

A Planning Guide for Accessible Conferences

> How to organize an inclusive and accessible event



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> Overview

A successful conference or event is one where everybody is able to participate fully. The advice in this guide will help you ensure that all conference participants, regardless of their abilities, get the most out of the event you are planning.

Knowing how to organize an accessible and inclusive conference can be challenging, especially if you are not familiar with accessibility issues or the various needs of persons with disabilities. Consider that one in seven people in Ontario has a disability. This number will increase over the next 20 years as the population ages.

Through the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the provincial government is working to make Ontario the most accessible province by 2025. This legislation requires organizations and businesses to be responsible for a new level of accessibility for persons with disabilities. The AODA sets standards in five areas: customer service, information and communications,

employment, transportation and the built environment. These standards apply to many aspects of hosting conferences and other such events.

The Council of Ontario Universities put together this guide to give you practical information on how to identify, remove and prevent barriers to accessibility when planning a conference. While the sections of the guide work as stand-alone pieces, they will be most effective if you use them as a complete package. Complete the checklist at the end to review some of the most important points and make sure they've been addressed before your event begins.

More information on accessibility standards in Ontario and how to eliminate barriers to accessibility can be found in the Resources section of this document.

An inclusive Mindset

It is essential to understand that persons with disabilities might have specific needs, and that every individual is different. A one-size-fits-all approach will not be as inclusive as one that addresses individual requirements.

If you prepare for your event with an awareness and concern for the different needs of participants you can organize an accessible conference. Through this awareness you will be able to create flexible plans that allow you to respond to requests efficiently.

Analyze each component of your conference from the point of view of someone with a disability. Once you have identified some of the barriers that your participants might face, you can begin to eliminate them. If possible, include persons with disabilities on your planning committee and consult with staff at disability resource centres to get the benefit of their experience. However, no matter how aware you are of the different needs of persons with disabilities, the most important initiative that you can undertake is to invite participants to tell you what they need and how you can help. Do this as early as possible in the planning process, so that you have plenty of time to respond. For example, depending on local resources, you might require significant advance notice to arrange accessible transportation or hire sign language interpreters.

Organizing an accessible conference also requires a willingness to make last-minute changes to any aspect of the meeting. An open mind is key to your commitment to create an inclusive event for all participants.



Did you know?

Not all barriers are physical obstacles

such as stairs. Nor are they immediately obvious to people who are not affected by them.

Listed below are five (5) types of barriers that may exist at a conference:

Attitudinal barriers are those that discriminate against persons with disabilities. The following are two examples:

- thinking that persons with disabilities are inferior; and
- assuming that a person who has a speech impairment can't understand you.

Information and communication barriers happen when a person can't easily understand information.

The following are three examples:

- print is too small to read;
- websites can't be accessed by people who are not able to use a mouse; and
- signs are not clear or easily understood.

Technology barriers occur when a technology can't be modified to support various assistive devices.

The following is an example:

- a website isn't compatible with screen-readers or other software.

Organizational or structural barriers are policies, practices or procedures that discriminate against persons with disabilities. The following is an example:

- not allowing enough time between sessions for people to move among events at the conference.

Architectural and physical barriers are features of buildings or spaces that cause problems for persons with disabilities. The following are three examples:

- hallways and doorways that are too narrow for a person using a wheelchair, electric scooter or walker;
- a lack of ramps or elevators; and
- parking spaces that are too narrow for a driver who uses a wheelchair.

Source: Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services

> *Selecting a Venue*

Determining where to hold an event is one of the first decisions conference planners must make. Choosing an accessible conference facility will minimize the number of additional arrangements you might have to make to accommodate participants with specific needs.

Depending on local circumstances, you might face limited choices in where you can host your event, or you might have plenty of options, including convention centres, campus buildings and area hotels. This section will help you know what to look for, so you can choose the most suitable venue.

Later in your planning, you will be able to consult with event participants about their specific accessibility needs; for now, however, take a more general approach to identify and remove barriers.

In particular, assess the following six (6) areas:

- Building entrance;
- Meeting rooms;
- Washrooms;
- Dining facilities;
- Information on getting there; and
- Hallways, paths, elevators and other routes of travel.

We have listed key items to note as you inspect each area. Remember, there is a longer checklist at the end of this document that will assist you with detailed observations.

Building Entrance

One of the first indicators that a venue might have accessible features is its entrance. Doors should be wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair or scooter, and should also have a power-assist feature to allow for ease of entrance into the building. If your participants cannot enter the building, then you should consider an alternate venue.

Meeting Rooms

Size is one of the most important factors in selecting a meeting room. Big rooms with lots of open space are better able to accommodate the accessibility needs of participants. For instance, in a large room you can provide wide paths and turning space for people who use mobility aids, such as wheelchairs, scooters and walkers. If a room is too big, however, attendees might have trouble hearing or seeing the speakers. Evaluate the room's acoustics and consider what sort of sound system you will need. Is the room's equipment sufficient or will you need to rent more?

Washrooms

The main factor to consider is proximity. Accessible washrooms should be close to all meeting and dining areas. Are there enough washrooms to accommodate the number of people who will attend?

Dining Facilities

Refreshment and reception areas should also be near the main rooms of the event, and have accessible washrooms nearby. Use movable tables and chairs. You can find more information on dining facilities in the Meals and Social Activities section of this guide.

Hallways, Paths and Elevators

In your site evaluation, look for wide, barrier-free routes of travel to and from all conference meeting areas. Watch out for things that can impede access, such as steps or sudden changes in level or flooring. If your event will take place on several floors, be sure that the building has enough elevator capacity to carry the people who cannot use stairs or escalators. Ideally, each elevator should have an auditory signal to alert people with low vision, and a visual cue system for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

You should also ask the facility's manager about emergency evacuation plans and whether they take persons with disabilities into account.

Getting There

Your conference venue should have a reasonable number of accessible parking spots. Ask whether additional parking spaces close to the building could be reserved for persons with disabilities, if needed. Does the building have a sheltered pick-up and drop-off area? Is the venue on an accessible public transit line? Look for clear, short paths between transit stops and the site of the event.



Setting up Accessible Meeting Rooms

The following ten (10) tips will help you set up your meeting rooms in an accessible manner:

- Reserve seats at the front of each room for participants who are Deaf, deafened, hard of hearing or have low vision.
- Remove more than just one seat for each participant in a wheelchair or scooter; consider the turning radius of these devices.
- Portable microphones staffed by a volunteer are much more accessible than a microphone on a stand.
- Check that there are clear sight lines for people using sign-language interpreters.
- Make sure presenters will be in a well-lit area.
- If slide presentations or videos will be used, the images should be projected high enough to be fully visible to all persons seated.
- Ensure that there is plenty of drinking water available throughout the event, not just at breaks and mealtimes.
- Allow for sufficient space between rows or in aisles for wheelchairs and scooters to get by.
- Ensure that the presentation area or stage is accessible for a person with a disability to present at the meeting.
- Lecterns and/or microphones should be adjustable with a clear path for people to move to and from their seats.

> *Hotels and Lodging*

As a conference organizer, you should be prepared to help attendees find lodging that meets their needs, regardless of whether you offer guest accommodation as part of your event.

This section will help you know what to look for to ensure that hotel rooms or other forms of lodging, such as university residences, are accessible to persons with disabilities.

An accessible hotel room should include the following five (5) items:

- Bathrooms with wide doorways, room for a wheelchair to have a turning radius, grab bars along and behind the toilet and bathtub, a roll-in shower, and pipes that are not exposed that could potentially injure the guest.
- Accessible routes to all areas of the room, including telephone, bed, closets and balcony.
- Door handles, sinks, faucets and other accessories that are levers rather than knobs, so people with limited dexterity can use them easily. All items should be within reach of someone in a wheelchair.
- Good lighting and wide pathways. High-contrast colours will help distinguish floors and walls.
- Safety features for people who are Deaf, deafened and hard of hearing, such as a flashing alarm system and access to a TTY phone (teletypewriter).

There should be a clear path from accessible parking spots to the lodging's lobby, as well as to the guest's room, with no obstacles or changes in elevation.

How easy will it be for attendees to get to and from their accommodation to the conference site, as well as to related social events? What are the transportation options? Could you make those connections simpler? If there is a dinner or other event off-site, are these locations also accessible?

Larger hotels often have the knowledge and customer-service expertise required to accommodate individual needs.

> *Identifying Needs Early*

In order to address people's needs effectively, you must know what those needs are. Early in the planning process, invite conference participants to tell you what you can do to help them get the most out of your event.

People will have different expectations and comfort levels about their participation and inclusion. Therefore, individual requirements for accessibility and accommodation will differ as well.

Involving Persons with Disabilities in Planning

When planning a conference and assessing site accessibility, it is important to consult with persons with disabilities. They can often recognize barriers or issues that people who do not have the experience of living with a disability might overlook.

Do not assume that individuals with similar disabilities will have the same needs; disabilities may be progressive, like multiple sclerosis, or episodic, where their health fluctuates.

Registration and Promotional Material

The earlier you invite participants to identify their needs, the more successful barrier removal will be. In promotional material, such as advertising and press releases, state clearly that the conference is committed to accessibility.

Registration is the ideal time for participants to specify their accessibility needs. Registration materials should give conference-goers a prominent place to do so, and should emphasize that organizers will work with them to accommodate those requests. It is best to have only one point of contact for accessibility needs to avoid duplication and confusion.

People who want to attend can provide more useful information if you give them details about the venue, the program material and schedule, and surrounding events, so that they can consider their needs in relation to what will be taking place and where.

It might be useful to list ways in which you could accommodate the needs of registrants, by asking them to identify what they will require. The following are twelve (12) common options:

- Wheelchair access;
- Allowing an accompanying assistant;
- American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ) interpreters;
- Note-taker;
- Assistive listening device;
- Video captioning;
- Large print;
- Braille;
- Providing information on a USB memory stick instead of paper;
- Orientation to the facility;
- Diet restrictions; and
- Scent-free environment.

If someone requests a fragrance-free environment, you should notify other participants and request that they limit their use of scented products. It might be easier to include a statement during the registration process that identifies that your event strives to be scent-free.

It is important to allow more than one method of registration, for instance, by telephone instead of only online. By narrowing options at the beginning, you could be excluding people from even signing up for your conference. If you are using online registration forms, ensure that they are accessible.

For more information about online registration, please review the Accessible Conference Website section of this document.

Budgeting for an Inclusive Conference

Incorporate accessibility planning into your event budget from the beginning. Making your conference accessible will help ensure that as many people as possible can attend and take part. Expenses related to accessibility may be divided into two categories: those for services and items that you should expect to provide, and those for things you will provide when a participant requests them specifically.

An inclusive conference should always include the following six (6) items:

- an accessible site (please see Selecting a Venue);
- accessible transportation options;
- accessible hotels and lodging;
- amplification of presenters and speakers;
- appropriate conference signage; and
- dietary accommodations.

An inclusive conference should also be prepared to provide additional services and assistance when they are requested in advance. The following are five (5) examples:

- note-taking services, or providing conference materials such as presentations in an accessible format;
- real-time video captioning;
- sign-language interpreters;
- assistive listening devices; and
- personal support workers (PSWs).

As outlined in the previous section, identifying potential accessibility needs early will help prepare you when conference participants take you up on your offer to accommodate their requirements.

Enquire whether your selected venue has experienced staff who can help anticipate costs and identify resources; they might also be familiar with useful best practices that will help you reduce costs while improving accessibility.

It is considered a best practice to waive the conference fee for a personal support worker who is accompanying a person with a disability.

Another best practice is to ask speakers and presenters to make copies of their texts and presentations available, thereby eliminating the need for note-takers. All material should be in a sans-serif font (such as Arial or Verdana) and should be no less than 12 point font size. It is also a good practice to have a few extra copies in large print (18 point font size) available at the conference.

> An Accessible Conference Website

Your conference website is often the first point of contact for conference participants. Make sure it is designed in a way that is accessible to all users, regardless of physical ability or the way in which they use the Internet.

It is particularly important that your online registration is accessible to all potential participants.

Here are four (4) key factors to keep in mind:

- Website visitors with a visual disability might have trouble interpreting images that are not accompanied by a text description — for instance, illustrations or animations. Many of these visitors will be using a screen-reader technology that turns the text on a web page into speech.
- Use large fonts and high-contrast colours to accommodate visitors with low vision or who are colour blind.
- Website visitors with some physical disabilities might not use a mouse. Ask your web design team to create your website navigation with a variety of input methods in mind.
- Is some information on your website conveyed only through sound? People with hearing disabilities might need to have that information in text form. A transcript may accompany videos or audio slideshows.

In coming years, many websites in Ontario will have to meet certain standards under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). Ensure that your web developers and others responsible for online content are aware that your conference is committed to accessibility. They should be current in their knowledge of the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 2.0](#) (see resources list for website address) of the World Wide Web Consortium, the

international organization that creates standards for the web. Resources, such as [Understanding WCAG 2.0](#) (see resources list for website address) and [How People with Disabilities Use the Web](#) (see resources list for website address), might be able to assist you in your discussions with web developers.

It might also be beneficial to run your website through an online [Accessibility Checker](#) (see resources list for website address), which will help identify the specific areas that do not comply with WCAG 2.0 guidelines.

More information on web accessibility standards can be found in the Resources section of this document.



For designated public sector organizations and large organizations in Ontario, the compliance schedule for [Section 14 of the AODA's Integrated Accessibility Standards](#) is as follows:

By January 1, 2014, new internet websites and web content on those sites must conform to WCAG 2.0 Level A.

By January 1, 2021, all internet websites and web content must conform to WCAG 2.0 Level AA, with a few exceptions.

> *Training Staff and Volunteers*

As a conference organizer, it is important to share your knowledge of issues for persons with disabilities with the rest of your staff and volunteers.

Under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), all staff and volunteers must receive customer-service training about accessibility standards.

Consider assigning specific roles to staff and volunteers to address some of the needs of your conference participants. You might also need to work with specialized professionals from outside your organization, such as Personal Support Workers (PSWs), interpreters and captionists.

Consider sharing the following seven (7) best practises with your staff about how to interact with persons with disabilities:

- Have a designated staff person or volunteer on hand to welcome participants and be ready to handle any requests that might surface.
- Treat persons with disabilities with the same level of respect and openness you would anyone else.
- Talk directly to a person who has a disability rather than to his or her assistant or interpreter.
- Offer assistance to persons with disabilities, but help only if the offer is accepted. Listen carefully to any instructions that the individual gives about the best way to be of assistance.
- Do not be overprotective of persons with disabilities; a friendly offer of assistance is most often met with appreciation, but an overt assumption that an individual cannot perform a task is patronizing. As with anyone else, let the person make decisions about what he or she can or cannot do and when assistance is required.



A Word on Language

The most common current practice is to use phrases such as “person with a disability” because this puts the “person” first. In this context, we might also refer to someone as a “person with low vision”.

However, it is important to be aware that others may prefer to be called a “disabled person”. This recognizes that it is society’s response to different individuals’ needs that disables them, in other words, a cultural construct. In any case, if someone indicates a preference, use that terminology.

- If you are having difficulty communicating with someone with a speech impediment, do not indicate that you can understand if you cannot. Although this can be an uncomfortable moment, it does not have to be awkward, if you handle it correctly. Ask the person to repeat the words, more than once if necessary. If a friend or PSW is accompanying the person, you can ask the participant’s permission to have the companion assist. If no one else is available to assist, try asking the individual “yes” and “no” questions.
- If you are uncertain of an individual’s needs, simply ask: “How may I help you?”

> Working with Outside Professionals

Information you receive during the registration process should give you an idea of which outside professionals you will need for your conference.

These might include the following four (4) professionals:

- personal support worker (PSW);
- American Sign Language (ASL) or Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ); interpreter;
- real-time closed captionist; and
- reverse interpreter, who communicates audience engagement back to a presenter with a disability.

Consult with these service providers as early as possible to book them, and find out how to properly equip and position them at your event. If you are employing sign-language interpreters, remember that often two are necessary because they require a break every 15 to 20 minutes; the event stage and other platforms should be set up to reflect this. For more information on finding and hiring outside professionals, see the Resources section of this document.



What are PSWs?

Personal support workers (PSWs) help people with the activities of daily living. At a conference, that primarily means assisting with meals and other personal needs, such as using the washroom. Two PSWs — one male and one female — might be required if participants do not bring their own.

It is considered a best practice to provide free entry to a PSW accompanying a participant to all events and self-serve meals that the conference-goer attends.

If the conference is hosting a formal meal that requires an extra fee and requires participants to reserve a spot, providing a PSW meal free of charge is at the discretion of the organizers. On the registration form, ask participants to indicate whether PSWs will accompany them to the meal, so that the proper number of meals can be prepared.

Sometimes, if participants bring their own PSWs, it might be possible to hire them for a nominal fee to assist others at the conference. Before hiring someone, ensure that the person assisting a participant is a certified PSW rather than a family friend or a relative who a delegate has brought along to help.

> *Transportation*

Well in advance of your conference, explore the availability of accessible transportation to and from all planned events and meetings.

For instance, you will want to investigate the options for getting to and from airports, train stations and bus terminals. You should have already confirmed the availability of accessible parking spots and areas for pick-up and drop-off when choosing the conference venue.

Evaluate the accessible transportation options to and from meeting sites, guest lodging and social events. Are you providing transportation, such as shuttles or tour buses, for participants between different conference venues? If these vehicles are not accessible, you must also arrange accessible transportation for those who require it. Generally you will need a van or bus equipped with a lift for participants who use a wheelchair or scooter, and possibly for people who use walkers or canes.

The local public transit authority is a good place to start for information on accessible routes, but you probably will have to contact private transportation providers as well.

Finally, if you know a large number of taxis are likely to be ordered at the end of the event, make arrangements with the local cab company to ensure that people using mobility devices, such as wheelchairs, can be served without undue wait times.

> *Planning the Agenda*

The key to ensuring your event has an inclusive agenda is to focus on the needs of participants and presenters. Again, one of the best ways to achieve this is by including persons with disabilities in the planning process.

Some general points to keep in mind when planning your conference agenda include the following five (5) points:

- Be considerate of the extra time it might take some persons with disabilities to complete a task or move between conference sessions.
- Allow sufficient break time between sessions.
- Keep the number of activities per day to a reasonable level.
- Think about the routes people will have to take to get to breakout groups and meals; ensure they are straightforward and barrier-free.
- Develop a schedule, including breaks, for any professionals you are employing, such as sign-language interpreters or note-takers. Make sure there are no gaps in the schedule.

Also, look for key points in the conference agenda when participants who have identified their disabilities are likely to need assistance. Have a personal support worker available if one has been requested, or assign a staff member or volunteer to be on standby to assist people as required.

Meals and Social Activities

We all know that some of the value of a conference is found outside the official agenda; it is in the casual conversations and periods of networking where many participants and presenters find learning opportunities.

As a conference organizer with an inclusive mindset, you can ensure that everyone has the chance to benefit from these social interactions.

Meals and Dining

The following eight (8) points can help ensure conference meals are enjoyable for all:

- Give participants an opportunity to indicate dietary needs when they register for the event.
- Make allowances for seating that will let all participants dine in the same area. People with walkers or wheelchairs should have a selection of seating choices, and not be confined to the fringes of the dining area or at a “special” table.
- Make sure there is an accessible route for travel between tables and aisles.
- If your event has a buffet, try to have servers available to assist; buffets can be particularly difficult for people with mobility or visual disabilities.

- Remember to include personal assistants and interpreters when estimating how much food is required.
- Tables are more accessible if they are less than three feet (one metre) high. If long tablecloths are being used, tape or tie down the corners, so they do not pose a tripping hazard or get tangled in a wheelchair.
- Offer bendable straws and lightweight cups, and put them within easy reach of anyone using a wheelchair.
- Accessible washrooms should be near the dining area.

Social Activities

An inclusive conference makes sure that icebreakers and other activities do not exclude persons with disabilities.

If your event has an official social gathering offsite or is offering a tour, remember to determine the accessibility of any outside activities and ensure suitable transportation services are offered.

If you expect a significant number of participants to leave the conference venue for informal evening social activities, offer suggestions in the conference kits for cafés, bars and restaurants that are accessible and easily connected to transportation options.

> Conference Information and Signs

For a conference to be inclusive, information must be available in formats that allow everyone to understand and participate. Here are some factors to keep in mind for clear communication.

Participants' Packages

Packages handed out at registration are a great opportunity to provide information on services available for persons with disabilities; for example, lists of accessible restaurants and cafés. You should make a personal visit to private establishments before recommending them as accessible to ensure their standards are adequate.

For conference materials that are not provided on your website, participants who have low vision might prefer to get the information on a USB (Universal Serial Bus) memory stick, so that they can use computers to access the materials via speech output, text magnification or other technologies. Avoid saving documents as PDFs (Portable Document Formats); some accessibility software programs have problems adapting the content to the needs of the user.

All materials, including schedules, should be available electronically in an easily convertible format. Consider making large-print versions of participants' packages available for people who have low vision. Use a non-italic, sans-serif font, such as Tahoma, Arial or Verdana, in 18-point type or larger. Non-glossy, light yellow or off-white paper is best to reduce glare.

If you are providing nametags, lanyards that are worn around the neck or wrist are preferable to clip-on tags, as they allow the most flexible use.

Signs

Signs can be of great help to people in unfamiliar environments. Think about the possible routes that participants will take to get into the conference building, then place directional signs starting at parking lots, drop-off points and public transit locations.

Approximately four feet (1.2 metres) above the ground is a good height for signs so that everyone can use them. Be sure to use a large, sans-serif font. Place signs in a hazard-free zone where people can approach them easily. People with low vision often need to get extremely close to signs to read them.

Participants will appreciate signs pointing to and identifying the following eight (8) areas:

- Conference registration desk;
- Main meeting rooms;
- Breakout rooms;
- Washrooms;
- Dining facilities;
- Parking spaces;
- Taxi stands; and
- Public transit.

A large map or floor plan, indicating the location of various facilities can also be included in the conference participants' package. For more information about making materials easy to see and read, consult the resources section of this document.

> *Helping Presenters Communicate Clearly*

The most successful conference is one with clear communication of ideas to all participants.

If you work ahead of time with the presenters, a lot can be done to achieve this. Both you and the presenters should keep the different communications needs of the audience in mind.

The following nine (9) points are a few general guidelines for effective presentations:

- Present key points in multiple ways, including visual, auditory and tactile approaches.
- Present visual materials in a format that allows everyone to follow. Consider developing a style template for presenters, so that all slideshows use high-contrast colours and large, easy-to-read type.
- If any presenters will be using video materials, try to arrange for captioning of the videos ahead of time.
- When projectors or video screens are not in use, turn them off. This reduces background noise and helps focus audience's attention on the speaker.
- Have all presenters use a microphone to help them be heard in case they trail off. For questions from the audience, have people speak into a portable microphone. If a question is not spoken into a microphone, ask the presenter to repeat the question into the microphone before answering.
- Presenters should speak clearly at a normal pace. Encourage them to include pauses after presenting complex points or visual elements to allow interpreters to catch up.

- Identify each speaker. Have only one person speak at a time, so that audience members or those listening to the tape will know who is talking. During a discussion, it is important for speakers to re-identify themselves.
- Presenters should always provide a direct and clear view of their mouths and faces.
- Arrange to have any presentation materials or handouts made available ahead of time in accessible or easily convertible formats, so that people with visual or hearing disabilities can convert the information into the format they require.

You should also check with the presenters to see if they have any accessibility needs, such as ramp or podium requests, listening aids, visual cues or high-contrast outlines of the edges of the stage, or a reverse interpreter. Ensure there is an adjustable lectern and easy access to the stage for people who use mobility devices.

Finally, remind your presenters that disabilities are not always visible or apparent

> *Last-minute Considerations*

It is almost conference day. You've been working for months to ensure this event will be accessible, but obstacles can be overlooked or even emerge at the last minute.

It is important to book some time before participants arrive to survey everything and check for possible barriers.

Schedule a meeting the day before your event starts to check that the venue will be able to provide everything that you requested in the contract. You might want to give the venue a written list of what you

expect its staff to do on the day before the conference and the day it begins.

A few hours before participants arrive, walk through the site and be on the lookout for common problems, such as missing signs or un-cleared sidewalks. The Checklist at the end of this document has a detailed inventory of the final things you will need to confirm.



Planning for Emergencies

Even the best-organized event can be disrupted by something unexpected.

In planning your conference, you should know what to do in case an evacuation is needed.

All emergency-preparedness planning must take persons with disabilities into account.

For instance, Ontario's Fire Protection And Prevention Act requires that a fire safety plan for evacuating occupants contain special provisions for people requiring assistance.

Ensure that all venues for your conference have an evacuation plan that considers the needs of persons with disabilities; make sure that you, as well as your staff and volunteers, are familiar with it. Emergency evacuation routes should be accessible and lead outside to an accessible path that will allow individuals to move away from the affected buildings.

Where possible, plan to evacuate individuals to another nearby building if the evacuation lasts more than a few minutes, particularly in poor weather.

When planning for conferences where a significant number of delegates with disabilities will attend, get in touch with local fire safety officials to develop a response plan in advance.

For detailed information about preparing an evacuation plan, consult the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada guide called [Planning for safety: Evacuating people who need assistance in an emergency](#), see resources section of this document.

> *Evaluating the Event*

Conference evaluations and feedback forms can help you and other organizers improve events for next time.

As part of the evaluation process, ask participants what they thought of the accessibility of the conference.

You could ask a general, open-ended question such as: “How well did the event address your accessibility needs?”

Or, if you’re conducting a more thorough evaluation, you could ask questions about specific elements of the conference. For instance:

- Did the conference registration process make it easy for you to identify any accessibility needs you might have?
- How did you find the availability of accessible parking and transport options?
- How accessible were the meeting facilities? Was there anything that needed to be improved?
- How do you rate the conference information kits? Did they provide the information you needed in an accessible format?

- How easy was it to follow presentations and discussions?
- How did you find the conference schedule? Was it too intense or too spaced out? Was there enough time between events?
- Did you find it easy to participate in conference social events?
- How do you rate the food at the conference? Were you able to meet your dietary requirements?
- Did the conference accommodate all your accessibility needs?
- How could we have done better?

Putting the Evaluation Process into Perspective

Remember, no event is perfect and first-time events are always a learning process. Evaluations are meant to be tools to help improve future events. Share the results of your evaluation with others, such as future organizers of your event or similar events.

> Checklist

This guide has covered many different topics. Please use this checklist to track your progress on your way to an accessible conference. If your event is truly inclusive, you should be able to answer “yes” to most of these questions.

We’ve based this checklist on the one provided by the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, [Planning an Accessible Meeting: A Checklist](#) (see resources section in this document). However, some modifications have been made.

Choosing the Location

The following are three (3) considerations when choosing the location:

- Did you visit the site before booking a location? You’ll want to check the location’s accessible features for yourself.
- Is any renovation or construction work scheduled during your event? This could affect accessibility.
- Are staff of the facility trained in providing accessible customer service?

Exterior Access

The following are considerations for signage, parking, sidewalk and/or paths of travel and accessible transit.

Signage

Do the signs for the street address or building name have the two points listed below:

- Clearly visible from the street?
- Well lit at night (for evening events)?

Parking

The following are five (5) parking considerations:

- Are sufficient accessible parking spots available for the estimated number of attendees with disabilities? If not, can you arrange for more designated parking spaces close to the building during the event? Are accessible metered parking or a public parking lot with accessible spaces nearby?

- Are designated parking spots for persons with disabilities close to the entrance of the building?
- Do the parking spots have a firm, slip-resistant surface?
- Is there a curb cut or level access from the parking area to the main entrance?
- Are parking areas clear of snow, ice, wet leaves and standing water?

Sidewalks and/or Paths of Travel

The following are five (5) considerations for the sidewalks and/or paths of travel:

- Is there a barrier-free path of travel from the parking lot or drop-off area to the meeting entrance? Stairs, sudden changes in level, slippery or unstable ground can impede accessibility.
- Are sidewalks wide enough for easy access? Are they obstacle-free?
- Are walkways clear of snow, ice, wet leaves and standing water?
- Are ramps gradual in slope? Do they have handrails on both sides?
- Are sidewalks and walkways separated from roads and driveways?

Accessible Transit

The following are three (3) considerations for accessible transit:

- Can people get to the event using accessible transit?
- Is there a drop-off area in front of the building? Is the drop-off area protected by an awning or overhang?
- Have you made sure there are accessible transportation options to all conference events and external social activities?

Interior Access

The following are considerations for entrances and lobbies, elevators, accessible washrooms, hallways and corridors, as well as meeting and conference rooms.

Entrances and Lobbies

The following are nine (9) considerations for entrances and lobbies:

- Are entrances (especially the main entrance) wide enough for people using a wheelchair or scooter?
- If the main entrance is not accessible, does a sign clearly visible at the front of the building indicate the location of an accessible entrance?
- Are entrances well lit? Are they away from isolated areas?
- If the door is locked after hours, can someone gain entry without having to push a buzzer or bell?
- Are door handles easy to open? Ideally, doors should have lever handles and/or be equipped with an automatic opener. Turning a knob can be difficult for people with limited strength and dexterity.
- Do signs in the lobby clearly indicate where in the building the meeting is being held?
- Are signs large enough and clear enough, so that people with low vision can read them?
- Are signs mounted at a comfortable height, so that people who use wheelchairs can read them?
- Can you arrange for staff or volunteers to be at entrances and throughout the facility to help persons with disabilities get to the meeting room?

Elevators

The following are six (6) elevator considerations:

- Are elevators located close to the meeting room? Are the elevators large enough to accommodate people who use wheelchairs and scooters, as well as their attendants?
- Are there enough elevators to safely and conveniently transport the number of attendees who use mobility devices?
- Do elevators have Braille buttons and raised numerals for people who are blind or have low vision?
- Are the elevator controls mounted at a comfortable height for a person using a wheelchair or scooter?
- Does the elevator have an auditory signal to alert people who are blind or have low vision?
- Does the elevator have a visual cue system in each elevator lobby to alert people who are deaf or hard of hearing?

Accessible Washrooms

The following are seven (7) accessible washroom considerations:

- Do washroom doors have Braille lettering or a raised (tactile) male/female symbol?
- Are washroom doors equipped with an automatic or push-button opener?
- Are washrooms large enough to accommodate people who use scooters and power wheelchairs? Do washrooms have at least one accessible stall?
- Is there at least one accessible unisex washroom on the same floor as the event? Remember: A minimum of a five-foot turning radius is needed for wheelchair users to manoeuvre without restriction.
- Can someone using a wheelchair or a scooter reach the faucets and turn the water on using one hand?
- Are washroom accessories and dispensers also within easy reach of a person using a wheelchair or scooter? Are the dispensers automatic or easy to use?
- Are the accessible washrooms located near the meeting rooms?

Hallways and Corridors

The following are three (3) considerations for hallways and corridors:

- Are major hallways and all essential doorways throughout the facility wide enough to accommodate people using wheelchairs and scooters?
- Are interior doors easy to open with one hand without having to twist the wrist?
- Do floor coverings (such as low-pile carpeting, hardwood flooring or tile) allow people using mobility aids, such as wheelchairs and scooters, to move easily through the facility?

Meeting and Conference Rooms

The following are twelve (12) considerations for the meeting and conference rooms:

- Is the meeting room on the building entry floor?
- Is the meeting room 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?
- Is accessible seating available throughout the meeting space?
- Are the reception/refreshment areas in an area large enough to easily accommodate people who use wheelchairs, scooters, guide dogs or other mobility aids?
- Are the stages and speaking areas, including lectern or podium, accessible to people with limited mobility?
- Is there a well-lit space for the sign-language interpreters?
- Is the area free of distracting background noises, such as ventilation systems or sound from adjacent rooms?
- If the meeting room has windows, are there drapes or blinds that can be used to reduce light or glare?
- Are lighting levels in the room adjustable?
- Are cables, wires and microphones well secured and away from aisles and other traffic areas?
- Have you reminded guest speakers and exhibitors to provide printed handout materials in alternative formats should they be requested ahead of time?

- Have the accessibility needs of the presenters been addressed?

Refreshment and Dietary Arrangements

The following are six (6) considerations for refreshments and dietary arrangements:

- Are you giving participants an opportunity to indicate any dietary needs ahead of time (for example, when registering for the event)?
- Where beverages are being served, are bendable straws and lightweight cups available within easy reach of people using wheelchairs or scooters?
- Are sugar-free beverages, juices and water available for people with dietary concerns such as diabetes?
- If food is provided buffet style, will someone be on hand to help serve people who have visual and physical disabilities?
- If pastries and cookies are on the menu, will you also have fresh fruits and vegetables available for people with dietary concerns?
- Is there access to the outdoors to allow people to walk their service dogs during meal and health breaks?

Hotels and Lodging

The following are two (2) hotel and lodging considerations:

- Have you identified hotels or other lodgings that have accessible rooms?
- Is the travel between the hotel or other lodgings and the conference accessible?

Invitations and Promotional Materials

The following are five (5) considerations for invitations and promotional materials:

- Do your invitations and promotional material about your accessible event include the International Symbol of Accessibility and other accessibility symbols?
- Are you providing invitations and event information in alternate formats for people or organizations that require or request them? Some examples are: Braille, audiotape, e-mail, large print, computer disk or USB memory drive.

- Do the invitation and promotional materials include a note that lets participants request any additional requirements they might have? Have you identified a single contact person for accessibility requests?
- Have you included persons with disabilities in the planning committee?
- Have you contacted a resource centre for persons with disabilities for input and advice?

Website and Accessible Communications

The following are four (4) considerations for website and accessible communication:

- Have you arranged for a sign-language interpreter and/or real-time captioner to be present?
- On your print materials, have you included information that your materials are available in alternative formats and in French, as well as information on how to obtain them?
- Have you calculated the quantities of multiple format documents you will need according to the anticipated audience? For example, if your audience is geared toward seniors, you might want to produce a greater number of printed materials in large print.
- Have you worked with a web developer to determine whether your conference website meets the standard criteria set out by AODA?

Training

The following is a training consideration:

- Have staff and volunteers been appropriately trained on accessibility and customer service?

Outside Professionals

The following are two (2) considerations for outside professionals:

- Have outside professionals been booked?
- Have you provided them with a schedule, so they know which sessions they are attending and when?

Planning the Agenda

The following is a consideration when planning the agenda:

- Does the agenda take into account for adequate breaks and time between sessions, for travel between events and health breaks?

Last-minute Considerations

The following are eight (8) last-minute considerations:

- Have you done a last-minute walk-through to remove any obstacles that might have emerged?
- Are signs to the venue, conference hall, meeting rooms and accessible washrooms clear and appropriately placed?
- Have you checked the hallway or accessible routes to make sure they are not blocked by any items, including low-hanging or protruding objects?
- Has food been labeled and particular dietary requests been met?
- Have you checked to make sure no trashcans have been placed in front of elevator buttons, blocking doorways and routes of travel, or blocking paper towel dispensers in restrooms?
- Have the audio systems been tested? Are induction loops and microphones ready for use?
- Have you checked that there are no slippery or wet floors?
- Is the entrance way free of snow, ice, wet leaves and standing water? Are the sidewalks and curb cuts clear as well? Is the area free of vehicles, especially delivery trucks, blocking the ramp or curb cut?

Events Evaluation

The following is a consideration for event evaluation:

- Does the conference evaluation include at least one question about accessibility?

> Resources

Legislation

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005), is available at the following website address: http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_05a11_e.htm

Barriers to Participation and Inclusion

Ministry of Community and Social Services, Understanding Barriers to Accessibility, Government of Ontario (2012), is available at the following website address: http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/programs/accessibility/understanding_accessibility/understanding_barriers.aspx

Useful Documents on Accessible Meeting Planning

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Guide to Planning Inclusive Meetings, Government of Canada (2009), is available at the following website address: http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2010/rhdcc-hrsdc/HS28-141-2009-eng.pdf

Ministry of Community and Social Services, Planning an accessible meeting, Government of Ontario (2012), is available at the following website address: http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/programs/accessibility/understanding_accessibility/planning_meeting.aspx

Ministry of Community and Social Services, Planning an accessible meeting: A checklist, Government of Ontario (2012), is available at the following website address: http://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/en/mcss/programs/accessibility/understanding_accessibility/planning_meeting_checklist.aspx

Web Accessibility

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), How Persons with Disabilities Use the Web, is available at the following website address: <http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/people-use-web/Overview.html>

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), Understanding WCAG 2.0, is available at the following website address: <http://www.w3.org/TR/UNDERSTANDING-WCAG20>

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, is available at the following website address: <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20>

Information and Communications Standards, section 14: Accessible Websites and Web Content (contains the compliance schedule), is available at the following website address: http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/source/regs/english/2011/elaws_src_regs_r11191_e.htm#BK15

Signs and Printed Material

Graphics Artist Guild, Downloadable Disability Access Symbols, is available at the following website address: https://www.graphicartistsguild.org/tools_resources/downloadable-disability-access-symbols

CNIB has developed Clear Print, an accessible design standard for printed items ranging from magazines to computer screens, is available at the following website address: <http://www.cnib.ca/en/services/resources/clearprint/Pages/default.aspx>

Interpreters, Intervenors and Captionists

One way to begin planning interpreter services or other accessibility services, such as intervenors and captionists, is to get in touch with the Canadian Hearing Society (website address is <http://www.chs.ca>) or the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (website address is <http://www.avlic.ca>). They can direct you to local service providers.

The Canadian Deafblind and Rubella Association (CDRA) can put you in touch with intervenors; it has local chapters throughout the country. Their website address is <http://www.cdbanational.com/en/indexe.html>

Your local university's accessibility office or office for students with disabilities will also be able to assist you with finding interpreters or other accessibility services.

Planning for Emergencies

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, Planning for safety: Evacuating people, who need assistance in an emergency, is available at the following website address: <http://www12.hrsdc.gc.ca/p.5bd.2t.1.3ls@-eng.jsp?pid=3435>

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