

AODA Tipsheet #5

Communicating with members with physical disabilities

This series provides tips for Ontario housing co-ops on communicating with members with disabilities. Using these tips will help your co-op adhere to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

GENERAL TIPS:

Ask before you help. Not everyone who has a physical disability requires assistance. People with physical disabilities often have found their own ways of doing things.

Speak naturally and directly to your members and the public. Having a physical disability does not necessarily mean the person has another disability such as hearing loss.

People who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices have different disabilities and varying abilities. Some can use their arms and hands. Some can get out of their wheelchairs or off their scooters and even walk for short distances.

Don't push or touch a person's wheelchair, scooter or other mobility device without permission, unless it's an emergency. It's part of their personal space.

Wheelchair and scooter users are people, not equipment. Don't lean over someone in a wheelchair or scooter to shake another person's hand or ask a person who uses a wheelchair or scooter to hold things.

People who use canes or crutches need their arms to balance, so never grab them. People who have limited mobility may lean on a door for support as they open it. Pushing the door open from behind or unexpectedly opening the door may cause them to fall. Even pulling out or pushing in a chair may present a problem. Always ask before offering help.

If the service counter in the office is too high for a wheelchair or scooter user to see over, step around it to provide service. Have a clipboard handy if filling in forms or providing signatures is expected.

People with disabilities use a variety of transportation services when traveling to and from appointments. When scheduling a meeting, be aware that the person/ applicant may be required to make a reservation 24 hours in advance. Provide the person with an estimated time to schedule their return trip when arranging appointments.

Some people with physical disabilities may have a support animal. Remember that a person with a physical disability has the right to have their support

When talking to a person who uses a wheelchair or scooter, where possible sit at his/her level. If that's not possible, stand at a slight distance away, so that the individual isn't straining their neck to make eye contact with you.

Some members with physical disabilities may be accompanied by a support person. When meeting, ensure you speak directly to the member, not the support person.

If a support person is present, create an opportunity for the member to indicate whether they want the support person there for the full appointment. Obtain consent if confidential information is going to be shared.

MOBILITY TIPS:

Keep the ramps and wheelchair-accessible doors to your building unblocked. Remove and minimize obstacles in the lobby and hallways, in garbage and laundry rooms so that people with physical disabilities can access these areas.

Try to ensure there is all-round space and unobstructed access for people who use wheelchairs, scooters and other mobility devices in the office, member meeting rooms and other public areas of the building.

If there are different routes through your building, ensure signs and staff can direct people to the most accessible ways around the building and grounds.

animal with them in all public areas of your facility and areas open to members, except where exempt by law, such as in food preparation areas.

Falls can be a big problem for people who have limited mobility. Be sure to set out adequate warning signs after washing floors. Also put out mats on rainy or snowy days to keep the floors as dry as possible. Make sure mats don't bunch up and make the floor impassable for people who use wheelchairs, scooters, or walkers.

Some people have limited use of their hands, wrists or arms. Offer help, as appropriate, with reaching for, grasping or lifting objects, opening doors and garbage chutes, etc.

Be aware of "reach limits" of a person who uses a wheelchair or scooter. Place as many items as possible within their grasp and at a height that facilitates access, for example: notices, the location of a member's mailbox, the location of entry buzzer systems, etc.

If you offer a seat to a person who has limited mobility, or if seating in public areas of your building is available, keep in mind that benches, chairs with arms or with higher seats are easier for some.