



## **Accessible Customer Service Tips for Serving People with Disabilities (Provided by York Region)**

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### ***Physical Disabilities***

Physical disabilities include a range of ways that physically limit a person's body from carrying out daily activities. It can range from minor difficulties in moving or coordinating one part of the body, through muscle weakness, tremors and paralysis.

People may be born with physical disabilities, such as Muscular Dystrophy, or it may happen at some point in their lifetime, such as tendonitis. A physical disability may affect an individual's ability to:

- Perform manual tasks such as holding a pen, turning a key or grip a door knob.
- Move around independently.
- Control the speed or coordination of movements.
- Reach, pull or use objects.
- Have strength or stamina.

### ***Tips for serving customers who have physical disabilities:***

- Speak normally and directly to your customer, not to the support person who is with them.
- People with physical disabilities often have their own way of doing things. Ask if they would like help.
- Wheelchairs and other mobility devices are part of a person's personal space. Don't touch, move or lean on them.
- Provide your customer information about accessible features that are close to them (automatic doors, accessible washrooms, etc.)
- Keep ramps and corridors free of clutter.
- If a counter is too high or wide, step around it to provide service.
- Provide seating for those that cannot stand in line.
- Be patient. Customers will tell their needs to you.

### ***Deaf, Deafened and Hard of Hearing***

Hearing loss may cause problems in distinguishing certain frequencies, sounds or words.

A person who is deaf, deafened, or hard-of-hearing may be unable to:

- Use a public telephone.
- Understand speech in noisy places.
- Pronounce words clearly enough to be understood by strangers.

### ***Tips for serving customers who have hearing disabilities:***

- Attract the customer's attention before speaking. The best way is a gentle touch on the shoulder or gently waving your hand.
- Always ask how you may help. Do not shout. Speak clearly.
- Be clear and use specific information when giving directions, and repeat or rephrase if necessary. Make sure you have been understood.
- Face the person and keep your hands and other objects away from your face and mouth.
- A person who is deaf may use a sign language interpreter to communicate. Always direct your attention to the person who is deaf, not the interpreter.



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- Any personal (e.g. financial) matters should be discussed in a private room to avoid other people overhearing.
  - If the person uses a hearing aid, try to speak in an area that is not noisy.
  - If necessary, write notes back and forth to share information.

### **Deaf-Blindness Disabilities**

Deaf-blindness disabilities are a combination of hearing and vision loss. A person who is deaf-blind has great difficulty getting information and performing daily activities. Deafblindness makes communication, learning, orientation and mobility difficult. People who are deaf-blind communicate using various sign language systems, including Braille, telephone devices, communication boards or a combination of these systems. Many people who are deaf-blind use the services of an Intervener who helps the person understand what is being said and seen, gives information and acts as a sighted guide.

### **Tips for serving customers who are deaf-blind:**

- Do not assume what a person can or cannot do. Some people who are deaf-blind have some sight or hearing, while others have neither.
- A customer who is deaf-blind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them or give you an assistance card or a note explaining how to communicate with them.
- Do not touch or address a service animal. It is working and has to pay attention at all times.
- Never touch a person who is deaf-blind suddenly or without permission unless it is an emergency.
- Understand that communication can take some time. Be patient.
- Direct your attention to your customer, not the Intervener.

### **Vision Disabilities**

A person with a vision disability has difficulty seeing clearly. Vision disabilities can include a loss of side vision, or a lack of central vision, which means the person cannot see straight. Very few people are totally blind. Many have limited vision such as tunnel vision, where a person only sees ahead. Some can see the outline of objects while others can see the direction of light. Vision loss may result in:

- Difficulty reading or seeing faces.
- Difficulty moving around in unfamiliar places.
- Difficulty seeing colours or distances.
- A narrow field of vision.
- The need for bright light or contrast.
- Night blindness.

### **Tips for serving customers who have vision disabilities:**

- Say who you are before making physical contact.
- Do not touch or address a service animal. It is working and has to pay attention at all times.
- Verbally describe the setting, form and location as necessary.
- Offer your arm to guide the person. Do not grab or pull.



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- Never touch your customer without asking permission, unless it is an emergency.
- Do not leave your customer in the middle of a room. Show them to a chair, or guide them to a comfortable location.
- Do not walk away without saying good-bye.

### **Intellectual Disabilities**

Intellectual disabilities affect a person's ability to think and reason. It may be caused by the person's genetic makeup, such as Down's Syndrome, or because they were exposed to a toxic substance, such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, brain trauma or psychiatric disorders. A person with an intellectual disorder may have difficulty with:

- Understanding spoken and written information.
- Understanding concepts.
- Being aware of sensory information.
- Memory.

### **Tips for serving customers who have an intellectual or developmental disability:**

- Do not assume what a person can or cannot do.
- Use clear, simple language.
- Be prepared to explain and provide examples regarding information.
- Remember that the person is an adult and unless you are informed otherwise, can make their own decisions.
- Be patient and verify your understanding of what they need.
- If you can't understand what is being said, don't pretend. Just ask again.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to their companion or attendant.

### **Speech Disabilities**

Speech disabilities involve the partial or total loss of the ability to speak. Typical disabilities include problems with:

- Pronunciation.
- Pitch and loudness.
- Hoarseness or breathiness.
- Stuttering or slurring.

### **Tips for serving customers with speech or language disabilities:**

- If possible, talk in a quiet environment.
- Give the person your full attention. Don't interrupt or finish their sentences.
- Ask them to repeat as necessary, or to write their message.
- If you are able, ask questions that can be answered 'yes' or 'no.'
- Verify your understanding of what they need.
- Have patience, respect and willingness to find a way to communicate.



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### **Learning Disabilities**

Learning disabilities include a range of disorders that affect the getting, keeping, understanding and processing of spoken and non-spoken information. People with a learning disability have average or above average intelligence, but take in and work through information and express knowledge in different ways. Learning disabilities can result in difficulties in:

- Reading.
- Problem solving.
- Time management.
- Finding the way.
- Processing information.

### **Mental Illness**

Mental illness disabilities result from a range of mental illnesses and disorders. There are, however, three main types of mental illness:

- Anxiety.
- Mood.
- Behavioural.

People with mental illness may seem edgy or frustrated, act forcefully, seem to be pushy or abrupt, be unable to make a decision, start laughing or get angry for no apparent reason.

### **Smell Disabilities**

Smell disabilities may involve not being able to smell odours or be overly sensitive to odours and smells. A person with a smelling disability may have allergies to certain odours, scents or chemicals or may be unable to identify dangerous gases, smoke, fumes and spoiled food.

### **Touch Disabilities**

Touch disabilities may affect a person's ability to sense texture, temperature, vibration or pressure. Touch sensations may be reduced or heightened resulting in a hypersensitivity to touch, temperature, or the opposite, numbness and the inability to feel touch sensations.

### **Taste Disabilities**

Taste disabilities may limit the experience of the four main ways we taste: sweet, bitter, salty and sour. A person with a taste disability may be unable to identify spoiled food or unpleasant substances.

### **Other Disabilities**

Other disabilities result from a range of other conditions, accidents, illnesses and diseases including ALS, asthma, diabetes, cancer, HIV/AIDS, being overly sensitive to substances in the environment, disorders that make a person have seizures, heart disease, stroke and joint replacement.



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### Talking about Disabilities

“Words can influence and reinforce the public’s perception of people with disabilities. They can create either a positive view of people with disabilities or an indifferent, negative depiction,” which means that the person is thought of in a negative way. Here are some general tips that can help you communicate with or about people with all types of disabilities more successful:

- Use *disability* or *disabled*, not *handicap* or *handicapped*.
- Never use terms such as *retarded*, *dumb*, *psycho*, *moron* or *crippled*. These words are very demeaning and disrespectful to people with disabilities.
- Remember to put people first. It is proper to say *person with a disability*, rather than *disabled person*.
- If you don’t know someone or if you are not familiar with the disability, it’s better to wait until the individual describes his/her situation to you, rather than to make your own assumptions. Many types of disabilities have similar characteristics and your assumptions may be wrong.

To learn more about accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities, please visit Ministry of Community and Social Services:

<http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcsc/programs/accessibility/index.aspx>