

A close-up photograph of a person's hand resting on the black wheel of a wheelchair. The person is wearing a blue shirt. The background is plain white.

# Accessible Customer Service

**A Guide for Town of Markham  
Board and Advisory Committee  
Members and Volunteers**

# Did you know?

## Did you know?

1.5 million people in Ontario have a disability

## Did you know?

“Disability” may involve:

- physical impairment
- sensory impairment
- cognitive or intellectual impairment
- mental or developmental disorder
- various types of chronic diseases

## Did you know?

People with disabilities travel, shop and do business just like everyone else

## Did you know?

Excellent customer service includes treating all customers equitably, with respect and dignity, and with courtesy.



# Overview

The Town of Markham is committed to providing excellent customer service to all residents and visitors, and to treat everyone with dignity and respect.

To do this, we must recognize the diverse needs of all of our residents – including the needs of people with disabilities.

In 2008, the Government of Ontario launched the accessible customer service standard under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. Its goal is to ensure that people with disabilities get the same level of customer service as everyone else.

The law requires that all public and private sector organizations in Ontario, including the Town of Markham, identify, remove and prevent barriers to accessible customer service. It also states that all staff, Council members, volunteers, board and advisory committee members must be trained on how to provide accessible customer service.

This guide will give you tips on how best to interact with a person with a disability, so that you can provide excellent customer service to all Markham residents.

If you are ever unsure about what to do in a situation, or what services the Town of Markham offers to people with disabilities, please ask a staff person, or contact Markham's Accessibility Coordinator, Warren Rupnarain at 905-477-7000 ext.3542, or [wrupnarain@markham.ca](mailto:wrupnarain@markham.ca).

## When interacting with a person with a disability, remember the T.A.L.K. principle:

---

**T** = Take the time to ask “May I help you?”

**A** = Ask - don’t assume. Never assist unless asked.

**L** = Listen attentively and speak directly to the customer

**K** = Know the accommodations and special services that are available

If you notice a person is having difficulty accessing your goods or services, a good starting point is to simply ask how you can best help. Be patient – and remember your customers are your best source of information about their needs. The solution can be simple and they will likely appreciate your attention and consideration.



# How to interact and communicate with people with various types of disabilities

---

Being able to interact and communicate with people with disabilities is a big part of providing accessible customer service. Sometimes the best approach is to ask a person with a disability how you can best communicate with them. Here are some tips:

## People who are deafblind

A person who is deafblind may have some degree of both hearing and vision loss. Many people who are deafblind will be accompanied by an intervenor, a professional support person who helps with communication (see page 11).

### TIPS

- Speak directly to your customer, not to the intervenor.
- A customer who is deafblind is likely to explain to you how to communicate with them, perhaps with an assistance card or note.

## People who have hearing loss

People who have hearing loss may be Deaf, oral deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing. These are terms used to describe different levels of hearing and/or the way a person's hearing was diminished or lost.

### TIPS

- Attract the customer's attention before speaking. Try a gentle touch on the shoulder or wave of your hand.
- Make sure you are in a well-lit area where your customer can see your face and read your lips.
- If your customer uses a hearing aid, reduce background noise or move to a quieter area.
- If necessary, ask if another method of communicating would be easier (for example, using a pen and paper).

## People who have physical disabilities

There are many types and degrees of physical disabilities. Only some people with physical disabilities use a wheelchair. Someone with a spinal cord injury may use crutches while someone with severe arthritis or a heart condition may have difficulty walking longer distances.

### TIPS

- If you need to have a lengthy conversation with someone who uses a wheelchair or scooter, consider sitting so you can make eye contact at the same level.
- Don't touch items or equipment, such as canes or wheelchairs, without permission.
- If you have permission to move a person's wheelchair, don't leave them in an awkward, dangerous or undignified position, such as facing a wall or in the path of opening doors.

## People who have vision loss

Vision loss can restrict someone's ability to read, located landmarks or see hazards. Some customers may use a guide dog (see page 10) or a white cane, while others may not.

### TIPS

- Don't assume the individual can't see you. Many people who have low vision still have some sight.
- Identify yourself when you approach your customer and speak directly to them.
- Ask your customer if they would like you to read any printed material out loud to them (for example, a menu or schedule of fees).
- When providing directions or instructions, be precise and descriptive
- Offer your elbow to guide them if needed.

## People who have learning disabilities

The term “learning disabilities” refers to a variety of disorders, such as dyslexia, that affect how a person takes in or retains information. This disability may become apparent when a person has difficulty reading material or understanding the information you are providing.

### TIPS

- Be patient – people with some learning disabilities may take a little longer to process information, to understand and to respond.
- Try to provide information in a way that takes into account the customer’s disability. For example, some people with learning disabilities find written words difficult to understand, while others may have problems with numbers and math.

## People with speech or language impairments

Cerebral palsy, hearing loss or other conditions may make it difficult for a person to pronounce words or may cause slurring. Some people who have severe difficulties may use a communication board or other assistive devices (see page 9).

### TIPS

- Don’t assume that a person with a speech impairment has another disability.
- Whenever possible, ask questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no”.
- Be patient. Don’t interrupt or finish your customer’s sentences.

## People who have mental health disabilities

Mental health issues can affect a person's ability to think clearly, concentrate or remember things. Mental health disability is a broad term for many disorders that can range in severity. For example, some customers may experience anxiety due to hallucinations, mood swings, phobias or panic disorder.

### TIPS

- Treat a person with a mental health disability with the same respect and consideration you have for everyone else.
- Be confident, calm and reassuring.
- If a customer appears to be in crisis, ask them to tell you the best way to help.

## People who have intellectual/developmental disabilities

Developmental or intellectual disabilities, such as Down Syndrome, can limit a person's ability to learn, communicate, do everyday physical activities and live independently. You may not know that someone has this disability unless you are told.

### TIPS

- Don't make assumptions about what a person can do.
- Use plain language.
- Provide one piece of information at a time.



# How to interact with people who use assistive devices

---

An assistive device is a tool, technology or other mechanism that enables a person with a disability to do everyday tasks and activities, such as moving, communicating or lifting. Personal assistive devices can include things like wheelchairs, hearing aids, white canes or speech amplification devices.

## TIPS

- Don't touch or handle any assistive device without permission.
- Don't move assistive devices or equipment, such as canes and walkers, out of your customer's reach.
- Let your customer know about accessible features in the immediate environment that are appropriate to their needs (e.g., public phones with TTY service, accessible washrooms, etc.)



# How to interact with people with disabilities who require the assistance of a guide dog or other service animal

---

People with vision loss may use a guide dog, but there are other types of service animals as well. Hearing alert animals help people who are Deaf, deafened, oral deaf, or hard of hearing. Other service animals are trained to alert an individual to an oncoming seizure.

Under the accessible customer service standard, service animals are allowed on the parts of the premises that are open to the public or to other third parties, unless the animal is otherwise excluded by law. You may ask a person for a letter from a physician or nurse verifying that their animal is required for reasons relating to their disability if it is not readily apparent.

## TIPS

- Remember that a service animal is not a pet. It is a working animal.
- Avoid touching or addressing service animals – they are working and have to pay attention at all times.
- Avoid making assumptions about the animal.  
If you're not sure if the animal is a pet or a service animal, ask your customer.



# How to interact with people with disabilities who require the assistance of a support person

---

Some people with disabilities may be accompanied by a support person, such as an intervenor. A support person can be a personal support worker, a volunteer, a family member or a friend. A support person might help your customer with a variety of things from communicating, to helping with mobility, personal care or medical needs.

According to the accessible customer service standard, a support person must be allowed to accompany an individual with a disability to any part of the premises that is open to the public or to third parties. If an event charges admission, advance notice must be given about what admission fee will be charged for a support person.

## TIPS

- If you're not sure which person is the customer, take your lead from the person using or requesting the goods or services, or simply ask.
- Speak directly to your customer, not to their support person.



**For more information on the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, or the accessible customer service standard, visit [www.accessON.ca](http://www.accessON.ca)**

Information on pages 5 through 11, adapted and re-printed with permission from the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario, Ministry of Community and Social Services.

**[www.markham.ca](http://www.markham.ca) • 905-477-5530**

Alternate formats available upon request.