

Guidelines: Accessible Service Delivery during Emergencies including COVID-19

Table of contents

About Accessibility Standards Canada.....	2
About these guidelines	2
Getting started	4
Preparing for Emergencies.....	5
Removing accessibility barriers before emergencies	5
Maintaining accessibility features	5
Preparing to make emergency changes to services	6
Making the built environment accessible	7
Emergency Egress (exit)	9
Evacuation plans	9
Emergency exit paths.....	11
Make sure your service delivery is safe	13
Accessible Service Delivery during Emergencies	14
Alternate service delivery.....	18
Drive-through services during COVID-19.....	19
Wayfinding	20
Emergency Signs	20
Inside Travel Paths.....	21
Outdoor Travel Paths	22
Guiding	23
Summary	24
Other resources.....	25
Contact us!	26

About Accessibility Standards Canada

Accessibility is about creating inclusive communities for all. [The Accessible Canada Act](#) encourages the creation of a barrier-free Canada.

Accessibility Standards Canada was created under the Accessible Canada Act. Our mandate is to:

- develop and review accessibility standards for organizations under federal regulations; and
- support and promote research that identifies, removes, and prevents accessibility barriers.

About these guidelines

These guidelines contain practical information for organizations under federal regulations and their employees. They will help organizations remove accessibility barriers to their service delivery during emergencies.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, federal organizations have reviewed accessible emergencies procedures. This review taught many lessons about accessible responses to emergencies. These lessons have formed the basis of this document.

- These guidelines include best practices for accessibility.
- These guidelines will help you consider accessibility in your service approaches.
- These lists of best practices are not complete. They are a starting point. Adapt them to your specific needs.
- These guidelines are for use in planning responses to a wide range of emergencies. Their application will depend on your organization and the emergency.
- When planning emergency responses, research the accessibility of your organization's service delivery.

- They provide links to sources with more complete lists of accessibility features.
- Please note that what is accessible for some persons could be a barrier for others.
- Talking to employees and clients about their needs is key for accessibility measures.
- These guidelines do not mention specific populations. In making your service accessible, consider the needs of your community. For example:
 - First Nations communities have distinct cultures, and unique accessibility needs. Consider the inclusion of First Nations languages, and First Nations sign languages, as part of your inclusive communications.

These guidelines are not medical or legal advice. When needed, get advice from:

- a public health organization;
- a legal professional;
- your union; and
- your workplace health and safety committee.

You should note that local responses are the responsibility of:

- provincial;
- territorial; and
- municipal governments.

National disability organizations and other stakeholders helped create these guidelines.

Getting started

In emergencies like COVID-19, ensure services for persons with disabilities are:

- the same as for everyone else; and
- available at the same time.

Effective service delivery during emergencies is key to ensuring public health and safety.

Persons with disabilities can face barriers when getting services. These barriers are often made worse during emergencies.

Federal organizations are responsible of making sure their services are accessible during emergencies.

Make your services accessible by:

- following accessible policies and procedures;
- having an accessible built environment; and
- training employees and volunteers who provide services to persons with disabilities.

Be responsive to:

- the needs of your community and clients;
- the new barriers created by the emergency;
- the changes you need to make to keep your service delivery accessible; and
- the feedback about accessibility from those that use your services.



Note

Removing barriers benefits everyone!

When you use inclusive and accessible design from the start, it is better for everyone. This is sometimes called "[The Curb Cut Effect](#)."

Preparing for Emergencies

Removing accessibility barriers before emergencies



All service delivery methods should be accessible by default, and inclusive by design. Accessibility policies should be in place at all times, including service delivery during emergencies.

Remove as many accessibility barriers as possible before any emergency. It will then be easier to remove new barriers created by an emergency.

Plan to adapt your service to emergencies. This should help you to maintain accessibility even when emergencies generate new barriers.

Maintaining accessibility features



Create a plan to keep your accessibility features updated at all times.

- Technology changes, and with it comes new accessibility barriers.
- Make sure that maintenance work on accessibility features starts immediately after an emergency.

For in-person service delivery:



- Check the most important areas for allowing access to your service.
- Focus on the maintenance of your most accessible service areas and pathways.
 - For example, if an emergency creates a physical barrier to your service delivery area, focus on clearing ramp access paths before stairways.

For remote service delivery, create a regular maintenance schedule for accessibility features.

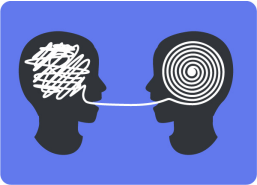


- For example, an emergency might prevent the use of normal mailing routes. Find new support services to use during the emergency.
- Check all procedures for remote service delivery on a regular basis. Assess if an emergency means these procedures no longer work.

If an emergency makes it impossible to maintain your normal accessibility features, look at [providing accommodations during emergencies](#).

Preparing to make emergency changes to services

Even with a plan, it can be very difficult or impossible to maintain all service delivery areas.



To deliver barrier-free services, you must prepare for unforeseen barriers caused by changes.

Consider persons with invisible disabilities. Be careful of making changes that might create significant stress or confusion. Communications about changes should be accessible, and in plain language.



Actions to take

Identify emergencies that could affect your service delivery procedures or your accessibility features.



- Assess your current accessibility features.
 - Develop a plan for replacing them.
 - Create alternatives if they become unusable due to an emergency.
- Create a plan for notifying the Canadian public about changes.
- Train your staff on accessibility.

During an emergency, some accessible services might become unavailable. Determine in advance what replacement services could be used. Ask your team:



- Is our built environment accessible to deliver services in-person during emergencies?
- Could in-person services be replaced by digital services?
- How can we deliver our service to Canadians who do not have access to the internet?

Making the built environment accessible

Create an [accessible built environment](#) before an emergency occurs.



Actions to take



To make sure your built environment lets you deliver accessible services at all times:

- consult accessibility experts;
- include the lived experience of persons with disabilities in the planning and design;
- make all public areas accessible to persons with disabilities using mobility aids, such as:
 - canes;
 - crutches;
 - walkers;
 - scooters;
 - wheelchairs; and
 - other assistive devices.



Make sure that there are enough options to get to your service delivery area. Follow guidelines on specific measurements for built environment elements like:



- the width of ramps;
- doorways;
- the distance between transportation and your service delivery area;
- outdoor accessible path features like [curb cuts](#);
- accessible washrooms, including:
 - automatic doors
 - tactile controls
 - enough space for those with mobility aids to use all features
- indoor travel paths; and
- the size of a turning radius for a mobility aid.



Tips

Built environment for clean air during COVID-19

COVID-19 has shown the need for creating built environments with clear air in mind.

Many Canadians have [Multiple Chemical Sensitivity \(MCS\)](#). Built environments focused on clean air is necessary to make your services accessible.



Make sure your built environment uses:

- Cleaning and building materials with no strong chemicals or scents;
- Strong air filtration systems; and
- Strong ventilation systems.

For instructions on planning construction and renovation projects:

- Consult the [National Standard of Canada for accessible built environment](#).



Tips

Washrooms during COVID-19

Where you can, make all features touchless. This includes:



- faucets;
- toilet flush controls; and
- soap and paper towel dispensers.

Touchless features remove an accessibility barrier and help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Emergency Egress (exit)



Emergency egress is important. Accessible evacuation for all Canadians helps avoid serious injury or loss of life.

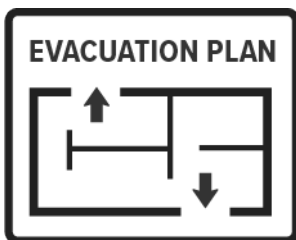
A plan must be in place to make sure all persons with disabilities can evacuate.

Evacuation plans

Plan to provide an accessible exit from your service delivery area.

Find out if your emergency exit has barriers to accessibility. Look to see if:

- the opening is wide enough for mobility aids;
- the door is automatic or uses easy-grip handles;
 - Easy-grip handles include lever or loop handles. These do not need you to grasp the handle tightly or twist your wrist.
- there are obstructions on the ground you must remove;
- there are physical barriers to mobility aids;
- you must use stairs to get to the exit;
- the exit is too far from the service delivery area; or
- there are any other accessibility barriers, as defined in the [National Standard of Canada for accessible built environment](#).





Make sure that all alarms and emergency notification systems are accessible. For example:

- Have alarms that use both audio and visual cues.
- Ensure that alarms are visible and hearable in every room of the building.
- Note that very loud alarms can be a trigger for some neurodiverse people.
 - Consult with experts and persons with disabilities to make sure that the sounds and noise are effective, but not overwhelming or triggering.



Some built environments make it impossible to use accessible alarm systems. This means that members of the public or your staff won't receive alerts when an emergency happens. Make plans to:

- check all rooms in the building in case of an emergency; and
- install accessible alarms at the earliest possible date.



Plan to have staff ready to organize an evacuation. Make sure to train these staff members in:

- [communication with persons with disabilities](#);
- [emergency egress best practices](#); and
- knowledge of accessible emergency exit routes and safe areas in the building.

Create a plan with persons with disabilities in mind

Include details for evacuating all persons with disabilities.

Create a plan that works for your built environment.



- Evacuations must include service animals.
- Some mobility aids might prevent the use of stairs.
 - Evacuation plans must provide a solution for evacuating people using mobility aids, even if elevators are unusable.
- Electric outages might prevent the use of mobility aids or assistive technology.
 - Determine if a generator is available to charge:
 - assistive devices; and
 - mobility aids during electricity outages.
- Do your accessibility features remove barriers for some, but create them for others?

Emergency exit paths

Make sure to mark emergency exits. Exits must have:

- lighting;
- tactile pathways; and
- accessible signage. For more detail, see:
 - [Accessible communication during COVID-19 and other emergencies: A guideline for federal organizations.](#)



Some persons with disabilities cannot use stairs.

- Try to offer all services on the same level as an accessible entrance to the building.
- If this is not possible, make sure that there is an accessible option, like an elevator.
- Some emergencies prevent the use of an elevator. Solutions will be different for each building. Research what accessibility features could work in your built environment.

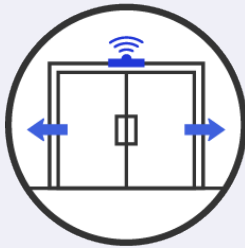


Tips

Emergency exits during COVID-19

Install automatic doors with touchless entry. These can help reduce the spread of COVID-19 and can remove barriers caused by limited space.

If you must use a door that is not automatic, provide hand sanitizer stations nearby to reduce the risk of spreading infection. Hand sanitizers with alcohol can create barriers for people with chemical sensitivities. Provide alternatives from the Health Canada [approved list](#).



During public health emergencies, the number of people allowed in elevators might be reduced. Consider accessibility needs while following public health guidelines.

- Make it clear how many people are allowed in the elevator. This will help everyone maintain a safe physical distance.
- Be clear about the number of people allowed when there is a person using a mobility aid.
- In larger elevators, use tactile markers on the floor to create physical distance.



Note

Upcoming standards for emergency egress

- Accessibility Standards Canada is developing national standards for accessible emergency egress.
- Follow these developments with our [technical committee for emergency egress](#).

Make sure your service delivery is safe

Depending on the kind of emergency, you might need to ask individuals if they need help. When asking:



- Do not make assumptions about what persons with disabilities can or cannot do.
- Persons with the same disability may have different needs.
- Persons with disabilities have different preferences for meeting their disability-related needs.
- Do not make decisions for them. Do not tell them what to do.
- Always ask the person if they want help. Do not assume they need help.



Tips



Using videos to provide information

It can be helpful to use a video to provide information in key areas in a building. The video should be available in alternate formats such as:

- plain language;
- American Sign Language (ASL);
- Langue des signes Québécoise (LSQ) ;
- captioning; and
- described video.

Use videos:

- at entrances to the building telling people where to go and how to access services; and
- in waiting and seating areas for announcements.

Accessible Service Delivery during Emergencies



If you are able to continue service delivery in-person during an emergency, provide:

- replacements for unusable accessibility features; and/or
- alternative service areas.



Actions to take



If an emergency makes an accessibility feature unusable, find a way to replace it. This might mean:

- replacing accessible tactile flooring;
- improving noise reduction features with low-pile carpeting and acoustic ceiling tiles;
- creating new accessible lighting systems; or
- considering new solutions to unforeseen accessibility barriers.



Removing room hazards like:

- noisy equipment;
- construction materials;
- physical barriers in pathways; and
- other obstructions.



Emergencies might cause changes to a service that people are familiar with. Provide a help desk to inform the public about the changes. Make sure that these help desks can give:

- information on the building's accessible features;
- help with [wayfinding](#) and accessing services; and
- updates on how to use services during emergencies.

Adjust your waiting areas and service desks during emergencies. Make sure all accessibility features stay in place.



- Provide enough space to allow for mobility aids.
- Provide convenient seating for a sign language interpreter or a support person.
- Provide care facilities for service animals.
- Provide translation and sign language interpretation services to make sure that all members of the Canadian public can access your service.
- Mark the area with the [universal symbol of accessibility](#).

If providing [alternate service areas](#), make sure that transport options remain accessible.

If you have to change your service delivery area because of an emergency, make sure it is not too distant from transportation services.

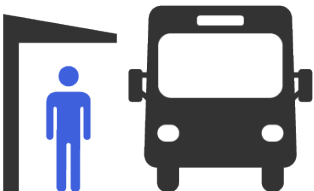


Evaluate transportation options for reaching the building where you deliver services. Make sure it is accessible for people using:

- accessible personal vehicles (for example, large vans with ramps and lifts for mobility aids.); and
- accessible transport options like ParaTranspo.

Replace any accessibility features made unusable by the emergency.

- For example, if a curb cut is unusable, provide a temporary ramp.



Make sure that it is possible to reach your service delivery area from:

- parking lots; and
- public transportation terminals.



Tips

Mask usage during COVID-19



Masks help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

- Where possible, use clear masks to allow for communication by lip-reading.
- Clear masks do not always meet standards for preventing the transmission of COVID-19. Consult local health authorities and [public health guides](#).



Tips

Using Floor Markers during COVID-19



During COVID-19, many service areas use markers on the floor to show where people should stand. These markers might not be accessible to those with low-vision.

Make sure that you use floor markers that are tactile and colour-contrasted.



Tips

Hand sanitizer stations during COVID-19

Hand sanitizer stations help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Many persons with disabilities have severe vulnerabilities to COVID-19. Sanitizer stations make it possible to deliver service in-person without spreading the virus.



Make sure that hand sanitizer stations are:

- placed in an area at an accessible height and free of obstacles for persons using wheelchairs or other mobility aids;
- using touchless automatic activation;
- clearly marked; and
- designed to release hand sanitizer when someone places a hand below the dispenser.

Do not use hand sanitizers with strong chemicals or scents. These create accessibility barriers.

- Find a product that meets safety needs without using strong chemicals.
- Select a hand sanitizer from the [List of hand sanitizers authorized by Health Canada](#).



Alternate service delivery

Emergencies may surprise you and leave you with little time to respond. Planning for accessibility is critical in this situation. Make sure that your alternate service solution:



- Provides the full range of the service to all persons with disabilities.
- Respects the dignity and independence of persons with disabilities.
- Protects the safety and comfort of all Canadians.



During an emergency, find a remote solution for delivering a service that is normally in-person. For example:

- online;
- by e-mail;
- by phone; or
- by mail.



Actions to take

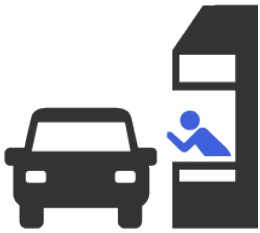
If your services change during an emergency, inform the Canadian public.

- Make sure all communications are accessible and in plain language.
 - Read more in: [Accessible communication during COVID-19 and other emergencies: A guideline for federal organizations](#).
- Make sure your service is accessible to persons with disabilities using communications technology.
- Train your service delivery staff to:
 - understand different assistive technologies persons with disabilities use to communicate; and
 - use [Accessible communication during COVID-19 and other emergencies: A guideline for persons with disabilities](#).

Use accessible products and services when communicating with the public.

Your service delivery website should be usable by all screen readers and similar technology.





Drive-through services during COVID-19

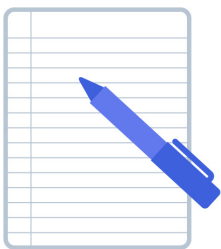
You may need to use a drive-through service to stay accessible during COVID-19.

- Using service windows prevents the need for indoor service areas.
- Make sure that these windows are accessible to:
 - a variety of vehicles; and
 - a variety of persons with disabilities.



Use accessibility features to provide drive-through services without increasing the risk of infection:

- Provide enough space at your service window for accessible vehicles using wheelchair lifts.
- Use traffic cones to direct vehicles to your service delivery window.
- Use accessible communication technologies and practices. This might include:
 - SMS texting;
 - video remote interpreting;
 - two-way induction loops; or
 - simple techniques like pen and paper.



Provide alternate accessible ways of delivering services for people:

- with visual impairment; and
- who cannot use a service accessible by car only.



Wayfinding

Wayfinding refers to information systems that guide people through physical environments. When effective, it can contribute to a sense of well-being, safety, and security.

If you are providing in-person services during emergencies, make sure that persons with disabilities are able to navigate to and from your service delivery area.

Poor wayfinding might lead to unsafe situations, especially during emergencies.

Emergency Signs

Temporary and permanent signs help people find their way during emergencies. These signs must:

- give health and safety information to the public; and
- be accessible to everyone.



Actions to take

Install signs as soon as possible and make sure they are accessible.

Signs should have all information in:



- Braille;
- large print; and
- audio messages (if possible).
 - See more in: [Accessible communication during COVID-19 and other emergencies: A guide for federal organizations.](#)



Use emergency signs to give directions for:

- accessible parking;
- entrances;
- pick-up and drop-off areas;
- service animal care areas; and
- other accessibility features.



Use emergency signs to warn about:

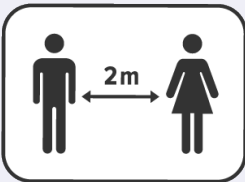
- inaccessible entrances,
- changes to pick up and drop-off areas;
- services that are not accessible; and
- other accessibility barriers.



Tips

Temporary Signs During COVID-19

Emergency signs about public health measures can help keep everyone safe. For COVID-19, use emergency signs to let everyone in your service area know your rules about:



- wearing masks;
- physical distancing; and
- the number of people allowed in an area.

Inside Travel Paths

All paths to essential areas must be accessible during emergencies. Determine if your usual accessible paths are safe.



Actions to take

Ensure the emergency is not stopping people from using public spaces. Maintain them on a regular basis. These areas include:



- registration areas;
- waiting areas;
- washrooms;
- service areas; and
- all other spaces used by the public or staff.

Make sure paths allow persons with mobility aids to turn around to change directions. All paths should be clear of hazards.

Outdoor Travel Paths

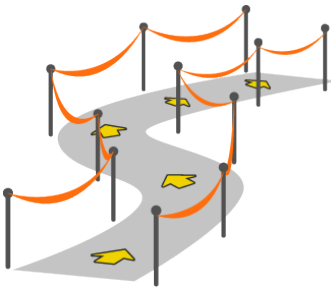


During an emergency, determine if your usual accessible paths are still usable. If the emergency has made them unusable, create replacement pathways.

- For example, sudden heavy snowfall might prevent the use of a ramp. If it is not possible to clear the ramp, provide a temporary replacement.

Outdoor paths to the building, including those from the parking lot and drop-off and pick-up areas should:

- be free of hazards; and
- have surfaces that are firm (not grass or dirt).



Make sure any temporary outdoor paths are:

- stable;
- slip resistant;
- wide enough for mobility aids; and
- without steps or steep slopes.

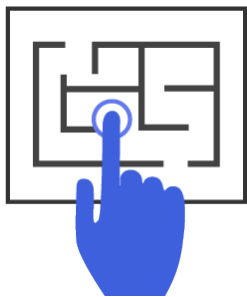


Actions to take



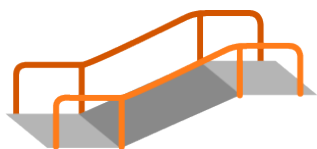
Consider using technology to help navigation.

- For example, create beacons to send wireless signals to smart phone apps. These apps give their users directions to the accessible paths you have identified.
- Research what navigation technologies might work best for your organization and service delivery.



Use tactile maps at main entrances to remove visibility barriers to navigation.

- During emergencies, use tactile maps to help persons with disabilities navigate your service delivery area without help.
- During public health emergencies, do not use tactile maps. (For example, COVID-19 does not permit the use of tactile maps due to infection risk).
 - Replace the tactile map with accessibility features to remove visibility barriers to navigation. (For example, an audio-format directional guide).



Ramps should be wide enough for a wheelchair and have:

- handrails to help with balance and wayfinding;
- edges along the sides to prevent falling off the ramp; and,
- level landings at the top and bottom.

Guiding

If unexpected changes happen to your service area, it might not be immediately accessible. Ensure your emergency plan covers all services.



- Create an accessible solution by providing in-person guidance.
- Train all employees and volunteers to help persons with disabilities in a respectful way.
- When helping or guiding a person in need, be flexible to different situations and needs.
- Follow best practices for [communicating with persons with disabilities during emergencies](#).

Summary



Your organization must be accessible.

- Train your staff to provide accessible services.
- Make sure all staff are safe during emergencies.
- Make sure your organization is accessible for persons with disabilities on your staff.



You must deliver accessible services at all times. This includes:

- Delivering accessible services during ongoing states of emergency.
- Continue delivering accessible services after emergencies.



You must prepare for emergencies.

- Remove all accessibility barriers in advance.
- Maintain accessibility features during emergencies.
- Prepare for emergency changes.
- Develop accessible built environment.
- Create an emergency egress plan.



Some changes must be made during emergencies.

- Make changes to keep everyone safe.
- Determine how to deliver accessible services.
- Create alternate service delivery methods.
- Make sure everyone can find their way.

Making your organization accessible for Canadians during emergencies:

- maintains the human right to access; and
- could save lives.

Other resources

- [The Accessible Canada Act](#)
- [A Way with Words and Images: Suggestions for the portrayal of people with disabilities](#)
- [Accessibility Glossary](#) – Translation Bureau, Public Works and Government Services Canada
- [The Curb Cut Effect](#)
- [List of hand sanitizers authorized by Health Canada](#)
- [Multiple Chemical Sensitivity \(MCS\)](#)
- [National Standard of Canada for accessible built environment](#)
- [Universal symbol of accessibility](#)
- [Principles of Universal Design](#)
- [Public health guides on clear masks](#)

Contact us!

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