

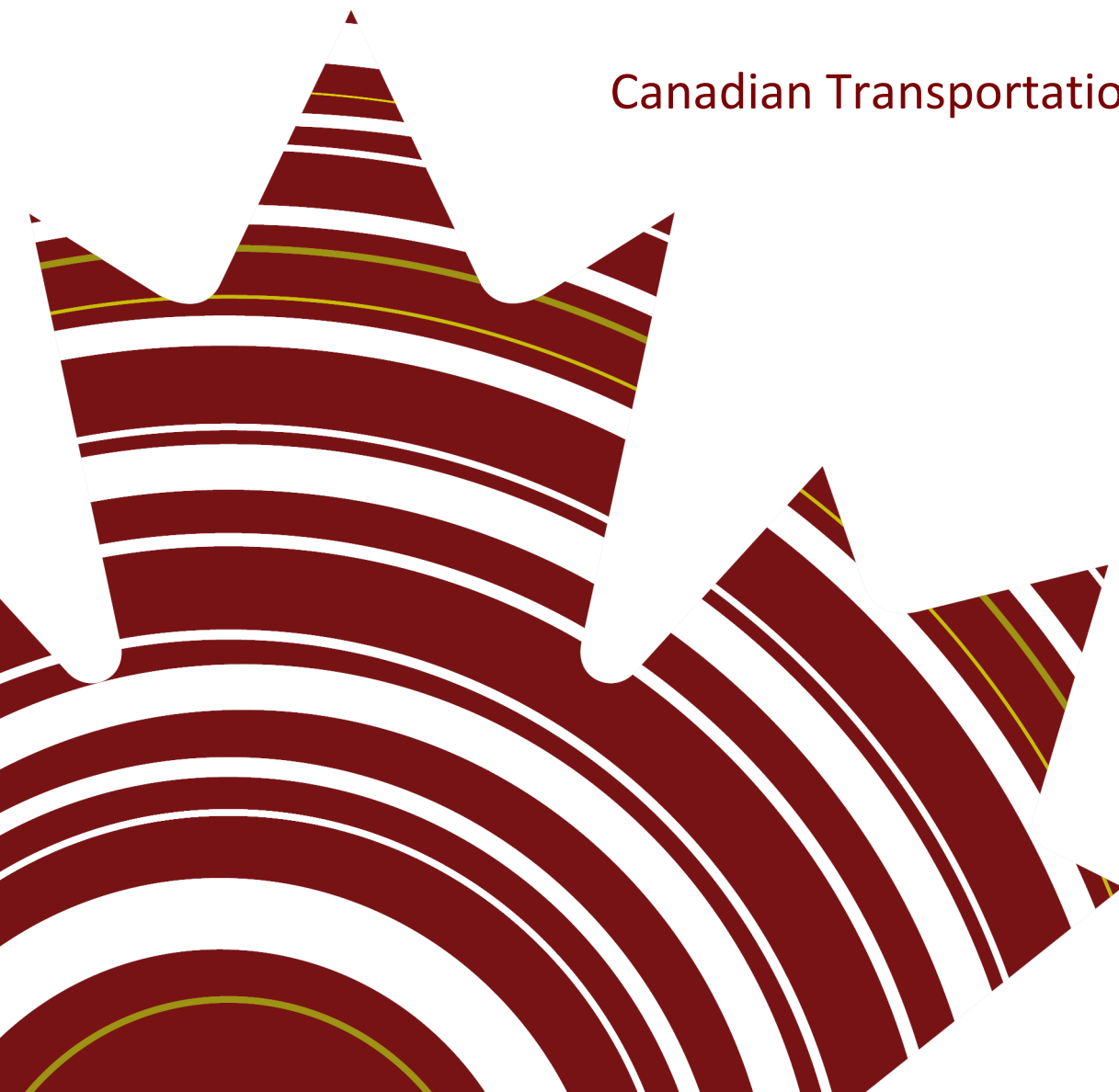


Canadian  
Transportation  
Agency

Office  
des transports  
du Canada

# Best Practices for Interacting with Persons with Disabilities – A Guide

Canadian Transportation Agency



Canada 

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# 1. Purpose

This guide provides best practices for transportation service providers subject to the requirements in the *Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations* (ATPDR). These best practices are designed to assist transportation service provider personnel in their interactions with persons with disabilities and to support compliance with the ATPDR requirements relating to personnel training, communicating with persons with disabilities, and the provision of services to them.

The Canada Transportation Act defines disability as any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment — or a functional limitation — whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person’s full and equal participation in society.

This guide sets out:

- Best practices broadly applicable to persons with disabilities; and
- Best practices for interacting with persons who:
  - are blind or partially sighted;
  - have a communication disability;
  - are deaf-blind;
  - are Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing;
  - have an intellectual, cognitive or learning disability;
  - have an episodic disability;
  - have a mental health disability; and
  - have a mobility impairment.

Transportation service providers not covered by the ATPDR may still have obligations relating to personnel training, communicating with persons with disabilities, and the provision of services to them. For more information consult [Accessible transportation guides — Introduction](#).

**Note:** This is not a legal document. The explanations and definitions it provides are for general guidance purposes only. The obligations for transportation service providers, including those relating to personnel training, communication, and services can be found in the [ATPDR](#). In case of differences between this guide and legislation or regulations, the legislation and regulations prevail.

## 2. General best practices

The best practices set out below are recommended for transportation service provider personnel during interactions with all persons with disabilities, regardless of their type of disability, at all points during the travel experience, from time of reservation to completion of travel at the destination terminal.

When providing a service or assisting a person with a disability:

- Identify who you are (for example, show the person your name badge).
- Speak directly to the person, not their interpreter or support person.
- Offer your help, but don't insist.
- Ask how to help and what to do. Never make assumptions about what is needed or how to provide the assistance, and don't hesitate to ask the person to repeat or to provide further clarification.

- Recognize that persons with disabilities have diverse needs.
- Give priority to the person's determination of their own disability-related needs and what sort of assistance or accommodation will meet those needs.
- Provide information about the location of accessible facilities.
- Ask questions about the person's disability only when this is necessary to understand and meet their disability-related needs. For example, it is rarely pertinent to know the underlying cause of a disability.
- Recognize that technologies (for example, self-service kiosks) may not work for everyone and that personal assistance may be required.
- Given that persons with disabilities often travel with extra equipment, offer to help them ensure that they have retrieved all of their possessions before leaving an area, such as a check-in counter, security screening area, or passenger seat.

**Remember:**

- Ask the person what is the best way to help.
- Treat the person with dignity.
- Be respectful and adaptable to different situations and needs.
- Recognize that it may take more time to provide a service to a person with a disability in order to ensure their needs are appropriately met.
- Listen to the person.
- Maintain eye contact without staring.
- Make the person feel comfortable.
- Deal with unfamiliar situations in a calm and professional manner.

# 3. Best practices for different types of disabilities

## Persons 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 function without difficulty in some circumstances and may not use a white cane or service dog.

However, impaired vision can restrict a person's ability to read signs, locate landmarks or see hazards. Given that facilities and services have been developed with sighted people in mind, persons who are blind or partially sighted may have difficulty in un-familiar settings.

### Best practices

- Always ask if assistance is needed; never assume that a person who is blind or partially sighted requires assistance. If assistance is requested, ask how best to help.
- Wheelchair assistance should never be offered to persons who are blind or partially sighted unless they also have a mobility impairment, as it is not a substitute for guiding assistance.
- Speak directly to the person and identify yourself as a representative of the transportation service provider.
- In noisy environments, it may be necessary to repeat yourself. When doing so, ask for confirmation that the person has heard what you have said.

- Be clear and precise when giving directions; give the person verbal information (for example, the number of stairs up or down). Pause at obstacles, such as stairs or doors, to let the person know that they are there.
- If you are offering a seat, gently place the person's hand on the back or arm of the chair (after confirming with the person that they are comfortable with you doing this); this will assist the person to locate the seat.
- Tell the person when you are leaving and what they can expect to happen and when. This avoids potential stress associated with not receiving ongoing assistance and not knowing when assistance will be resumed.
- When assisting a person with a service dog, don't interact with or talk to the dog; never pet, feed, or provide instructions to a service dog. The dog is working and should not be distracted.
- When dealing with monetary transactions, tell the person the denominations when you count the money they have given you or that you are returning to them.
- Ask if the person needs assistance completing forms. For example, offer to take a verbal declaration for border clearance and to guide a person's hand to the appropriate space for signature. This can be done by placing an envelope or piece of cardboard just below the signature line to guide the person.
- Offer assistance if the person appears to be having difficulty locating a specific service area, washrooms or food services facilities.

# Persons who have a communication disability

A communication disability is typically a speech or language impairment. A person with a speech impairment may have difficulty with articulation, pronunciation, or with fluidity and emission of the voice. A person with a language impairment may have difficulty choosing words, combining words to form sentences, or understanding the meaning of a word. Some persons may be unable to speak and instead communicate by pointing to a picture or letters on a board, or by typing their message on a device. Most persons who have speech or language impairments do not have hearing loss or a cognitive disability.

## Best practices

- Give the person time to speak without interrupting them. Resist the temptation to finish their sentences for them.
- Watch and listen as the person may use body language, speech, or a communication device.
- If the person is having difficulty expressing their needs, summarize what you have understood and ask for confirmation of your understanding (which can be given in a variety of ways). In this way, the person can then just complete their thought rather than having to repeat everything.
- Don't pretend to have understood and don't hesitate to ask the person to repeat themselves.
- Stay away from noisy areas, including those where others are speaking.
- Avoid speaking loudly, this does not help.
- Consider using pen and paper or a computer, tablet, or cell phone to communicate if you are having difficulty understanding the person, but first ask the person if this is acceptable.



- If the above strategies do not help, 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 pointing at these words on a piece of paper or by pointing a thumb up or down. You should first ask the person if this is acceptable.

## Persons who are deaf-blind

A person who is deaf-blind has both a hearing and visual disability, which can range in severity. When interacting with a person who is deaf-blind, start by determining the best way to communicate with them. Persons who are deaf-blind often communicate by using sign language, fingerspelling (the use of "finger alphabets" or "hand alphabets", as a part of many sign languages, to represent letters or numbers using the hands), printing letters in the palm, tactile sign language (hand-over-hand signing, in which the hands of the person who is deaf-blind are placed over those of the signer to feel and read the signs through the hands of the signer), or speech reading. Electronic devices, such as mobile phones, can also be used to convey oral and visual information.

Persons who are deaf-blind, especially those with severe or complete hearing and vision loss, may be accompanied by an intervener when travelling. An intervener is a person who is trained to provide auditory and visual information to persons who are deaf-blind. The intervener will communicate what you say to the person who is deaf-blind using the communication method that works best for the person and tell you what the person says in reply. A person who is deaf-blind but who has residual vision may communicate using pen and paper; if so, respond in the same way using concise plain language.

### Best practices

- Gain the person's attention before starting a conversation; for example, tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm.

- Don't assume what the person can or cannot do. Some people who are deaf-blind have residual vision and/or hearing, while others have neither.
- Speak directly to person, not to their intervener.
- Ask whether the information you have provided is clear.
- Offer assistance if the person appears to be having difficulty locating a specific service area, washrooms or food services facilities.
- In case of emergency, if the person is not accompanied by an intervener, draw an "X" on the person's back (this is the universal sign for emergency), and lead the person away from any hazard.

## Persons 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.

"Deafened" is used to describe a person who lost their hearing after learning speech. "Hard of hearing" is used to describe a person who is unable to hear well. There are a variety of communication techniques used by persons who are deafened or hard of hearing, such as lip or speech reading, or by using an assistive listening system (the use of a microphone to capture sound and transmit this wirelessly, including through an induction loop, to a person who uses a wireless receiver to hear the sound).

## Best practices

- Get the person's attention before you speak. A gentle tap on the shoulder is appropriate if the person is near you, or you can wave your hand if the person is at a distance.
- Ask the person what their preferred method of communication is and whether it would be helpful to communicate by using a pen and paper or a computer, tablet, or smartphone.
- If the person is travelling with a sign-language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not the interpreter.
- Maintain eye contact with the person. Don't look down or sideways.
- Remove visual distractions (for example, don't stand in the front of bright light and avoid environmental noise).
- Rephrase what you have communicated or offer to explain things in writing if you think this is needed to clarify your message.
- Body language helps to project the meaning of what you are saying; use facial expressions and gestures when appropriate.
- Don't assume that the person is wearing hearing aids.
- Discuss matters that are personal (for example, disability-related needs or medical information) in a private setting.

# Persons who have an intellectual, cognitive or learning disability

Persons with an intellectual disability have difficulty in carrying out daily activities and may have difficulty in communicating, solving problems, reasoning, making decisions or learning. Persons with a cognitive disability have difficulty concentrating and retaining information. Persons with a learning disability have different patterns of learning than most other persons. Some of the most common learning disabilities involve difficulties in reading, writing, math, and language comprehension.

## Best practices

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

## Persons who have an episodic disability

Some disabilities are characterized by impairments and functional limitations that are episodic in nature; for example, multiple sclerosis and seizure disorders, which can result in symptoms and functional limitations that fluctuate in severity. Because of this, a person with an episodic disability may not always need the same assistance - or the same level of assistance - that they have previously needed.

### Best practices

- Don't make assumptions about the nature or severity of functional limitations that a person with an episodic disability may be experiencing based on past experience.
- Make an individual assessment of what the person needs. Not all persons with the same episodic disability experience the same type or severity of functional limitations.
- Ask the person what disability-related assistance they need and only ask questions about their disability if it is necessary to make sure you provide the right assistance.

## Persons who have a mental health disability

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, many are invisible and will not be apparent unless they are disclosed. Mental health disabilities are often episodic; symptoms and needs can vary from day to day, from individual to individual, and assistance may be needed to prevent or manage triggers or symptoms, such as those relating to post-traumatic stress disorder.

## Best practices

- Discuss personal matters (for example, disability-related needs or medical information) in a private and confidential manner.
- State clearly who you are and use a normal volume and tone of voice.
- Ask a person who discloses a mental health disability if disability-related assistance is required. Remember that needs vary from person to person, so always ask the person about their specific needs.
- Focus on what assistance is required and avoid unnecessary and intrusive questions about the person's disability.
- Speak directly to the person, not to someone who is accompanying them during their trip unless the person asks you to do so.
- If communication is challenging, use concise plain language and ask the person whether it would be preferable to communicate in writing.
- Persons with mental health disabilities may wish to travel with a support person or an animal (for example, a service dog or an emotional support animal) that provides assistance related to their disability.

## Persons who have a mobility impairment

There are many types of mobility impairments as well as aids used to assist with mobility. Persons with lower body impairments may use canes, walkers or wheelchairs. Persons may also have upper body impairments that can result in limited or no use of the upper extremities. In these cases, power wheelchairs are usually used to aid mobility. 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 person using a wheelchair. If possible, sit next to the person when having a conversation.
- Don't touch a person's mobility aid without their permission.
- Don't assume that a person using a wheelchair wants to be pushed; ask first.
- Where a person wishes you to push their wheelchair, do so in a manner that respects their dignity and autonomy; for example, by confirming with them where they want to go; maintaining an appropriate speed; and not leaving them alone for extended periods without assistance or explanations.
- Ensure there are no obstructions, such as counters, between you and the person. If necessary, move to the person's side of the counter during your interaction.
- Where a lowered counter is not available, provide the person with a clipboard as a writing surface.
- Remove any obstructions that may block the path of travel to the person's destination point.
- Offer assistance if the person appears to be having difficulty opening doors.
- If a person uses a cane, crutches, or a walker, offer to carry their baggage or other personal items.
- Offer a chair if the person will be standing for a long period of time.

## 4. We're here to help

For more information and guidance about accessible travel and the Canadian Transportation Agency's dispute resolution services, please contact us at [info@otc-cta.gc.ca](mailto:info@otc-cta.gc.ca).