accommodate people with disabilities as much as possible. Here are some of the steps we take:

Notification: TRC puts in writing that Riverwood has steep terrain not suitable for strollers and that the City does not maintain the trails in winter. Signs on the trails reinforce this message. In the event of a program change or cancellation: TRC posts notices on all doors, website, Facebook and Twitter; also TRC places a message on the phone system.

Barriers: TRC works with the City of Mississauga to identify barriers to people with disabilities and works to remove them. For example, the Chappell House was retrofitted in 2017 to comply with accessibility guidelines. The MacEwan Terrace Garden was designed with ramps and signage that meet the guidelines as well.

Education Programs: TRC teachers meet with teachers bringing classes to Riverwood and review whether any students have disabilities and how best to accommodate them. Changes are then made to the program.

Volunteers: Through screening processes, volunteers are screened for appropriate placements. In the event a volunteer wants to assist in a program area where accommodations cannot be made, the volunteer position is altered, if possible, to accommodate the volunteer's abilities.

Class Size: One of the reasons TRC is able to provide accommodations is that we provide programs geared to smaller class sizes.

Conclusion

The Riverwood Conservancy is committed to being inclusive in its programs and to providing customer service to persons with disabilities. Thinking of the person first and the disability second is key to success. Asking any program participant "How can I help?" will make everyone feel welcome and included. Thank you for supporting TRC in ensuring the Accessibility Standards for Customer Service are followed.

Resources

- The Geneva Centre for Autism at www.autism.net or 416-322-7877 or 1-866-GENEVA9
- American Psychiatric Assn., **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder**, 4th Ed., 1994
- Child Development Resource Connection Peel, 905-890-9432 or TTY 905-890-8089
- Temple Grandin and Margaret M. Scariano, **Emergence: Labeled Autistic**, Arena press (1986)
- Temple Grandin, **Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism**, Double Day (1995). Temple Grandin is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Colorado, and international speaker on Autism (she was diagnosed with autism at age 2), advocate on humane treatment of animals, and is the owner of Grandin Livestock Systems and a world renowned designer of livestock handling facilities.
- Erinoak Kids, www.erinoakkids.ca or 905-855-2690

This document is adapted from the City of Mississauga's **May I Help You? Understanding Accessible Customer Service** and Peel Children's Aid's **Guidelines for Delivering Accessible Customer Service**.