
Improving Accessible Customer Service Standards – 2024 Initial Recommendations

Deadline for Feedback is January 9, 2025

Proposed recommendations for accessible customer service standards

Overview

Throughout its review and discussions, the committee agreed that developing and implementing customer service standards requires a holistic approach. The proposed recommendations work together to prevent and remove barriers to accessibility. The committee also acknowledged the impact of other accessibility standards, which overlap and intersect with the customer service standards. The committee considered multiple solutions and tactics as it developed its recommendations, including practical, non-regulatory measures, such as enhanced partnerships, education and guidance for obligated organizations.

The committee considered the following factors as it developed its proposed recommendations:

- the issue, gap or barrier that needed to be addressed
- the evolving accessibility landscape (for example, new and emerging technologies and jurisdictional laws)
- the intended goal and impact of its recommendations
- how the recommendation aligned with existing AODA standards, as well as with the *Ontario Human Rights Code*
- the most appropriate tool to implement the proposed recommendation (for example, regulatory, non-regulatory or both)
- whether progress of the recommendation can be measured to assist obligated organizations with implementation

Implementation timelines

Throughout its discussions, the committee acknowledged the importance of allowing time and flexibility for government to consider and implement the recommendations, balancing the imperative for change with the need to allow organizations time to prepare for changes to their requirements.

Given this, the committee recommends that all non-regulatory recommendations, such as those related to guidance materials, tools and resources, be implemented within 18 months, while all recommendations that are regulatory in nature be implemented within three years.

Recommendation 1: establishment of accessibility policies

The requirements for the establishment of accessibility policies are stated in both the general requirements (section 3) and the customer service standards (section 80.46) of the IASR. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

- the general requirements and the customer service standard include duplicative requirements for the establishment of accessibility policies
- there is currently no requirement for organizations to review or update their existing policies, which can leave them inconsistent or outdated over time
- confusion often arises when an organization's goods, services and/or facilities are regulated under different jurisdictional laws (for example, the banking industry)

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. Government, Ontario Legislative Assembly, broader public sector and small private organizations' policies should be reviewed, updated and renewed in line with their existing compliance reporting periods:
 - a. Large organizations, specifically, should review their policies yearly.
 - b. All organizations should write their policies in plain language with templates or best practices provided by government in collaboration with umbrella organizations.
2. When creating or reviewing their accessibility policies, organizations should review their other existing bylaws and policies to reflect the IASR requirements, where applicable.
3. Government should provide guidance on key areas that can be looked at from an accessibility lens when organizations are reviewing their policies (for example, the Smart Serve template).
4. Streamline existing requirements for making information available to the public:
 - a. Create a checklist document that highlights all the requirements that need to be publicly posted (feedback process, policies, etc.).
 - b. Amend the IASR to require information to be included in an organization's publicly posted accessibility policies.
5. Clarity is required around application and implementation in instances where an organization's goods, services and/or facilities are regulated under different jurisdictional laws (for example, banking sector, food premises).
6. Update the language in the customer service standards from "equal" to "equitable" to reflect the different needs of people with disabilities.

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7. The Customer Service Standards Development Committee is in agreement with the Information and Communications Standards Development Committee [recommendation 6](#) and, for clarity, proposes amending “in a timely manner” to “in a mutually agreed upon timely manner which considers the circumstances of the requester, and the urgency of his or her request”.
8. Organizations’ policies to include a statement of commitment affirming they fully comply with the provisions of the customer service standards to ensure their goods, services or facilities are barrier-free and provide full and equitable opportunities for persons with disabilities to freely access them, based on the aforementioned checklist.

Recommendation 2: accessible training

The requirements for accessible training are stated in both the general requirements (section 7) and the customer service standards (section 80.49) of the IASR. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

- both the general requirements and the customer service standards include training requirements, which may lead to confusion for organizations about their obligations around accessible customer service as it relates to training their staff
- under the IASR, training is not required to be renewed, which may lead staff to forget about their responsibilities
- businesses may have outdated training that may unintentionally create additional barriers and confusion for staff

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. Disseminate accessibility considerations and compliance information for businesses at the point of the licensing/registration process (for example, Ministry of Public and Business Service Delivery single window for business). For example, create a checklist of accessibility considerations of which new organizations should be aware.
2. Government to create guidance templates, training modules and resources for employers and businesses that include industry-specific information:
 - a. Training modules targeted at the use of service animal accommodation.
 - b. Templates that reflect the size of the organization and the requirements applicable to them.
 - c. Government to work with umbrella organizations to develop sector-specific training modules and resources.
 - d. Templates, training modules and resources to include how attention to accessibility in general and customer service accessibility in particular benefits organizations and businesses.

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3. Training is mandatory for all employees, volunteers and contractors and has to be reviewed, updated and delivered as required, every 2 to 3 years or sooner to keep up with best practices and as regulations/legislation change.
4. All postsecondary education institutions should offer a mandatory accessibility course for graduating students before they enter the labour market.

Recommendation 3: accessibility plans

The requirements for accessibility plans are stated in the general requirements (section 4) of the IASR. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

- the frequency required to update and revise Multi-Year Accessibility Plans (MYAPs)
- how to build additional accountability and transparency into accessibility plans
- the need for guidance and resources to support obligated organizations in developing their MYAPs
- potential confusion between MYAP requirements and requirements for establishing accessibility policies (section 3)

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. Require updates to the MYAP every 4 years (instead of 5 years).
2. Large organizations should develop and publish progress reports of measures taken to implement the strategy referenced in the MYAP (show achievements, approved budgets, etc.) every 2 years. Organizations with less than 50 employees are exempt.
3. The organizations' plans/policies should include how they will respond to feedback, how they will advise the public about notices of service disruptions and how they will respond to requests for accessible formats and communication supports.
4. The MYAPs should include information on how an organization will measure and track against its MYAP commitments.
5. Government to develop guidance templates and tools that assist organizations in developing MYAPs.

Recommendation 4: feedback process required

The requirements for providing an accessible public feedback process are stated in the customer service standards (section 80.50) of the IASR. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

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- duplication between this requirement and the feedback requirements under the information and communications standards (section 11 of the IASR)
- key differences between Ontario’s accessible public feedback requirements and those of other jurisdictions
- organizational approaches to prioritizing and addressing customer feedback
- guidance materials to assist organizations in establishing an accessible public feedback process

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. Government should reorganize the feedback process requirements across the IASR (for example, section 11) under general requirements for its broad application.
2. Organizations should be required to prioritize a response based on severity (for example, feedback or complaint related to surgery or urgent care).
3. Organizations should be required to:
 - specify more clarity around their feedback process – timeframe for providing a response and outlining what a member of the public can expect as feedback moves through an organization’s internal process (this needs to be included and described in their policies or plans)
 - provide an overview of how they determine and prioritize feedback based on severity of input
 - better advertise their feedback process, make it known there is one in place and accept feedback through multiple avenues as available (for example, social media messages, emails, phone calls, etc.)
 - have an accessible feedback process that considers the needs and intersectionality of their customers (for example, type of disability/digital literacy)
4. Government to develop more tools and guidance to assist organizations in setting up an accessible feedback process and responding to feedback.

Recommendation 5: format of documents

The requirements for the format of documents are stated in the customer service standards (section 80.51) of the IASR. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

- duplication between this requirement and requirements for accessible formats and communication supports, and accessible websites and web content, under the information and communications standards of the IASR
- the opportunity to endorse and build upon existing recommendations from the information and communications standards development committee

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- the need to build in “timeliness” in meeting requests for accessible formats
- educational supports, such as training and awareness tools

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. Streamline the requirements for accessible formats across the IASR (for example, from section 12) into one place, that is the general requirements section, to make it clear that section 14 (accessible websites and web content) under the information and communications standards is a baseline for websites and that the public can request alternate formats of anything based on section 12, including information on the website over and above Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).
2. Public sector organizations to proactively provide American Sign Language and Langue des signes québécoise (ASL/LSQ) when delivering emergency-related information.
3. Further to the Information and Communications Standards Development Committee’s recommendation, public sector organizations and large organizations should have conversion-ready digital formats available to make response to requests faster.
4. Government, in collaboration with large umbrella organizations, to support small business to comply with the requirement outlined in the recommendation above, by:
 - developing educational supports (videos, guidebooks, training)
 - exploring grant and funding opportunities to assist small business in being compliant
5. Further to the Information and Communications Standards Development Committee’s recommendation, timelines for provision of formats should be reasonable and agreed upon by both parties and government should publish guidance for reasonable timelines of various types of formats. In addition, the Customer Service Standards Development Committee agrees with the Information and Communications Standards Development Committee’s recommendation that a process/Ombudsman/mediator should be created to resolve minor disagreements under the AODA that do not necessarily rise to the level of a Human Rights complaint.
6. Organizations to identify in their MYAP, their plans and processes for requesting alternate formats and the expected timelines (aligned with guidance from government where it exists). Their MYAP should report in the aggregate requests that were made and responded to.

Recommendation 6: procuring or acquiring goods, services or facilities

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The requirements for procuring or acquiring goods, services or facilities are stated in the general requirements (section 5) of the IASR. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

- in addition to procurement-related requirements spread across the general requirements, there are also procurement requirements in the information and communications standards (sections 15 and 18)
- recommendations from the past legislative reviewers and standards development committees around accessible procurement
- the development of federal accessibility standards for procurement and the opportunity for alignment

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. The Ontario government to align all procurement-related recommendations across IASR (particularly in information and communications standards) and in one section under general requirements.
 - a. Specific to information communication technology, leverage existing mechanisms (for example, Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT)) to meet accessibility requirements.
 - b. Align with the [Information and Communications Standards Development Committee's recommendation 14](#) and include VPAT in that list.
2. The Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility to create more definitions, templates, guidelines, checklists, frequently asked questions documents, videos and other tools to help organizations implement accessible procurement requirements and ensure organizations incorporate Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility (IDEA) principles.
3. The Ontario government to monitor Accessibility Standards Canada (ASC) and the Accessible Procurement Resource Centre (APRC) projects underway to evaluate changes to procurement standards and leverage opportunities to inform procurement standards, emphasizing the importance of Federal-Provincial-Territorial collaboration.
4. The government should establish a strategy and process to ensure that its funding does not erect new barriers or perpetuate old ones. This monitoring process should cover capital or infrastructure spending, procurement of goods, services or facilities, transfer payments to public sector partners, business development grants or loans and research grants. All organizations, projects and purchases should be screened for compliance and accessibility before funding is approved.
5. The Ontario government to study the utilization of artificial intelligence and its implications for accessibility standards.
6. Encourage universal accessibility/design in procurement programs.
7. Small organizations should consider accessibility in their procurement processes.

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8. Define practicability similarly to section 14 (6) from the information and communications standards and make it clear how it works alongside undue hardship in Ontario's *Human Rights Code*. For example:
 - a. An organization with significant resources may be required to fund the creation of a new product or service that does not currently exist up to the point of undue hardship.
 - b. An organization cannot use cost to avoid procuring a product or service that exists.
9. Require details of procurement processes within MYAPs and Annual Status Reports.

Recommendation 7: notice of temporary disruptions

The requirements for notice of temporary disruptions are stated in the customer service standards (section 80.48) of the IASR. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

- the impact of changing technology on how organizations can most effectively communicate temporary disruptions
- planned versus unplanned disruptions, how they are communicated and their respective impacts on people with disabilities
- challenges for verifying compliance with these requirements

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. Large organizations should keep a record of the various ways notices of disruptions are communicated and include it in their status report every 2 years.
2. Obligated organizations should publicize their notices of temporary disruptions through all appropriate means, such as websites, social media, emails, etc.
3. Organizations to describe in their plan or policy how they will be achieving compliance with current and future requirements related to notices of disruptions.
4. When organizations receive information requests, the information is to be provided in an accessible format that is appropriate to the individual's disability.
5. For planned disruptions, organizations should have in place alternative facilities or services prior to the planned disruption and communicate them publicly as far in advance as possible. For unplanned disruptions, organizations should comply with these requirements as soon as possible.
6. Government, in collaboration with organizations, to develop and/or share across all sectors best practice documents on notices of disruptions.

Recommendation 8: self-service kiosks

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The requirements for self-serve kiosks are found in section 6 of the general requirements section of the IASR. Since the IASR was enacted in 2011, self-service kiosks have become a much more significant part of everyday life with emerging technologies such as self-check outs, automated point-of-sale terminals and public transit ticketing terminals, to name a few. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

- the need to integrate section 6 (self-service kiosks) with section 5 (procuring or acquiring goods, services and facilities) as the latter also provides general guidance on procuring goods, which overlap with requirements for kiosks
- the need to expand requirements beyond the Government of Ontario, Legislative Assembly and Designated Public Sector to ensure service kiosks are accessible more broadly
- the importance of alignment with any future federal accessibility requirements, given the impact these would have on federally regulated sectors such as banking or airlines

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. Government to add an explicit section on self-service kiosks, under the existing procurement requirements under section 5 of the IASR (procuring or acquiring goods, services or facilities) in order to streamline requirements.
2. The private sector shall comply with accessibility requirements relating to providing accessible kiosks under section 6(1). These are to be implemented in the same way as the design of public spaces standards and Building Code changes (that is, on a go-forward basis on major renovations and new builds).
3. Refer issue to the Design of Public Spaces Standards Development Committee to consider the design and definition of kiosks beyond the issue of counter height, to include the physical environment of the kiosk (for example, gap pumps, ticket machines, room size, space for a wheelchair, etc.).
4. Government to produce guidelines:
 - a. on accessible kiosks and features that should be covered and addressed.
 - b. in alignment with potential federal guidelines for manufacturers.

Recommendation 9: the use of service animals

The requirements for the use of service animals are stated in the customer service standards (section 80.47) of the IASR. These requirements were updated and expanded during the first review of the customer service standards in 2016. Since that time, service animals have been a growing area of interest to the public, businesses and people with disabilities. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

- the continued barriers experienced by people with disabilities when accessing establishments and services with a service animal

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- challenges experienced by organizations in understanding their obligations and when it's appropriate to ask for proof of documentation
- competing rights and obligations under the *Ontario Human Rights Code* as it relates to the duty to accommodate and the right to refusal of a service animal (for example, ride sharing)
- confusion between requirements for guide dogs under the *Blind Persons' Rights Act, 1990* and service animal requirements under the AODA
- lack of consistency in the information provided in the documentation written by a regulated health professional
- stakeholder feedback from other standards development committees' recommendations (for example, education and health)

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. Government to develop training tools or a toolkit for organizations to train their staff when interacting with people using service animals:
 - These are to include education supports, resources templates, checklists and adaptable resources. Government to work with umbrella organizations when developing these resources.
 - Greater understanding to be provided for why this training is needed, all possible and potential circumstances for why an animal might not be allowed on premises (due to religion, allergies, infection control) or excluded (due to provincial laws or municipal bylaws).
 - Government should partner with stakeholders to create specific educational material for that sector, including stakeholders whose operations prohibit animals on their premises.
 - Create educational resources around the interplay of the AODA with other laws regarding service animals (for example, municipal bylaws), on Ontario's *Human Rights Code* guidelines, as well as share best practices.
 - The training should make it clear on how and when staff can ask patrons for the appropriate documentation in order to then provide them with the appropriate supports.
2. Government to develop a template to be completed by a regulated health professional to document an individual's need for a service animal (similar to an accessible parking permit). This form is to be accompanied by an information sheet of instructions to clarify the purpose of this form. The template should include:
 - a. formal letterhead or provincial government logo
 - b. space for confirmation from the regulated health professional who completes the form, along with their college identification, credentials if relevant
 - c. emergency contact for the person and for the service animal

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3. Work with the healthcare industry, hospitals, paramedics on protocols on how to deal with service animals being transported or received with their incapacitated owners.
4. This Customer Service Standards Development Committee supports and endorses the [Health Care Standards Development Committee's recommendation](#) that states that there should be no restrictions for persons with disabilities requiring the accompaniment of a support person or service animal when accessing health care, especially during emergency situations.
5. Government will work with the 9 regulated health colleges to better understand the code of practice and standards in order to achieve clearer and harmonized understanding for all the regulated health professions, definition and role they have in offering a letter for support for service animals.
6. Government to add the following sentence in the IASR to empower organizations: "If it is not objectively apparent to a business or organization whether an animal is a service animal (for example, endangering the health of other people or due to its behaviour), the business or organization can ask the handler to provide documentation as required at law."
7. Ensure alignment with federal government standards as they are released in order to reduce confusion and work towards a seamless experience across jurisdictions.
8. Ride share service providers, such as taxi drivers and vehicle-for-hire service drivers, are to inform and provide proof to the businesses for which they work of any limitations to providing rides to service animal owners based on code-protected grounds.
 - **Note:** this may entail extending requirements to sole proprietors depending on how a ride share company is structured, which should be possible under the application of the AODA's provision of 'persons providing goods, service, or facilities'
9. Ride share companies must ensure that the process for onboarding drivers requires them to identify in advance any code-protected grounds they would have to not transport one or all types of service animal. They must then ensure trips with those animals are not assigned to those drivers.
10. Ride share companies must provide the opportunity for individuals who use service animals to identify themselves in advance (for example, as part of signing up or developing a customer profile). Only those drivers protected under the *Ontario Human Rights Code* should be exempt from having to pick up individuals who use service animals.
11. Government to conduct a refreshed outreach and education campaign to communicate all changes above if and when they become effective.

Recommendation 10: the use of support persons

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The requirements for the use of support persons are stated in the customer service standards (section 80.47) of the IASR. The requirements are intended to ensure that organizations permit a person with a disability who is accompanied by a support person on their premises without adding any additional barriers. In developing its proposed recommendation, the committee considered the following issues:

- understanding obligations under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, particularly as it relates to undue hardship on the part of the organization
- lack of guidance for organizations on how to work with individuals to determine whether they can be accommodated without the use of a support person
- consideration of whether organizations should bear the cost (wages and other fees) of the support person if the requirement was determined by the organization
- the need for jurisdictional alignment in support person policies

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. The Ontario government to continue working with the federal government (for example, through the existing Memorandum of Understanding agreement with Accessibility Standards Canada) to support consistent requirements for support persons regardless of jurisdiction.
2. Upon receipt of a reasonable request, organizations must provide ASL/LSQ interpretation up to the point of undue hardship when other methods of communication do not meet the needs of the person requesting the accommodation. It must be clarified that ASL/LSQ is a “communication support” as defined in the legislation.
3. A support person accompanying a person with a disability who is accessing provincially owned goods, services or facilities (for example, transportation) should not be charged an admission fee or fare.
4. Fees are to be waived for a support person accompanying a person with a disability, if a note from a regulated health professional is provided stating that a support person is required to access goods, services and facilities.
5. Organizations must make best efforts to explore alternative measures for accommodation before imposing the requirement of a support person and be required to consult with the person with a disability.
6. An organization may only require a person with a disability to be accompanied by a support person where it is determined that no other reasonable accommodation measures will allow the individual to access the goods, services or facilities provided by the organization. Where that is the case, the organization must pay the fees and wages for the support person to the point of undue hardship.
7. The Ontario government should partner with the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) to produce plain language training materials on the

procedural duty to accommodate the need for a support person under both the AODA and OHRC and include this as mandatory training under the IASR.

Recommendation 11: purpose, application and definitions; scope and interpretation

As the customer service standards became the first accessibility standards in regulation under the AODA in 2008, they preceded the creation of IASR in 2011 as a stand-alone regulation. Following the review of the accessible customer service standards in 2016, these requirements, including its scope, interpretation and definitions sections, were merged into the IASR, which resulted in redundancies. As a result, the committee spent a considerable amount of time reviewing these sections for duplication and gaps with the goal of better streamlining requirements.

The committee proposes the following recommendation:

1. The “customer service standards” should be renamed “the design and delivery of accessible programs and services standards” to align with language used by other jurisdictions, including federal.
2. Definitions under customer service standards section 1 (scope and interpretation) are to be moved and merged with definitions under general requirements.
3. The definition of a service animal should include emotional support animals and provide examples of different types of service animals. The requirement to carry documentation for service animals should also apply to emotional support animals.

Conclusion

The initial recommendations developed by the committee are intended to address customer service barriers to accessibility that people with disabilities may encounter throughout their everyday life while accessing services, goods or facilities. The committee looks forward to the public feedback that will follow the posting of these initial recommendations. All input will be considered by the committee before final recommendations are made and submitted, as per the requirements of the AODA, to the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility, for consideration.