



Canadian
Transportation
Agency

Office
des transports
du Canada

Best Practices for Providing Assistance to Customers with Disabilities

A resource tool



Making Transportation Efficient and Accessible for All

Canada 

This document and other Canadian Transportation Agency publications are available on our website at www.cta.gc.ca.

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Catalogue No. TT4-44/2016E-PDF

ISBN 978-0-660-04602-0

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Available in multiple formats.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Overview	1
Serving customers who are blind or partially sighted	3
Serving customers who have communication disabilities.....	4
Serving customers who are deaf-blind	5
Serving customers who are Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing	6
Serving customers who have intellectual disabilities	7
Serving customers who have mental health disabilities	8
Serving customers who have mobility impairments.....	9
About the Agency.....	10
How this resource tool was developed.....	10

Introduction

Transportation service providers are required to assist their passengers with disabilities and are guided by the Canadian Transportation Agency's [accessibility standards](#) (including regulations and codes of practice), which help ensure that air and federal rail, ferry and bus services and facilities are accessible to persons with disabilities.

One of these standards are the [Personnel Training for the Assistance of Persons with Disabilities Regulations](#) (PTR). The regulations require Canadian air, rail and ferry carriers and terminal operators to fully instruct their personnel in assisting passengers with disabilities.

The Agency has developed this resource tool to assist transportation service providers comply with the requirements of the PTR. This resource tool contains quick reference pages to assist transportation service provider staff but is not meant to be comprehensive. In addition to this resource tool, the Agency's [Accessibility for All](#) training program provides more information on how to assist passengers with disabilities.

This resource tool does not address safety, or specify the type of information to provide to passengers with disabilities. It focuses on how to interact with passengers who have a variety of different types of disabilities. The information provided in this resource tool is best used when assisting a customer who has identified themselves as a person with a disability, but can also be helpful when it is clear that a person may require assistance.

Overview

When serving customers with disabilities, you should always be accommodating and considerate of their dignity, individuality and desire for independence.

General questions you can ask:

"Are you an experienced traveller?"

You can use the question to see if you should provide additional information about travel processes and procedures.

"Do you require any disability-related assistance during your travels?"

"Do you have any medical conditions (e.g., diabetes or epilepsy) of which you wish to inform the carrier staff?"

When serving customers with disabilities:

- Speak directly to the customer, not the interpreter or attendant.
- Offer your help, but don't insist.
- Ask how to help and what to do.
- Recognize that customers have diverse needs.
- Respect the customer's determination of their own needs and level of autonomy.
- Avoid touching mobility aids (e.g. wheelchair, cane or service animal) without first asking the user.
- Provide information about the location of accessible facilities.
- Avoid making assumptions; don't hesitate to ask the customer to repeat or to provide further clarification.
- Ask questions about the customer's disability only when they are pertinent to their travel needs. For example, it is rarely pertinent to know the underlying cause of a disability.
- Recognize that technologies (e.g. self-service kiosks) may not work for everyone; therefore personal assistance may be required.

Remember:

- Ask the customer to tell you the best way to help.
- Treat the customer with dignity.
- Exercise patience and adaptability.
- Listen to the customer.
- Maintain eye contact without staring.
- Make the customer feel comfortable.
- Deal with unfamiliar situations in a calm professional manner.

Serving customers who are blind or partially sighted

There are varying degrees of blindness; not all people with vision loss are completely blind. Most have some residual vision which enables them to travel with only minimal assistance. For these travellers, vision loss can be considered an invisible disability as the person may appear to function without difficulty in some circumstances.

Impaired vision can restrict a person's ability to read signs, locate landmarks or see hazards. As the majority of sensory information is learned through sight, persons who are blind or partially sighted may have difficulty in unfamiliar settings.

Best practices

- Always ask if assistance is needed; never assume that a customer who is blind or partially sighted requires assistance. If assistance is requested, ask how best to assist.
- Speak directly to the customer and identify yourself as a representative of the service provider.
- In busy noisy environments, it may be necessary to repeat yourself. When doing so, ask for confirmation that the customer understands your instructions.
- Wheelchair assistance should not be offered to customers who are blind or partially sighted as it is not a substitute for guiding.
- Be clear and precise when giving directions; give the customer verbal information (e.g., number of stairs up or down). Pause at obstacles, such as stairs or doors, to announce them to the customer.
- If you are offering a seat, gently place the customer's hand on the back or arm of the chair, which will assist the customer to locate the seat.
- Tell the customer when you are leaving; never leave a customer who is blind talking to an empty space. Ensure the customer is fully aware of what is taking place.
- When assisting a customer with a service dog, don't interact with or talk to the dog. Never pet, feed, or direct a service dog wearing a harness or vest.
- When dealing with monetary transactions, tell the customer the denominations when you count the money they are receiving from you.
- Make sure that the customer has picked up all of his or her possessions before leaving.
- Ask if the customer needs assistance signing forms – offer to guide their hand to the appropriate space for signature. Place an envelope or piece of cardboard just below the signature line to guide them to this space.
- Offer assistance if the customer appears to be having difficulty locating a specific service area, washrooms or food services facilities.

Serving customers who have communication disabilities

A communication disability can include a speech impairment or a language disorder. A person with a speech impairment may have difficulty with articulation, pronunciation or elocution, or with fluidity and emission of the voice. A person with a language disorder may have difficulty choosing words, combining words to form sentences, or with understanding the meaning of a word.

Best practices

- Give the customer time to speak without interrupting them. Resist the temptation to finish their sentences for them.
- If the customer is having difficulty expressing their needs, summarize what you have understood, the customer can then just complete the sentence rather than having to repeat everything.
- Stay away from noisy areas (e.g. conversation of others).
- Use short sentences and questions and discuss one topic at a time.
- Ask questions that require only short answers or a nod of the head. Try to offer a choice of answers to your question to obtain a "yes" or "no". The "yes" and "no" can also be expressed by nodding, pointing at yes-no on a sheet, pointing the thumbs up or down, etc.
- Avoid speaking loudly, this does not help.
- Don't pretend to have understood and don't hesitate to ask the customer to repeat themselves.
- Consider writing, using a computer, tablet, or cell phone as an alternative means of communicating if you are having difficulty understanding the customer, but first ask the customer if this is acceptable.

Serving customers who are deaf-blind

A person who is deaf-blind has both a hearing and visual disability, which can range in severity. When serving a customer who is deaf-blind, as with any other disability, ask first how best to offer assistance, including on how best to communicate. Follow the customer's lead. If they present a pen and paper, respond using their pen and try to mirror the writing style. Persons who are deaf-blind often communicate by using sign language, fingerspelling, printing letters in the palm, tactile sign language, or speech reading. Electronic devices, such as mobile phones, can also be used to convey oral and visual information.

Customers who are deaf-blind may be accompanied by an intervenor when travelling. An Intervenor is a paid professional trained to provide auditory and visual information to persons who are deaf-blind.

Best practices

- Gain the customer's attention before starting a conversation (tap the customer gently on the shoulder or arm).
- Don't assume what a customer can or cannot do. Some people who are deaf-blind have some sight or hearing, while others have neither.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to the intervenor.
- Ask whether your communication is understood.
- Make sure the customer has picked up all of their possessions before leaving.
- Offer assistance if the customer appears to be having difficulty locating a specific service area, washrooms or food services facilities.
- In case of emergency, if the customer is not accompanied by an intervenor, draw an "X" on the customer's back (this is the universal sign for emergency), and lead the customer away from the emergency situation.

Serving customers who are Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing

"Deaf" is used to describe a person who communicates in sign language. In Canada, there are two predominant visual languages: American Sign Language (ASL) and langue des signes québécoise (LSQ). Deaf culture is a linguistic cultural minority with five distinguishing features for sociological criteria, specifically: language, values, traditions, norms and identity.

"Hard of hearing" is used to describe a person who can hear a little sound through their ears. "Deafened" is used to describe a person who became deaf after learning speech and hearing. There are a variety of communication techniques used by persons who are deafened and hard of hearing such as lip or speech reading, or an assistive listening system.

Best practices

- Get the customer's attention before you speak. A shoulder tap is appropriate if the customer is near you, or you can wave your hand if the customer is at a distance.
- Identify who you are (e.g., show the customer your name badge).
- Ask the customer about their preferred method of communication, and/or whether it would be helpful to communicate by writing using a paper and pen or a computer, tablet, or smartphone.
- If the customer uses a sign-language interpreter, speak directly to the customer, not the interpreter.
- Maintain eye contact. Don't look down or sideways.
- Remove visual distractions (e.g., don't stand in the front of a bright window and avoid environmental noises).
- Rephrase when you are not understood.
- Be patient and prepared to write things down if you are not being understood or you don't understand.
- Body language helps to project the meaning of what you are saying; be animated. Use facial expressions and gestures when appropriate.
- Don't assume that the customer is wearing hearing aids.
- Discuss matters that are personal (e.g., disability-related needs or medical information) in a private manner to avoid eavesdropping by others.

Serving customers who have intellectual disabilities

Intellectual disabilities (including developmental or learning) affect a person's ability to receive, express or process information; however, cognitive ability can vary widely. Persons who have intellectual disabilities might require more assistance than other customers to complete a task, or may need additional time to understand and respond to questions when communicating.

Best practices

- Offer assistance or extra time to complete forms, understand written instructions, or make a decision; wait for the customer to accept the offer of assistance – don't "over-assist" or be patronizing.
- Be prepared to repeat, rephrase or provide an explanation more than once.
- Be patient, flexible, and supportive; take time to understand the customer and make sure the customer understands you.
- If you are not sure what the customer said, ask for clarification.
- Listen carefully when the customer speaks.
- Speak slowly – give information in clear, short sentences.
- Break instructions into small parts.
- Check the customer's understanding frequently.
- Ask the customer if they would like key information written down.
- Consider moving to a quiet or private location, if you're in a public area with many distractions.

Serving customers who have mental health disabilities

Persons who disclose mental health disabilities often face stigma, discrimination and a lack of understanding about their disability. Although there are many different forms of mental health disabilities with different characteristics and symptoms, most are invisible. You will not know if someone has a mental health disability unless it is disclosed. These disabilities are episodic; symptoms and needs can vary from day to day and from individual to individual. A customer may not display any visible signs of a mental health disability, but require an accommodation to prevent or manage triggers or symptoms.

Best practices

- Discuss personal matters (e.g. disability-related needs or medical information) in a private and confidential manner to minimize stigma.
- State clearly who you are; speak in a normal tone of voice.
- Ask customers who disclose a mental health disability if accommodations are required. Remember that needs vary from person to person, so always ask the customer about their specific needs.
- Focus on accommodation and avoid unnecessary and intrusive questions about the disability.
- Speak directly with the customer with a disability rather than a friend or family member, unless the customer requests otherwise.
- If communication is challenging, use clear and plain language and ask the customer how you can most effectively communicate together.
- Like people with other forms of disability, customers with mental health disabilities may require a support person of their choosing or service animal during travel.

Serving customers who have mobility impairments

There are many types of mobility impairments and people use different types of aids to assist with mobility. People with lower body impairments may use canes, walkers or wheelchairs. People may also have upper body impairments that can result in limited or no use of the upper extremities.

The use of mobility aids, such as canes or walkers, can also be due to problems with dizziness and balance.

Best practices

- Put yourself at eye level with a customer using a wheelchair. If possible, sit next to the customer when having a conversation.
- Don't touch mobility aids, including wheelchairs, without permission.
- Don't assume that a customer using a wheelchair wants to be pushed, ask first.
- Ensure there are no obstructions, such as counters, between you and the customer. Come around to the customer side of the counter during your interaction.
- Where an accessible counter is not available, provide a clipboard as a writing surface.
- Make sure there is a clear path of travel.
- Offer assistance if the customer appears to be having difficulty opening doors.
- If a customer uses crutches, a walker or another assistive device, offer assistance with coats, bags or other belongings.
- Offer a chair if the customer will be standing for a long period of time.

About the Agency

The Canadian Transportation Agency is an independent, quasi-judicial tribunal and regulator of the Government of Canada.

The Agency makes decisions on a wide range of matters involving air, rail and marine modes of transportation under the authority of Parliament. For certain accessibility matters, the Agency also has jurisdiction over extra-provincial bus transportation. Part V of the *Canada Transportation Act* provides the Agency with a human rights mandate to eliminate undue obstacles to the mobility of persons with disabilities in the federal transportation network to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal access to transportation services.

In exercising its human rights mandate, the Agency applies the fundamental principle of equality. The Agency eliminates undue obstacles in three ways:

1. by developing and monitoring compliance with regulations, codes of practice and standards concerning the level of accessibility in modes of transportation under federal jurisdiction;
2. by eliminating problems before they occur by responding to pre-travel inquiries and by educating persons with disabilities and service providers about their rights and responsibilities; and,
3. by resolving complaints on a case-by-case basis using an approach that is consistent with the one used for identifying and remedying discrimination under human rights law.

How this resource tool was developed

In developing this resource tool, the Agency conducted research and consulted its Accessibility Advisory Committee which is made up of associations representing persons with disabilities, transportation service providers and other government departments.