

**Council of Ontario Universities
Accessible Customer Service eLearning**

Module 1 Summary

**UNDERSTANDING THE AODA AND THE ACCESSIBILITY STANDARDS FOR
CUSTOMER SERVICE**

Background

Since 1962, the *Ontario Human Rights Code* (OHRC) has provided persons with disabilities with the right to access goods, services, employment, etc. without discrimination. The Code requires employers, service providers and landlords, for example, to accommodate persons with disabilities to the point of undue hardship. The Code has resulted in some progress towards breaking down accessibility barriers in Ontario. However, progress has occurred on a case-by-case, reactive basis. Full access remains limited as persons with disabilities still encounter many barriers that prevent equal access and participation.

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)

The goal of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (2005) is to make Ontario accessible by 2025 through the development of accessibility standards. In addition to customer service, development of standards in other key areas is underway, including:

- information and communications
- built environment
- employment
- transportation

Accessibility Standards for Customer Service

The Ontario government has developed a customer service standard, known as the *Accessibility Standards for Customer Service*, Ontario Regulation 429/07, under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*. The customer service standard came into force on January 1, 2008, and applies to all people or organizations, both public and private, that:

- Provide goods and services either directly to the public or to other businesses or organizations, and
- Have one or more employees in Ontario

Government of Ontario ministries and broader public sector organizations, including universities, must comply with the standard by January 1, 2010. Private sector and non-profit organizations must comply by 2012.

Definition of Disability

The AODA uses the *Ontario Human Rights Code* definition of disability. It includes disabilities of different severity, visible as well as non-visible disabilities and disabilities of which the effects may come and go. It also includes sensory disabilities (e.g., hearing and vision), learning disabilities and physical disabilities.

AODA defines a disability as:

- a) any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical coordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device,

- b) a condition of mental impairment or a development disability,
- c) a learning disability, or dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language,
- d) a mental disorder, or
- e) an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the *Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997*.

Barriers to Accessibility

A barrier is anything that keeps someone from fully participating in all aspects of society because of his or her disability. Barriers can be visible or non-visible. Furthermore, while barriers are often unintentional, they can restrict access to goods and services. Common barriers include:

Attitude

This barrier is about what we think and how we interact with persons with disabilities. It is perhaps the most difficult barrier to overcome because our attitudes – based on our beliefs, knowledge, previous experience and education – can be hard to change. For instance, some people don't know how to communicate with persons with disabilities – they may assume that someone with a speech problem also has an intellectual disability. Some people worry about offending someone by offering help and deal with this by ignoring or avoiding persons with disabilities.

Architectural or structural

Architectural or structural barriers may result from design elements of a building such as stairs, doorways, the width of hallways and room layout. These barriers may also occur through everyday practices, such as when we store boxes or other objects in hallways, obstructing accessible pathways.

Information or communication

Information or communication barriers – like small print size, low colour contrast between text and background or not facing the person when speaking – can make it difficult to receive or convey information.

Technology

Technology, or the lack of it, can prevent people from accessing information. Common tools like computers, telephones and other aids can all present barriers if they are not set up or designed with accessibility in mind.

Systemic

Systemic barriers can result from an organization's policies, practices and procedures if they restrict persons with disabilities, often unintentionally, as in the case of making a full course load a requirement for eligibility for campus services such as residences, scholarships and honours listing.

Customer Service Standard Requirements

The customer service standard outlines a series of different requirements for service providers across Ontario. To achieve compliance with the standard, universities must:

- Establish policies, practices and procedures on providing goods or services to persons with disabilities
- Train everyone responsible for developing these policies, practice and procedures on accessible customer service
- Ensure that the university's policies, practices and procedures are consistent with four principles: independence, dignity, integration and equality of opportunity
- Have a policy for people's use of their own assistive devices
- Communicate with a person with a disability in a manner that takes into account his or her disability
- Permit persons with disabilities to bring their service animals onto campus

- Allow persons with disabilities to be accompanied by their support persons while on campus and let them know what, if any, admission will be charged for support persons
- Provide notice of temporary disruption to facilities or services that persons with disabilities may use or access
- Establish and make publicly available a process for receiving and responding to feedback about accessible customer service, specifying the actions to be taken if a complaint is received
- Train anyone who interacts with the public on behalf of the university on accessible customer service

Most universities have policies, practices and procedures that relate to customer service for persons with disabilities. Examples include policies on accommodating students with disabilities, procedures on booking assistive listening devices, room reservations and residence admissions policies. While some of these are formal, documented practices, others are unwritten and informal.

Principles of Accessible Customer Service

Under the customer service standard, each university must ensure that its policies, practices and procedures address the requirements of the standard, and use reasonable efforts to ensure they are consistent with the following principles:

Dignity

Providing service with dignity means the customer maintains his or her self-respect and the respect of other people. Dignified service means not treating persons with disabilities as an afterthought or forcing them to accept lesser service, quality or convenience.

Independence

Ensuring people are able to do things on their own without unnecessary help, or interference from others.

Integration

Integration means providing service in a way that allows the person with a disability to benefit from the same services, in the same place and in the same or similar way as other customers.

Equal Opportunity

Equal opportunity means having the same chances, options, benefits and results as others. In the case of services, it means that persons with disabilities have the same opportunity as others to benefit from the way you provide goods or services.

Disruptions in Service

Universities must provide notice to the public when there is a temporary disruption to their facilities or services. This notice is important to persons with disabilities because they often go to a lot of trouble to access your services.

This applies whether a temporary disruption is planned or unexpected, as in the following examples:

- Elevators out of service
- Cancelled classes due to illness
- Building shutdowns
- Changes in building access due to construction

The standard requires universities to provide notice of temporary service disruptions using a variety of methods that can include:

- Posting in a conspicuous place
- Sending an email message
- Posting on a website
- Any other reasonable method under the circumstances

The notice should also include information about:

- The reason for the disruption
- Its expected duration
- A description of alternate facilities or services, if available

Feedback Process

Good customer service for persons with disabilities also includes a process for receiving and responding to feedback. The standard requires universities to establish and implement a process for receiving and responding to feedback about the way they provide goods or services to persons with disabilities.

The process must allow people to give feedback in a number of ways:

- In person
- By telephone
- In writing
- By email
- On disk
- By other methods

Using a variety of methods ensures that you take into account the varying communication needs of persons with disabilities.

The standard also requires universities to specify the action that staff, faculty or other respondents will do if a complaint is received.

Finally, the standard requires universities to make information about the feedback process readily available to the public.