

## **Accessibility Standard for Customer Service:**

### Employer Handbook

Manitoba's new accessibility standard under The Accessibility for Manitobans Act means great customer service for everybody.

Accessible customer service is not necessarily about ramps or automatic door openers. It is about understanding that your customers and clients have a variety of needs.

The following topics in this handbook will assist you in developing policies and practices that will help you welcome and better serve everybody.

1. Understand what barriers prevent accessible customer service.
2. Identify the areas that require accessibility policies and practices.
3. Requirements for providing accessible customer service.
4. Learn about *The Human Rights Code*.
5. Sample policies

The Accessibility Standard for Customer Service applies to all organizations in Manitoba that:

- provide goods or services
- have one or more employees

There are different deadlines for compliance:

- Manitoba government, November 2016
- public sector organizations, November 2017
- private and non-profit organizations and businesses, November 2018

Feedback is welcome.

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## 1. Understand what barriers prevent accessible customer service

### **What are accessibility barriers?**

Many people think disabilities are the barriers, but that is not the case.

Barriers prevent people with disabilities from participating in everyday life. Once you understand what accessibility barriers are, it is easier to identify them. There are many types of barriers.

Accessibility barriers limit or prevent people from being able to get information, service and goods or to enter a space or be part of an activity.

- Attitude, including stereotypes and assumptions, can be the biggest barrier. An example is thinking people who cannot communicate verbally have nothing to say.
- Physical barriers include stairs, push doors and cluttered hallways. For example, by identifying physical barriers, organizations can determine how else to serve their customers, short of investment in renovations.
- Communication barriers prevent people from understanding information. An example is a sign that is too small or confusing.
- Technology barriers often relate to information and communication. An example is a website that is not accessible to people who are blind and use a screen reader.
- Systemic barriers are those practices or policies that prevent many customers from accessing your service. An example is including service animals in a no pet policy.

## 2. Identify the areas that require accessibility policies and practices

Develop and put into place measures, policies and practices that will help ensure barrier-free customer service for people with disabilities, seniors, and others with challenges to mobility, communication, understanding or health concerns.

Let your customers know your accessibility policies and/or procedures are available on request.

### **Preparing for Accessible Customer Service**

Putting the customer first, includes letting the principles of independence, dignity, access, and equality guide you.

Obligations:

- identify barriers to accessible customer service
- remove barriers to accessible customer service
- prevent the creation of new barriers to accessible customer service
- provide equivalent customer service

### **General tips on providing accessible customer service**

If you are not sure what to do, ask your customers, “How can I help?” Your customers with disabilities know if they need help and how you can provide it.

Avoid stereotypes and make no assumptions about what type of disability the person has. Many disabilities are not visible, and asking personal questions is not appropriate.

Do not assume what a person can or cannot do. Take the time to get to know your customers’ needs and focus on meeting those needs.

An active offer is a proactive way to ensure that your information and services are available and accessible to everyone.

For example, on documents, include the phrase: “Alternate formats available on request.” If required, the customer may request larger print, an electronic version, or having the document read out-loud. Braille is another possible request, though less likely. See [www.AccessibilityMB.ca](http://www.AccessibilityMB.ca) resource tab for Manitoba accessibility service providers.

### 3. Requirements for providing accessible customer service

To provide accessible customer service, the Accessibility Standard for Customer Service requires that organizations introduce measures, policies and practices on its eight requirements.

- 1) meet the communication needs of customers
- 2) allow assistive devices
- 3) welcome support persons
- 4) allow people with service animals
- 5) maintain barrier free access
- 6) let customers know when accessibility features are not available
- 7) invite customers to provide feedback
- 8) train staff on accessible customer service

The following information explains these eight requirements in more detail.

- 1) Consider a customer's **communication barrier** when providing services and take it into account when communicating.

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There are many different types of disabilities, some visible, others invisible. Disabilities may affect mobility, balance, dexterity, vision, hearing, speech, language, learning, understanding or mental health.

#### **TIPS:**

- Consider how your organization can prepare to meet customers’ communication needs. For example, have a pen and paper on hand.
- Ask your customers how you can best communicate with them. Every situation is different and depends on an individual’s needs.

- Offer a chair if a longer conversation is required.
- Seat yourself to engage with someone using a wheelchair.
- Offer documents in accessible formats, if requested. For example, you may direct them to your accessible website or offer the document in larger print.
- Be patient. People with some kinds of disabilities may take a little longer to understand and respond. A good start is to listen carefully.
- Keep signage simple with large lettering.
- Consider “How can I help” as a greeting or sign.

## **2. Allow assistive devices**

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An assistive device is any piece of equipment that people use to help them with daily living. Some examples include a wheelchair, screen reader, listening device, magnifying glass or cane.

### **TIPS:**

- Consider how your organization can prepare to serve customers who use assistive devices.
- If you have assistive devices on site, make sure staff knows how to use them, for example, public computers with accessibility features.
- Offer the space and time that may be required to modify your services to meet the needs of customers using assistive devices.
- Can you offer helpful measures, such as carryout service or delivery?

## **3. Welcome support persons**

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Support persons help individuals with disabilities perform daily tasks. Often people who have support persons are not able to do things without assistance. A support person does not have to be a paid support worker. He or she can be a family member or a friend.

### **TIPS:**

- Consider how your organization can serve customers who have a support person.
- Avoid charging fees for the support person.
- If you charge admission for a support person, clearly state the admission fee in advance.

#### **4. Allow service animals**

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Service animals assist people with disabilities. A person with a service animal has the right to enter any place where the public is allowed.

It may be obvious that the animal is trained to assist with a disability that is visible (a person who is blind). It may be less obvious if the animal is trained to assist with a disability that is invisible (example: post-traumatic stress disorder or diabetes). On rare occasions, access to a person with a service animal may be restricted (example: access to a sterile laboratory or operating room). Generally, these types of facilities are not considered public areas.

#### **TIPS:**

- Review definition of a service animal and what questions an employee can ask if unsure. (See Guideline: Discrimination against persons with disabilities who use service animals [www.manitobahumanrights.ca](http://www.manitobahumanrights.ca)).
- Welcome service animals into public areas of your workplace or business.
- Consider how your organization can prepare to serve people with service animals.
- Do not apply standard pet policies to service animals.

#### **5) Review your physical space - Barrier Free Access**

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Customers with disabilities need easy access to your premises. Clear hallways, elevators, and doorbells are all features that create accessibility. If introducing significant accessibility improvements, long term planning and renovations may be required. There are however, many simple and inexpensive ways to make your organization more accessible.

**TIPS:**

- Organize the space so there is room for wheelchairs, scooters and walkers.
- Consider seating options if clients must wait for service.
- Consider both audio and visual cues when informing customers that it is their turn to be served.
- Keep hallways and waiting meeting rooms clear of clutter such as boxes and entrance ways cleared of snow and ice.
- Ensure the placement of standing signage is not a tripping hazard.
- Brainstorm ideas of how to take service to your customer if your structure is not accessible.

**6) Accessible features temporarily not available**

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Sometimes accessibility features or services require repair or are temporarily out of service (example: an elevator or accessible washroom). When this happens, notify your customers. Consider putting a notice on your website for long-term disruptions.

**TIPS:**

- Make a list of the accessible facilities and services some people rely on.
- Prepare a template notice in advance.
- Include the reason for the disruption, and if possible, how long the service will be unavailable and what alternative facilities or services are available, if any.
- Post the notice in a place where people are most likely to find it, for example the entrance door to your business or another high traffic area or on your website. Also, if you have one, include an announcement on the public address system.

**7) Invite customers to provide feedback**

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To learn about barriers that exist in your workplace, invite customers to give feedback on how well you provide accessible customer service.

**TIPS:**

- Determine how you want to receive feedback (example: in person, by email or on your website).
- How will you respond to feedback, including advice?
- How will you let customers know about the process?

## **8) Conduct accessible customer service training**

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Training is the key to great customer service. That is why training is at the heart of the Accessibility Standard for Customer Service.

See Tips for Employees to get you started. [www.accessibilitymb.ca](http://www.accessibilitymb.ca)

You must provide training to

- all employees and volunteers who interact with the public (paid and unpaid, full-time and part-time positions).
- persons involved in developing policies for your organization (including managers, senior leaders, directors and owners).

The most effective training should include

- an overview of The Accessibility for Manitobans Act (2013), the requirements of the Accessibility Standard for Customer Service, and Manitoba's human rights legislation (The Human Rights Code).
- reasonable accommodation practices as set out by The Human Rights Code.
- your organization's measures, policies and practices to provide accessible customer service.

**TIPS:**

- Train existing staff.

- Train new staff soon after they are hired.
- Keep track of who has been trained and when.
- Refer to Tips for Employees.
- Organizations in Manitoba offer this training. Visit [www.accessibilityMB.ca](http://www.accessibilityMB.ca) Resources – Accessibility Service.

## 4. Learn about The Human Rights Code (Manitoba)

### **The importance of human rights legislation in Manitoba**

The rights and responsibilities covered by The Human Rights Code overrides any other law, unless that law specifically says otherwise.

The Human Rights Code prohibits unreasonable discrimination on specific grounds, including physical and mental disabilities. Manitobans are encouraged to take steps to make reasonable accommodations.

Accommodating means allowing for changes to the way things are usually done. The changes might be visible to the public, such as the installation of automatic doors to ensure access for a person with a physical disability or installing a ramp or elevator. The changes might also only be apparent to certain people, such as a service provider providing documents in larger print.

Service providers should respond to an accommodation request by communicating with the person or group making the request. Ask what the need is and how it can be best met. Good communication, flexibility and co-operation are very important. The facts of each situation and the specific needs of the individual or group must be considered.

In most cases, accommodation is simple and affordable. With flexibility and good communication, accommodation solutions are usually possible.

The duty to reasonably accommodate often is described in human rights law as accommodation short of undue hardship. Inconvenience or some financial cost does not usually qualify as undue hardship. However, if accommodation does result in undue hardship, other alternatives still must be explored.

If it is not possible to grant the request in full, or in part, it must be shown that it would cause undue hardship to the company or organization to do so. Organizations and businesses should develop a reasonable accommodation request process.

Make sure you and your staff are familiar with *The Human Rights Code* and the meaning and practice of reasonable accommodation.

[www.manitobahumanrights.ca](http://www.manitobahumanrights.ca)

## 5. Sample Policies

Becoming accessible means developing policies on how your organization will provide service to customers with disabilities. It is management's responsibility to create awareness among employees, and to attend training with its employees.

If you have 20 or more employees, you must document and inform customers of your Customer Service Policy. If you have fewer, you must comply with the customer service standard. It is up to you whether to document these practices.

Below are sample policies and practices to ensure compliance with The Accessibility Standard for Customer Service. Some organizations may wish to publicize only the policies and to add the practices to their procedures manual. These are working samples and may not always reflect your specific organization. Please add any other measures that reflect your organization or your customers.

### **Accessible Customer Service Policy**

(Company or organization name)'s accessible customer service policy is consistent with the principles of independence, dignity and equality of opportunity for people with disabilities.

We are committed to the Accessibility for Manitobans Act and its customer service regulation. This policy reflects its ongoing practices and measures of the eight requirements of the Customer Service Standard. Any current or future policy or practice not respecting and promoting the principles of dignity,

independence, integration and equal opportunity for people with disabilities, will be reviewed, modified or removed.

## **Practices or procedures**

### 1. Communication and information

To determine the barrier, we ask the customer what method of communication works.

We communicate with people disabled by barriers in ways that take into account the nature of the barrier.

#### Practices

- Have patience and find a quieter space if required.
- Have easy to read fonts and plain language documents.
- Have paper and pen available if required.
- All publications will include, “This publication is available in alternate formats upon request.”
- Signage or verbal greeting will begin with “How can we help?”
- The website will include documents in alternate formats with large print and alternative text (alt tags) if required.

### 2. Assistive devices

People with disabilities may use their personal assistive devices when accessing our goods, services or facilities.

In cases where the assistive device presents significant and unavoidable health or safety concerns, we will attempt to use other measures to ensure the person with a disability can access our goods, services or facilities.

Practices:

- Staff is trained and familiar with the various assistive devices that we provide to customers to ensure access to our goods, services or facilities.
- Training includes appropriate interaction of staff with customers using assistive devices. For example, staff will not touch or move assistive devices without customer's permission.

### 3. Support persons

We welcome customers accompanied by a support person.

Practices:

- There is no charge extra for support persons. or,
- If there is a fee for a support person, we will notify customers in advance.
- Training includes appropriate interaction of staff with customers accompanied by support persons. For example, staff will address the customer, unless requested to do otherwise.

### 4. Service animals

We are committed to meeting the requirements of Manitoba's Human Rights Code and welcome customers accompanied by service animals.

The Human Rights Code (Manitoba) defines a service animal to be "an animal that has been trained to provide assistance to a person with a disability that relates to that person's disability."

A service animal can often be identified through visual indicators, such as its harness or vest, or through the assistance it is providing. In some cases, a person's disability may prevent the individual from maintaining physical control of the animal. Then, the person is expected to maintain control of the animal through voice, signal or other means.

## Practices

- When it is not easy to identify if an animal is a service animal, staff may ask:
  1. Is the animal assisting you?
  2. What assistance has the animal been trained to provide related to your disability?
- If another law prohibits service animals, we will explain why the animal is excluded and discuss with the customer another way of providing goods and services.

Complete only if applicable: Service animals are prohibited from the following areas...
- Staff will not pet, feed or play with a service animal without permission of its handler.
- Training ensures staff understands the rights of persons accompanied by service animals.

## 5. Maintain Barrier Free Access

We are committed to maintaining barrier free access to our goods and services.

## Practices

We maintain barrier free access and ensure accessible features are available as intended by:

- keeping hallways, ramps and waiting meeting rooms clear of clutter such as boxes.
- keeping entranceways cleared of snow and ice.
- ensuring the placement of standing signage is not a tripping hazard.
- allowing space for mobility devices.

## 6. Notice of temporary disruption

In the event of a planned or unexpected disruption of services or facilities affecting customers disabled by barriers, we will promptly post notices and, when possible, announce the disruption. A clearly posted notice or announcement will include information about the reason for the disruption, its anticipated length of time, and a description of alternative facilities or services, if available.

Services/Facilities that are affected by this policy include [List services/facilities]

- accessible washroom
- elevator
- automatic doors

#### Practices

The notice will be publicly available in the following ways:

- posted on website  posted at entrance
- announced on intercom
- immediately explained by service provider
- time line given if known

#### 7. Feedback process

We welcome feedback on how we provide accessible customer service. Customer feedback will help us identify barriers and respond to concerns.

#### Practices

Customers can provide feedback in the following ways:

[List ways to provide feedback]

- email ○ phone
- visit reception desk ○  
Website

We will provide customers accessible feedback formats and communication supports on request.

All feedback is directed to the (position title or department).

- There is an immediate response regarding the receipt of feedback.
- Customers can expect to hear back in [number] of days (weeks).

## 8. Training

All staff receive training on accessible customer service and new employees are trained within [timeframe] after being hired.

Training includes:

- the purpose of The Accessibility for Manitobans Act and the requirements of the Customer Service Standard
- the policies and actions related to the Customer Service Standard
- how to interact and communicate with people disabled by barriers, including persons who use an assistive device or require the assistance of a service animal or a support person
- what to do if a person with a disability is having difficulty in accessing our goods, services or facilities

If there are any changes to our accessible customer service policies, we will inform and train staff.

### **Making public events accessible: (optional for business and non-profit)**

Although only a requirement for the public sector, all organizations could benefit from a policy or practice that assures easy access for everyone at the organization's meetings and public events

Practices

Public events are accessible by

- announcing events in a manner that is accessible.
- holding event(s) in accessible meeting places.
- inviting requests for relevant disability accommodations.



**For more information contact:**

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**Available in alternate formats, upon request.**

**Visit [www.AccessibilityMB.ca](http://www.AccessibilityMB.ca) to learn more.**

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