

## **A Town That Anyone Could Call Home**

Our cities, our towns, our neighbourhoods – these are where we build our communities, where we find jobs, where we make friends, where we raise our families. A community truly thrives when everyone who lives and visits there can fully participate and contribute equally.

If people who have disabilities are made to feel as though the services that their community offers are fully open and available to them, the community will never be limited in terms of how it can grow and what kind of businesses and residents it can attract.

On January 1, 2008 a new province-wide standard on accessible customer service for people with disabilities will come into effect in Ontario.

All organizations that provide goods or services to the public, and have at least one employee, will be covered by the standard. This includes private businesses, non-profit organizations, as well as the provincial government and municipal governments, universities, colleges, hospitals, school boards and public transit organizations.

Under the new standard, organizations will be required to:

- Demonstrate a commitment to removing barriers to quality customer service for people with disabilities;
- Train employees and volunteers on how to provide accessible customer service;
- Offer an accessible way for people with disabilities to provide customer feedback and commit to taking action on any complaints;
- Provide information on any service disruption that would prevent accessibility for people with disabilities (e.g. posting signs at the entrance of a building to let customers know that the elevator is temporarily out of service);
- Make information available about the accessibility features of your customer service practices;
- Permit the use of accessibility supports such as service animals, wheelchairs and accessibility support persons;
- Clearly advise customers who require help from a support person, whether or not that support person will be charged a fee for entry if you

are a business that charges admission (e.g. movie theatre, museum, sports facility); and

- Communicate with customers with disabilities in a way in which they can easily understand (e.g. providing a publication in an alternative format, such as audio or Braille).

While the standard comes into effect on January 1, 2008, private businesses and non-profits will have until 2012 to fully comply. However, the provincial government, municipal governments and the broader public sector (hospitals, school boards, colleges, etc.) will have to comply by 2010.

The Town of Huntsville in Ontario's Muskoka district is already well on its way to greater accessibility thanks to a bold suggestion made a few years ago during a town council meeting that Huntsville put in a bid to host the 2006 Ontario Paralympic Games.

When the idea was first put forward, not everyone in town was convinced that their little community had what it took. Despite a booming cottage tourism industry, Huntsville has a population of only 18,000 permanent residents. There was also some local concern that the community wasn't accessible enough to host such an enormous event focused on athletes with disabilities. But, the town came together and the residents committed themselves to learning about accessibility and making changes wherever they could.

When the word came that they had actually won the bid and would indeed host the Ontario Paralympic Games in 2006, it was the beginning of a journey that would change the town forever.

"Practically everybody in town was touched in some way by that event," said Debbie Kirwin, Chair of Huntsville's Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC). "Town staff, politicians, retailers, hotels, community centers, sports venues, even the local high school rose to the challenge and learned about accessibility and made changes."

Today, one year later, the effects of hosting the games continue on. Huntsville is the only town in the district of Muskoka to have audible crossing lights at major intersections. It is also the only town to have an accessible transit system with one bus that even provides door-to-door, on demand service for customers with disabilities. Sixteen designated parking spots are available in town, and they have just passed a new by-law that levies a \$300 fine against anyone misusing accessible parking spaces on private property.

Due to its location nestled in the heart of the Muskoka lakes district, Huntsville relies heavily on a large tourism industry. Kirwin says that the improvements that

they've made in terms of accessibility have also helped to give that sector an extra boost. "We received an email from a woman who uses a wheelchair and was here visiting from Burlington," said Kirwin. "She commented specifically on what a treat it was to come to a town where she could easily get around and shop."

Part of the reason for the enormous success that Huntsville has had with embracing accessibility has come from having hosted the Paralympics, but it also comes from the great co-operative working relationship that exists between the AAC and the town staff and counselors.

The AAC has been monitoring closely the implementation of the AODA, and with the new Accessible Customer Service standard set to come into effect, they are working closely with the town to reach out to retailers and service providers in the area. "The town has provided us with a lot of the tools we need to help the local service industry here," says Kirwin.

The Accessible Customer Service Standard is the first standard to be developed under the government's Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). The act was passed in 2005 with the intention of making Ontario accessible by 2025 through the development of province-wide, enforceable standards on accessibility for people with disabilities.

This is just the first of five standards that the Ontario government is developing under the AODA. Future standards will cover the areas of transportation, information and communications, the built environment, and employment.

For more information on the Accessible Customer Service standard and what it means for you, visit [www.accesson.ca](http://www.accesson.ca)

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