

Planning an Accessible Meeting



Advanced planning may help to ensure that the accommodation needs of people with disabilities are anticipated and acted upon ahead of time. Even when you may not know in advance whether any of your participants may need accommodations, you should be prepared to arrange your meeting or event to be accessible so that everyone can fully participate.

The following guidelines are meant to help you plan your meeting or event.

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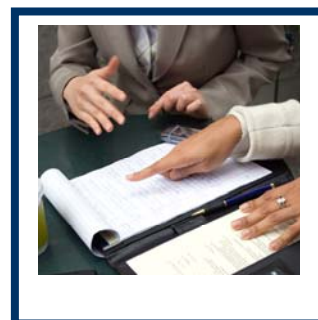
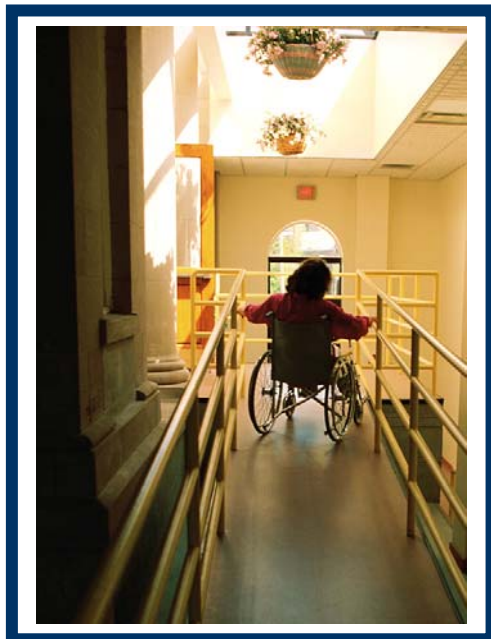
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General Points

Short workshops, information sessions, focus groups, media conferences or events of a few hours in duration may not require the same detailed preparations that lengthy conferences or conventions require, such as determining dietary requirements when planning menus and arranging overnight guest rooms. However, many of the same pre-event planning steps apply to both.

These guidelines reflect an optimal level of accessibility. Some facilities may not meet all of the criteria. If you are in doubt about the level of accessibility at a potential venue, it is recommended that you consult with the Town's Accessibility Advisory Committee who has expertise in barrier-free access and/or meeting planning.

Two important areas need to be considered when arranging accessible meetings – **physical access to the meeting space** and **access to the meeting contents and proceedings**.



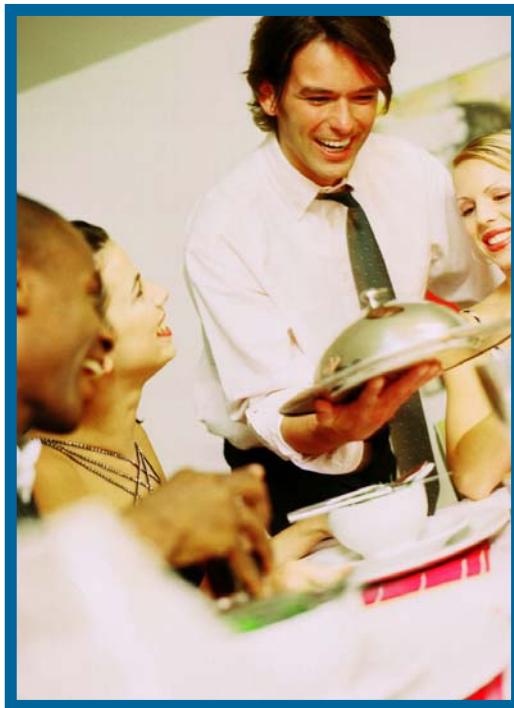
Planning an Accessible Meeting

Here are some general points to think about when planning an accessible event:

- Ensure that a member of your staff is responsible for making the event accessible.
- Be prepared to respond to accommodation requests in the same manner that you respond to other requests and questions about the event.
- Ensure that the invitation or notice of meeting includes information about the accessibility of the event.
- Investigate what local resources are available, for example sign language interpreters, accessible transportation, emergency veterinarians for service animals and wheelchair repair services, when preparing for longer events.
- Schedule sign language interpreters and/or real-time captioners as soon as possible after confirming the date of the event.
- Before confirming the date, find out if other disability-related events are taking place in the area during the same time frame. This may have an impact on your event and availability of service providers.
- If the event's participants are responsible for their own meal arrangements, find out what local restaurants are accessible.
- Investigate the availability of installed or portable FM Listening Systems in meeting facilities for people who have a hearing loss. (The Council Chambers has an FM system installed).
- Investigate the availability of telephones with auditory adjustments for people who have a hearing loss.
- Check to determine whether there are visual fire alarms. If not, inquire about the facility's evacuation plan or create your own.
- Determine the availability of a TTY. Ensure that your staff has been trained on how to use it. A TTY is a device that is used by persons who are deaf and hard of hearing to communicate through telephone lines.
- Ensure that the conference website is available in a format this is accessible to people who use screen readers.
- Ensure there is at least one telephone that can be used by a person who is seated.
- Check to see if the customer service areas (ie. counters, display tables, etc.) are low enough for wheelchair or scooter users to see over.
- Make sure that any additional signs specific to the event are created in large print.
- Determine a suitable relieving area for guide dogs/service animals and provide water bowls.

Choosing the Location

- Plan an on-site visit to the location under consideration in order to determine its level of accessibility before you book your event.
- Determine if the site has been recommended by a credible local disability organization with expertise in barrier-free access.
- Determine the appropriateness of the location through previous successful experiences involving people with disabilities at that venue.
- Inquire about recent renovations or current construction that may have an impact on accessibility.
- Determine whether the staff at the location has been sufficiently trained in disability awareness. If not, arrange for training from a recognized trainer prior to your event.



Exterior Access

Signage

- Ensure that the signs for the street address or building name are clearly visible from the street.
- Check to see that the signs are well lit during evening events.

Parking

- Determine that there are a reasonable number of accessible parking spots available for the estimated number of attendees with disabilities. Arrangements can be made with the owners of the meeting facility to permit additional spaces for designated parking close to the building for the duration of the event.
- Ensure that the designated parking spots for people with disabilities are on a firm, slip-resistant surface and located close to the entrance of the building.
- Determine whether there is a curb cut or level access provided from the parking area to the main entrance.
- Ensure snow removal during winter events.



Sidewalks/Path of Travel

- Determine that there is a barrier-free path of travel from the parking lot or drop off area to the meeting entrance, avoiding stairs, sudden changes in level, slippery or unstable ground, or objects obstructing the path of travel.
- Ensure snow removal from the path of travel during winter events.
- Ramps, if required, should be gradual in slope and have handrails on both sides
- Sidewalks should be clearly separated from the road and driveway for safety reasons.
- For outside events, the Town has portable accessible ramps that can be signed out in 6 and 8 foot lengths. Information can be found on the Town's Event Request Form.

Accessible Transit

- Make certain that the location is serviced by accessible (F.A.S.T.) or parallel transit services.
- Ensure there is a drop-off area available in front of the building. A covered drop off area is preferred.

Interior Access

Entrances and Lobbies

- Make certain that an accessible entrance is available with all doorways wide enough for the passage of a person using a wheelchair or scooter. Access through the main entrance is highly desirable.
- In the case when the main entrance is NOT accessible, ensure there is a clearly visible sign at the front of the building indicating the location of the accessible entrance.
- Check that entrances are well lit and not located in isolated areas.
- Ensure that the door handles are easy to open without individuals having to twist their wrist. Ideally doors should have lever handles and be equipped with an automatic door opener.
- Provide signs indicating where the meeting is taking place within the building.
- Ensure that signs are large enough and clear enough to be read by people with low vision.
- Make sure the signs are mounted at a comfortable height for both people who use wheelchairs and people with low vision.
- Arrange for staff or volunteers to be available at doorways and throughout the facility to direct or assist people with disabilities to the meeting location.

Elevators

- Determine that the elevators are located close to the meeting facilities and are large enough to hold power wheelchair and/or scooter users.
- Ensure there are enough elevators to safely and conveniently transport the number of people using mobility devices attending the session.
- Where lifts must be used, make certain they are safe and easy to operate with enough space to accommodate both wheelchair and scooter users.
- Determine whether Braille buttons and raised numerals have been provided to assist people who are blind or have low vision.
- Check to see that the elevator has a visual cue system in each elevator lobby to alert people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Accessible Washrooms

- Make sure the washroom doors have a raised (tactile) male or female sign or Braille lettering.
- Check to see that washroom doors are equipped with an automatic or push button door opener.
- Ensure the location has washrooms that are large enough to accommodate scooter and power wheelchair users and are equipped with at least one accessible stall.
- Ensure the location has at least one accessible unisex washroom on the same floor as the event. A minimum of five-foot turning radius is needed for wheelchair users to maneuver without restriction.
- Make sure that the faucets are reachable by a person using a wheelchair or scooter and can be operated using one hand.
- Check to see that other washroom accessories and dispensers are within easy reach of a person using a wheelchair or scooter.
- Make certain that the accessible washrooms are located in close proximity to the meeting rooms.

Hallways and Corridors

- Check to see that major hallways and all essential doorways throughout the facility are wide enough to permit the passage of people using wheelchairs or scooters.
- Ensure that all interior doors are easy to open with one hand without twisting the wrist.
- Determine that low pile carpeting, hardwood flooring or tile has been used as the floor finish to ensure that a wheelchair or scooter user can travel easily throughout the facility.

Meeting and Conference Rooms

- It is preferable for the meeting room to be located on the building entry floor.
- Ensure that the boardroom or meeting room is large enough to provide circulation and seating for an adequate or anticipated number of participants who use wheelchairs, scooters, guide dogs or other mobility aids.
- Check to see that accessible seating is available throughout the meeting space.
- Determine that the receptionist/refreshment areas are in an area large enough to provide circulation for participants who use wheelchairs, scooters, guide dogs or other mobility aids.
- Ensure that there is a well-lit space provided for the sign language interpreter when interpreters will be present.
- Check for noise levels (ventilation systems, noise from adjacent rooms, etc.) which may be distracting.
- Check to see that the meeting room has appropriate requirements (drapes, blinds, etc.) to provide reduction of light or glare from windows.
- Ensure that cables, wires and microphones are well secured and do not block traffic.
- Remind guest speakers and exhibitors to be prepared to provide printed handout materials in alternative formats should alternative formats be requested in advance.



Making refreshment and dietary arrangements

- Where beverages are being served, bendable straws and lightweight cups should be made available within easy reach of individuals in wheelchairs or scooters.
- Make available non-sugar (dietary) beverages, juices and water for people with dietary concerns such as diabetes.
- Be aware that self-serve meals or buffets may present obstacles for some people who are visually impaired or people with a physical disability. Well-trained catering service staff can provide assistance to participants who require additional help. If catering staff is not present, ensure that someone is assigned to assist those who need help getting food.
- Check to make sure that an alternative to pastries and cookies, such as fruits or vegetables, are available for people with dietary concerns.
- Provide an opportunity for participants to indicate their dietary needs on any registration form or invitation to an event where meals are being served.

Producing invitations and promotional materials

- Ensure invitations and promotional material about your accessible event are identified with the International Symbol of Accessibility (ISA) and other accessibility symbols.
- Provide invitations in alternate formats for people or organizations that require or request them (ie. Braille, on audiotape, via e-mail, in large print on computer disk).
- The invitation and promotional materials should include a note that asks participants to request any additional requirements they may have in order to fully participate in the meeting or conference.



Ensuring accessible communications

It is important to consider the communication needs of your whole audience when preparing your meeting or conference and accessibility is one important component of your communication plan. However, accessibility to print documents is not the only need you must take into consideration. It is important to make any oral presentation available to people who are deaf through a qualified sign language interpreter. Print materials need to be in formats readily accessible to people who are print disabled.

When preparing for any public event, with or without a disability focus, it is suggested that you:

- Arrange for a sign language interpreter and/or real-time captioner to be present upon request.
- Promote the fact that your materials are available in alternative formats and provide contact information on how to obtain these formats on printed materials.
- Display, and have available for distribution, materials prepared in alternative formats.
- Adjust the numbers of multiple format documents you will need according to the anticipated audience. For example, if the anticipated audience consists of seniors, you may consider producing a greater number of printed materials in large print.
- Respond to specific customer's requests for preferred alternative formats by making post-event production and delivery arrangements if required.

Communication Support Services

Communication support services help people with disabilities access information presented orally at meetings, conferences, and public events. In pre-event planning, each participant should be asked if they require any special accommodations

Sign Language Interpreters

A sign language interpreter is necessary whenever communication is required between deaf and (non-signing) hearing people. Interpreters should be available at events, meetings or presentations attended by people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Real-Time Captioning (also known as CART)

Real-time captioning can make a meeting or presentation accessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing and who may not use sign language. It provides simultaneous (real-time) speech to text translation. A real-time captioner uses a court reporting steno machine, coded to type verbatim text with minimal keystrokes. The steno machine is connected to a laptop containing special software that converts the key strokes and displays the text being spoken for the user to read on an overhead screen or monitor.

Computerized Notetakers

Computerized notetaking is a service that can make a meeting or presentation more accessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. It may also be requested by people with vision disabilities because it allows them to refer to the saved electronic notes afterwards using screen reading software. Notetakers use a laptop computer with a standard keyboard and an overhead screen or monitor. Computerized notetaking is not a verbatim transcript, but summarizes what is spoken while still maintaining accuracy and the spirit and intent of the speaker.

Assistive Listening Systems

An assistive listening system receives a feed from the audio system found in lecture halls or meeting or conference rooms. This communication support makes it easier for people who are hard of hearing to hear and understand speech even from a distance. For example, a wireless FM system, which consists of a transmitter and receiver, can be used with or without a hearing aid.

Intervenors

Intervenors may guide and interpret for people who are deaf-blind. Intervenors are trained in special sign language that involves touching the hands of the client in a two-hand, manual alphabet or finger spelling.

Communication Support Attendants

Communication support attendants help people with intellectual disabilities access information presented orally at meetings, conferences, and public events.

Providing attendant care services

Attendant care services to people with disabilities include assistance with personal care and escorting to community outings. To ensure that adequate arrangements are made, ask the participant prior to the event about the level and type of service required. Clearly describe the specific needs of the participant to the vendor.

Meeting Accessibility Policy of the Canadian Hearing Society

The Canadian Hearing Society (CHS) supports the rights of people who are deaf and hard of hearing and is committed to ensuring accessibility to information communicated during all meetings, workshops, and other communication sessions. It is the CHS policy that any meetings, workshops or other session follow the following guidelines for accessibility and communication. It is the responsibility of the designated chairperson of the meeting to ensure the policy is adhered to and that accessibility issues are prepared for prior to the commencement of the session in question:

Interpreters and Real-Time Captioners/Notetakers

Every session will have sufficient interpreters and/or real-time captioners/notetakers. Which service(s) will be provided will depend on the participant's request. Based on availability, a real-time captioner will be the preference over a notetaker. Presenters must remember that the captioner/notetaker is in a fixed position due to equipment. All equipment must be in good working condition. Should there be any problem with accessibility requirements e.g. interpreters or captioner/notetaker not available, equipment not working, the session will be cancelled. Furthermore, should accessibility requirements falter during the session e.g. equipment stops working, the session will be stopped until the required adjustments are made.

Facilities/Meeting Flow

Prior to beginning the session, the Chairperson will ensure that all physical adjustments are made prior to the beginning of the event e.g. blinds and lighting adjusted as required. The Chairperson will designate someone to keep a speakers list to assist with time management and the flow of the meeting.

Sightlines

Everyone (including interpreters, captioner/notetaker) must be able to see each other and the presentation clearly. Seating must be made available for those who lip read to ensure sightlines. Tall objects such as water bottles should be kept off the tables. Equipment must be positioned in the least restrictive spot.

Noise

Common background noises can interfere with hearing speech (for anyone). All present should avoid noises such as flipping pages, rocking chairs and sliding coffee mugs while speaking. Likewise if the overhead projector is not being used, it should be turned off. Consider visual noise as well. One example is to avoid cluttering the wall directly behind the presenter with flip chart paper. Avoid mannerisms or bright clothing that create visual distractions.

Reading Time

The presenter should pause to allow participants to look at overheads, papers or other visuals. Stop speaking and wait for the participants to resume eye contact.

The contents of this guide have been developed using the Accessible Meeting Tips found on the Accessibility Directorate's web-site.

For further information about accessibility, please visit:

- the Town of Fort Erie web-site at www.forterie.on.ca - click on accessibility
- the Ministry of Community and Social Services- Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities at <http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/mcss/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/>

