

Accessibility and the Church

In April 2005, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act was passed into law. Unlike previous versions, this Act has implications for those who fail to meet the various standards that were to be developed and implemented. The first of these standards, Customer Service, has been passed with a compliance deadline of **January 1, 2012**, for service providers.

In interpreting the Act for the purposes of this document, **"customer service" is understood as how we interact with those who come through our doors- parishioners, community ministry participants, campers, students, seniors, and so on. It may also include those who are seeking religious services- weddings, funerals, baptisms- and how we are able to provide those services.** It does not pertain to the physical accessibility of the property, which is addressed through the "built environment" standards yet to be released.

What does this have to do with ministries of The United Church of Canada? While the Act only applies to those ministries within Ontario, many of the things supported in the principles of the Act can be translated into what any congregation or ministry might look like as a church welcoming people with disabilities. The Customer Service standards address how we provide our services to those who require them. These standards require taking the time to develop policies and practices and to provide training in this area to staff and volunteers.

Every designated public sector organization and all other providers of goods or services in Ontario who have at least one employee in Ontario need to comply with the identified standards. For the purposes of the Act, charities, non-profit organizations, and churches fall under the area of "other providers." Most of our congregations and many of our other ministries will be required to do the following:

1. Establish policies, practices, and procedures.
2. Establish a training program and train staff and volunteers.
3. Establish a feedback process.

Resources

For specific information on fulfilling each of these requirements, refer to the Guide to the Accessibility Standards for Customer Service, Ontario Regulation 429/07: http://www.mcass.gov.on.ca/mcass/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accession/compliance/customer/compliance_guidelines.htm.

For more information on the Customer Service Standards, see

* Summary of Requirements:

www.mcass.gov.on.ca/mcass/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accession/compliance/customer/customer_summary

* Communication Access for People Who Have Communication Disabilities:

www.accesson.ca/mcss/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accesson/compliance/customer/comm_access.htm

* What has to be done to comply:

www.mcss.gov.on.ca/mcss/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accesson/compliance/customer/what_comply

For training resources, see

* Serve-Ability: Transforming Ontario's Customer Service:

www.mcss.gov.on.ca/mcss/serve-ability/splash.html

* Access ON: www.accesson.ca

For ministries with 20 or more employees, there are additional requirements. Visit the Ministry of Community and Social Services website for detailed information:

www.mcss.gov.on.ca/mcss/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario.

Additional standards are to be developed as part of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. The following list identifies these areas. Each one is at a different stage in development, but, to date, none have been passed into law and no deadline for compliance has been set.

* Information and Communication: one-way or interactive process achieved through one or more media or mechanisms, including but not limited to conventional print, in person, information and communications technologies:

www.mcss.gov.on.ca/mcss/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accesson/compliance/information

* Built Environment: access to, from, and within buildings and outdoor spaces (ramps, doors, counters, etc.):

www.mcss.gov.on.ca/mcss/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accesson/compliance/environment

* Employment: helping employers create equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities:

www.mcss.gov.on.ca/mcss/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accesson/compliance/employment

* Transportation: accessibility to public and private transportation services (buses, taxis, etc.):

www.mcss.gov.on.ca/mcss/english/pillars/accessibilityOntario/accesson/compliance/transportation

Determining future requirements

As congregations and ministries undertake projects, particularly building and technology upgrades, it is prudent to review the proposed standards in trying to determine future

requirements. Not doing so may have financial consequences. The local Ministry of Community and Social Services office is a good resource to consult when planning upgrades.

In summary

All United Church congregations and ministries are encouraged to consider how we can be more welcoming by making our buildings and practices accessible to all. The steps we take today may benefit someone tomorrow, and will reflect the spirit of welcome and compassion we experience in Jesus.

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me..." (Matthew 25:35)