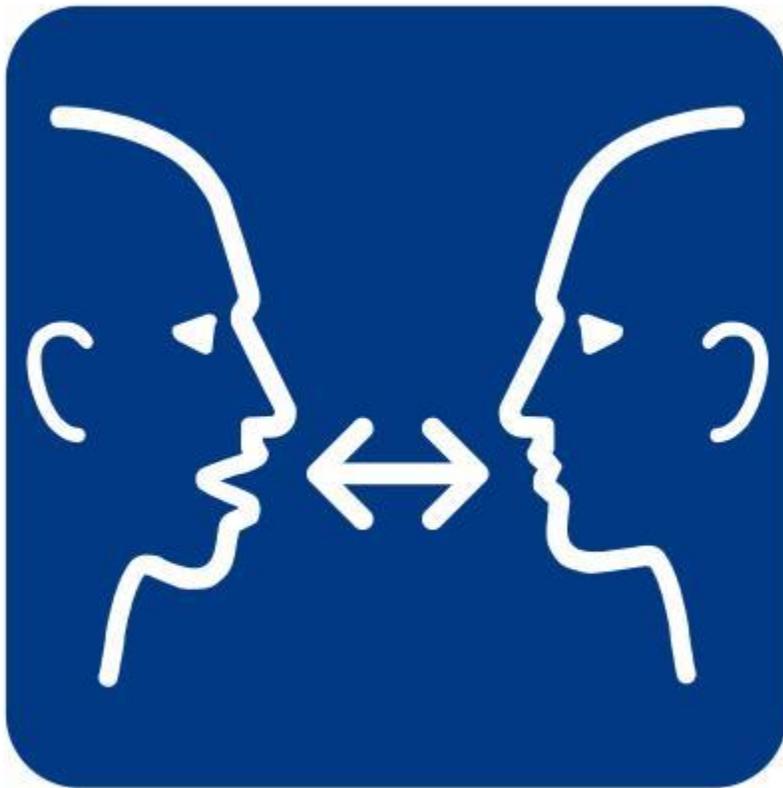


Accessible Communication

Guidelines for making services accessible for people who have disabilities that affect their communication



Communication Disabilities Access Canada

This document is intended for businesses, private, public and non-profit organizations and government services. It is useful for managers, front-line staff and policy makers who are responsible for providing face-to-face and telephone customer services, hosting meetings and events, and communicating information in any way to and from the public. In this document, we provide general suggestions on ways to make services accessible for people who have speech, language and communication disabilities that are not primarily caused by significant hearing or vision impairments.

We recommend that you connect with The Canadian Hearing Society, The Canadian Association of the Deaf and The Canadian National Institute for the Blind for information on accessibility for people who are culturally Deaf, oral deaf, or deafened, hard of hearing or who are blind or partially sighted. Contact the Canadian Deafblind Association for information about people who are deaf and blind.

The booklet accompanies the CDAC webinars and courses that are available online at <http://courses.cdacanada.com> and our website resources at <http://www.communication-access.org>.



Communication Disabilities Access Canada (CDAC) is a national, non-profit organization with charitable status. CDAC promotes accessibility, inclusion and human rights for people who have speech and language disabilities. For information about CDAC, our projects, resources and courses go to <http://www.cdacanada.com>

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Background

Being able to communicate is something many of us take for granted. Speaking and understanding, reading and writing are skills that most of us use every day. We communicate to express our feelings, thoughts and opinions, to ask questions, to get things we need and to give information to others. We communicate with lots of people and for many different reasons. For example, we might ask for things we want in a store; discuss our medical concerns with a doctor; order a meal in a restaurant; interact with a bank teller about our finances or call a taxi company to book a ride. Communication is fundamental to getting all goods and services in our community whether that is through face-to-face interactions, writing, online or communicating over the telephone.

Without effective communication we cannot access businesses and organizations.

In Canada, there are approximately 440,000 people who have speech and language disabilities that are not caused by Deafness or significant hearing loss. They may have cerebral palsy, cognitive disability, traumatic brain injury, aphasia, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis or other conditions.

Like everyone, people who have disabilities that affect their communication, have the right to access your services. They cannot be discriminated against, denied or given inferior services because they have a disability. Their rights to equal access to goods and services are protected by:

- The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982)
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)
- Federal, provincial and territorial human rights codes and accessibility laws

The basis of all good communication includes a respectful attitude and being a good listener. These skills are more important than ever for people who have disabilities that affect how they understand what people are saying or express themselves. In addition, they may require you to do some things differently so that both of you can effectively communicate with each other.

Accessible Communication

We all need to make sense of information and to be able to express them when using services. It is frustrating if we don't understand information given to us, or if we can't get our message across to a service provider. People who have disabilities that affect their communication can face daily and significant challenges when communication breaks down.

Fortunately, there are things that people who work in organizations can do to make their services communication accessible, so that everyone can:

- Understand information given to them
- Communicate effectively in-person and over the telephone
- Use the communication methods they think are best for them
- Read and understand written information
- Complete forms, take notes and sign forms
- Navigate and use the organization's website and social media
- Communicate and participate at meetings, forums and public events

Disabilities That Affect Communication

Disabilities that affect communication can occur in one or more of the following areas:

- Speaking
- Understanding what others are saying
- Reading and writing

Some of the main types of disabilities affect communication include:

Hearing: For people who are deaf or have a hearing loss it can be difficult or impossible to hear what a person is saying and sometimes their own speech may not be easily understood.

Movement: People who have disabilities such as cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis may have difficulty moving their muscles to speak, use gestures, turn pages in a book and write.

Cognition: People who have intellectual disabilities from birth or acquire brain injuries or dementia or Alzheimer's disease later in life can have difficulty remembering, learning, understanding, or problem-solving that can make communication challenging.

Language: People who have aphasia after a stroke or accident may have difficulty understanding others, speaking, reading and writing. The experience of aphasia is similar to being in a foreign country where you know what you want, but you have problems understanding others or expressing yourself.

In addition to having communication challenges, people can have multiple disabilities. People who are deafblind have limited hearing and vision. They are unable to use these senses to receive communication. People who have cerebral palsy, may be unable to speak, walk or physically manipulate objects. People who have autism spectrum disorder may experience challenges learning and using language, as well as interacting with other people.

Regardless of the cause of the disability, people who have disabilities that affect their communication are individuals and they communicate in their own, unique ways.

They can also communicate more effectively when they are given appropriate communication supports.

[Click here for more information about disabilities that can affect communication.](#)

Communication Methods

People communicate in different ways because of the type of disability they have, as well as their personality, preferences, needs, skills and access to clinical services and device funding. Most individuals use a variety of ways to communicate. Some ways that people communicate include:

- Speech
- Body language, facial expressions and gestures
- Pointing or looking at objects and people
- Sign Languages (e.g. American Sign Language, Langue des signes Quebécoise, Signed Exact English, and Adapted Sign Language)
- Writing, typing or drawing
- Spelling on a letter board
- Pointing to pictures, symbols and/or written words on a communication display
- Using a communication device

[Click here for more information](#)

Communication Barriers

People, who have disabilities that affect their communication, can experience a range of barriers when accessing goods and services in their communities. They report that people often:

- Ignore them, and speak to the person with them
- Underestimate their abilities to make their own decisions
- Speak about them as if they are invisible
- Assume they cannot hear or understand what they are saying
- Restrict them to answering yes and no questions rather than letting them use their communication boards or devices
- Pretend to understand their messages when they don't

In addition, service providers may not give them:

- The time they need to communicate
- Information in ways they can read and understand
- The supports they need to communicate at meetings, and public events or in critical situations such as healthcare, police, legal and justice services

[Click here for communication barriers that may occur in your service sector](#)

People Who Need Communication Supports

People have communication support needs if they need assistance to understand, express themselves or interact with others. It may not always be obvious that a person has a communication support need.

They may:

- Speak in a way that is hard for you to understand
- Communicate in a way that is unfamiliar to you
- Have difficulty communicating exactly what they want to express
- Show you a card or tell you they have a disability that affects their communication
- Look confused, shrug or gesture that they don't understand
- Defer to someone to answer for them
- Answer in ways that suggest they may not have heard or understood what you said
- Give inaccurate, irrelevant, unclear or rambling answers to questions

Communicating in Face-to-Face Situations

When you meet a person who may have a disability that affects their communication:

- Treat the person with respect by saying “hello”. Make eye-contact.
- Talk directly to the person, not just the individual who might be with them.
- Speak naturally and clearly, using your normal tone, volume and rate.
- Ask what you can do to make communication go smoothly. People who communicate in different ways are the experts on how they communicate and what they want you to do.
- Do not underestimate the person’s abilities.
- Be patient. Do not rush the conversation.
- Wait for the person to finish their message. Do not guess unless the person gives you permission to do so.
- If it isn’t obvious how the person communicates, ask them to show you how they communicate “Yes” and “No”. Use “Yes” and “No” questions to find out how the person wants to communicate with you.
- Always politely tell the person if you do not understand their message.

If the person uses a letter or picture board

- If it is not obvious, say, “Please show me how you communicate.” The person will either demonstrate or show you their communication instructions. These instructions are usually on the person’s communication board or on the person’s wheelchair tray if they use one.
- If the person uses their hand to point to items on a board, say the letter, word or picture out loud that they select.
- If the person uses a way other than pointing, such as an eye gaze to select items on his/her communication board, they probably have someone with them to assist you communicating with them.
- It often helps to write down the items that the person selects so that you can keep track of the message.
- If the items that the person selects do not make immediate sense, try putting the words together into a sentence.

If the person uses a communication device

- Stand or sit in front of the person. Do not look over their shoulder or ask how they use the device.
- Wait for the person to construct their message.
- If you don't understand the speech, tell the person and they will either repeat it or indicate that you can read the screen.

If the person's speech is difficult to understand

- Watch the person as they speak.
- Move to a quiet area with no distractions.
- Take the time to get used to the person's speech. It gets easier the more you listen and the person may need to repeat what they are saying a few times before you understand.
- Tell the person if you don't understand what they are saying. The person will either say it another way, show you what they are talking about, spell it out verbally, write it down, use a communication device or point to letters, words or pictures on their communication board.

If the person has difficulty understanding what you are saying

Some people, not everyone, may have difficulty understanding what you are saying.

People may want you to:

- Use clear, everyday language
- Avoid using unnecessary words, jargon, technical terms and long, ambiguous sentences.
- Pause between your sentences. Allow time for the person to understand or to speak, nod, signal "yes" or use their communication board or device.
- If there is a communication assistant present, this person may rephrase what you are saying or use other strategies to support the individual in understanding what you are saying.
- Show the person what you are talking about by:
 - Using gestures
 - Pointing at objects, people or pictures

- Writing the key words that you are saying
- Drawing a picture or diagram

If the person has a hearing loss

- Make sure the person is looking at you before you start talking and that they can see your mouth.
- Speak normally, do not yell or shout.
- Do not speak too quickly.
- Make sure you well lit – avoid backlighting so the person can see you when speaking.
- Reduce background noise.
- Explore other ways of communicating such as writing, typing or showing examples of what you are talking about.
- Check that the person understands what you are saying.

[Click here for more information from The Canadian Hearing Society \(CHS\)](#)

If the person uses a communication assistant

A communication assistant is an individual who interprets a person's speech if it is unclear or assists a person who uses a communication display or device.

It is important to:

- Ensure that the person who accompanies an individual is authorized to assist them with communication. Once you have confirmed the role, accept the person's messages as conveyed to you by the assistant.
- Speak directly to the individual, not to the assistant.
- Observe the person directing the assistant so that you know they are communicating and approving their messages. If you are unsure about a message, ask the person "Is that what you wanted to communicate?"
- The communication assistant may also help the person understand what is being said to them.

[Click here for videos and more information](#)

Communication Tools

Most people use their own picture, symbol or letter boards and devices to communicate. They typically get these from specialized augmentative and alternative clinics, where clinicians can assist them in selecting and customizing communication systems that meet their needs. People who have communication support needs, do not expect a business, or organization to provide them with a communication device.

However, it is useful to have some basic, non-technical communication tools available such as a black marker, pencil and a note pad. If needed, a person can point to it to tell you to write down what you are saying or that they might want to use it if you don't understand their speech.

Communication Assistance

Some people may require communication assistance when interacting in a group situation, at a meeting, conference, forum or committee or when communicating with a person who does not know how they communicate or in an important situation or when communicating about a complex matter.

A communication assistant can be a family or support staff who is authorized by the person who has a communication disability to support them communicating. However, there may be times, when a person may not have the assistance they need. In these situations, the organization may be required to find and hire an assistant in order to ensure that the person can effectively communicate when using a service.

CDAC provides online training for people who provide communication assistance and has a database of people who are available on an ad hoc basis to provide communication assistance.

[Click here for more information and to access the CDAC communication assistance database.](#)

Appointments

People, who have communication support needs, usually require more time for an appointment because it takes longer for them to communicate. You may want to schedule an extra 15-20 minutes or arrange an appointment at the end of the day so that you can go over the allotted time. When appropriate, it may also be helpful to send the person a list of questions that will be asked during the appointment so that they can prepare their answers ahead of time by writing them out, or programming them into a communication device. If the person needs to follow-up with you after a meeting, discuss whether they will do this via phone, text or email communication.

Telephone Services

Find out how the person wants to communicate with you on the telephone. They might want to use their speech, a device or a communication assistant. Depending on the nature of your services, you may need policies and procedures in place to ensure that the individual with a communication disability has authorized the assistant and that you are speaking to that person over the phone. Alternatively, the person might want to use e-mail, social media, video call, or other text based communications instead of the telephone. Some people may want to use message relay services. People who are Deaf or hard of hearing may want to use a TTY.

[Click here for more information](#)

Reading and Written Information

Whether it is a brochure, an announcement, a note, flyer, booklet, document or a web page, it is important that your information can be read and understood by your intended readers. It is a good idea to use the principles of plain language when producing all your written information, because everyone benefits from understanding your information. Plain language is a style of writing that uses everyday language at approximately a Grade 5 reading level. It uses short, simple words, and sentences that are no longer than 15 words. It avoids unnecessary information, jargon, and terminology and organizes main points of information into short paragraphs, lists and bullets. In addition, plain language has guidelines for the type of font to use as well as size of font, use of color, contrast and

images. There are a number of online resources that provide guidelines for writing plain language documents. In addition, some organizations offer plain language services and will review and make suggestions to make your information easier for people to read.

Some people may require reading materials in alternate formats such as large print, electronic copy, or Braille. Other people may want human assistance to support them to read and understand a written document.

[Click here for more information about making reading materials accessible](#)

Websites

In addition to using Plain Language guidelines to make content and layout of a webpage easy to read and understand, all websites, PDF documents, and social media must comply with the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

[Click here for Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#)

Forms, Note-taking and Signatures

Not being able to physically hold a pen does not mean that a person cannot approve or sign a document. People who cannot write and who understand the meaning of a document may use an alternative mode for signing. Alternatives range from an X, a stamp, a thumb-print, or assistance from an approved person. Depending on the situation, you may want to negotiate a formal arrangement for signatures with the individual.

Make your forms easy to read and understand by following plain language guidelines. Some people will want to complete them on their home computer, especially if they use switches or other alternate access methods. Your forms must comply with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and provide the option to save the document without losing everything, as some people who require communication supports may need to take frequent breaks. Accessible forms should also allow a person to access a spell checker, dictionary and predictive text.

Alternatively, some people will want human assistance to complete a form and take notes.

[Click here for more information for accessible writing](#)

Meetings, Public Events and Workshops

If you organize meetings and events, it is important to offer communication assistance as part of your accessibility options, which may also include sign language interpreting and attendant services. If needed, a person can request a communication assistant. You can find people who may be able to assist by going to the [communication assistance database](#). It is also helpful to give people the agenda ahead of time as they might want to prepare a written message or program what they want to say in their communication device. If you are chairing or moderating an event, make sure you give people the time they need to communicate their messages.

[Click here for more information about accessible meetings](#)

Privacy

Be mindful of the individual's right to privacy. While an individual may use a support person to assist in daily activities, they may not want to share aspects of their personal life with that person or anyone else. It is the person's responsibility to negotiate privacy agreements with their communication assistant. However, in some situations your organization may require a communication assistant to sign an agreement to protect everyone's privacy (e.g. group counseling).

Environment

Use signs that are easily recognized by people and put them in areas that are well lit and can be seen by people who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices. Make sure your workspace is well lit because people who use communication boards and devices need appropriate lighting to see and use their communication systems. It is a good idea to have a quiet area, with no distractions, that you can use so that you can concentrate on communication.

Healthcare Settings

In a healthcare situation, patients who have conditions that affect their communication may require assistance to communicate with healthcare providers. If this is a family member or support staff, it is important to ensure that the patient has authorized them to assist with communication. Every effort must be made to safeguard the patient's autonomy in decision-making about their healthcare. Patients who do not have a way to communicate or who do not have a communication assistant should be referred to a Speech-Language Pathologist. Hospital, healthcare settings and emergency services should have a range of communication boards that people can use. A Speech-Language Pathologist can provide training to staff on how to use these tools and ensure patients have effective ways to communicate.

[Click here for more information on communication tools for healthcare settings](#)

Emergency Situations

The ability to communicate is crucial in the event of emergencies, such as a hurricane, flood, fire, trauma, or loss of electricity. Emergency personnel need to be able to interact with the individuals whom they are rescuing; medical personnel need to get accurate information from those who have been injured; displaced persons need to contact loved ones.

[Click here for communication tools in emergency and disaster situations](#)

Police, Legal and Justice Situations

In police, legal or justice services a Communication Intermediary may be required to support victims, witnesses and accused to make disclosures to police, give testimony in court, and express opinions at legal meetings. Communication Intermediaries are Speech-Language Pathologists with additional training from CDAC to work in these situations. You can find a communication intermediary on the [CDAC database](#).

[Click here for information about access to police, legal and justice situations](#)

Communication Access Symbol

The image here shows two heads facing each other in profile, with ears and eyes. One head has an open mouth as if speaking. There is a two-way arrow going between the heads illustrating a two-way interaction. The image is white on a blue background.



Just as the wheelchair symbol indicates accessibility for people with mobility disabilities, the communication access symbol shows that an organization is prepared to make every effort to make its services accessible for people with disabilities that affect communication.

It shows that communication:

- Involves two or more people
- Is about interaction
- Is about giving, as well as receiving information
- Is about listening and watching

Display the communication access symbol with the caption “Let us know if you have any communication needs when using our service”. If possible, have a low desk section for people who use wheelchairs and signage and it should be at a height that is easily read from the height of a wheelchair.

[Click here to download the communication access symbol](#)

Accessible Communication Checklist

When you meet a person who has a disability that affects their communication, do you:

- Talk respectfully in a normal, tone and volume
- Take time to communicate
- Talk directly to the person, not about them or to the person with them

When communicating, do you:

- Ask the person how they communicate (if it is not obvious)
- Watch and respond to their body language, gestures, pointing to objects, items on a communication display
- Avoid overusing yes and no questions
- Give the person the time they need to communicate
- Ask permission to guess if you think you know what they are communicating
- Tell the person if you do not understand their message and give the person opportunities to repeat or use other ways to communicate their message to you
- Use everyday language if the person has difficulty understanding

When providing telephone services, do you:

- Give extra time to communicate with a person who has unclear speech or uses a device over the telephone
- Provide alternate options for telephone services such as in-person meetings, text, email, Skype and social media
- Have procedures in place for a person to use an authorized communication assistant over the telephone

When hosting appointments, meetings and public forums, do you:

- Provide the agenda ahead of time
- Offer communication assistance as part of your accessibility options (e.g. sign language, communication assistance, attendant services)
- Help find and pay for a communication assistant, if the person does not have someone to assist.
- Offer extra time for an appointment or meeting

When providing written information, and if requested, do you:

- Offer to read and explain documents
- Take notes, write down instructions or appointments
- Assist with filling in forms and / or provide an electronic version of the form
- Give written information in plain language that is easy to read and understand
- Offer alternate formats, such as large print or electronic copies
- Provide an accessible website that complies with the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
- Accept alternate signatures or authorized signers

Does your space have:

- A quiet, well-lit space to communicate
- Low service desks and counters for people in wheelchairs
- Signs that are easy to understand and positioned where people can see them

Does your organization have:

A Go-to person who has taken extra training in communication accessibility

- A person who has a disability that affects communication on your accessibility advisory committee
- A process to train all existing and new staff
- An accessible complaint process
- An accessible process to respond and resolve complaints
- An internal or external organization or person who can advise on how to resolve communication access complaints

Resources

CDAC online courses

<http://courses.cdacanada.com>

Communication Access Resources and Symbol

<http://www.communication-access.org/>

<http://www.communication-access.org/resources/symbol/>

Communication Assistance Database

<Database.cdacanada.com>

Plain Language Guidelines

<https://www.scopeaust.org.au/service/accessible-information/>

Access to Healthcare

<http://www.patientprovidercommunication.org>

<http://www.cdacanada.com/projects/access-to-healthcare/>

Access to Police, Legal and Justice Services

<http://www.access-to-justice.org/>

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

<https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/quickref>

Accessible Forms

<https://doccenter.freedomscientific.com/doccenter/archives/training/accessible-forms-in-word.htm>

Accessible PDF Forms using Adobe Acrobat Pro

<https://www.washington.edu/accessibility/documents/pdf-forms/>

The Canadian Hearing Society

<https://www.chs.ca>

Canadian Deafblind Association

http://www.cdbaontario.com/about/index_e.php

Canadian Deaf Association

http://www.cdbaontario.com/about/index_e.php

Canadian National Institute for the Blind

<https://www.crowdp.ca/en/partners/canadian-national-institute-blind-cnib>

www.cdacanada.com

Contact us for more information

Email: admin@cdacanada.com

[Click here to give us your feedback on this booklet.](#)

