

AODA: Universal Design Will Be the Law

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Photo: Frances Jewett

THE ONTARIO GOVERNMENT IS introducing five sets of mandatory standards under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA)*. These standards require public and private sector organizations to remove and prevent barriers to accessibility for customers and employees with disabilities. The legislation is part of the Ministry of Community and Social Services' (MCSS) plan to ensure that, by 2025, people with disabilities are able to participate in and enjoy opportunities available to people without disabilities.

Universal design refers to a broad-spectrum solution that produces buildings, products and environments that are usable and effective for everyone, not just people with disabilities. Innovative practitioners have been slowly improving accessibility of the built environment; but, in the coming years, the introduction of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)* will move universal design into the mainstream. Expect exciting transformation as new constraints imposed on designers force breakthroughs that will improve the lives of millions, whatever their abilities.

The power of the AODA is its global definition of accessibility. Accessibility has traditionally been equated with ramps and automatic door openers for people in wheelchairs and scooters. As a result of the new Customer Service Standards, Ontarians will be much more sensitive to the meaning of equal access. Invisible, attitudinal barriers typically present the biggest challenge for people with

disabilities. Soon to follow, the Information and Communication and Employment Standards will educate us further about how people with disabilities can be better served and enabled to join the workforce in greater numbers. When the Built Environment Standards are finalized, we may come to think of our traditional approach to alternate access for people with disabilities as unethical. We are beginning to see universal access as a right.

Accessibility also makes good business sense. Approximately 1.85 million people in Ontario have a disability. That's one in seven. Over the next 20 years, as the population ages, that number will rise to one in five Ontarians. In Canada, the buying power of persons with disabilities is now estimated to be \$25 billion, a figure that more than doubles when you factor in the influence these individuals have on the spending decisions of friends and families. The **market will reward architects, designers and businesses that offer accessible or universal designs.**

The AODA Built Environment Standards will require architects and designers to comply with a new standard or a revised version of the OBC; in itself, nothing new. Heightened awareness of our social responsibility and the resulting market pressures will be the transforming influences. We anticipate universal design will flourish in the coming years as Ontario takes corporate social responsibility for people with disabilities seriously.

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Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) Standards

1 **Customer Service Standards:** The first set of standards to come into effect relates to customer service and affects organizations that provide goods and services to the public. Public sector organizations must have complied by January 1, 2010; private sector firms by January 1, 2012.

The next three standards will be harmonized and put in place in 2011.

2 **Information and Communications Standards:** The proposed standard outlines how businesses and organizations may be required to create, provide and receive information and communications in ways that are accessible for people with disabilities.

3 **Employment Standards:** The goal of the proposed standard is to help employers create equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

The proposed standard:

- sets out specific requirements for the recruitment, retention and accommodation of people with disabilities; and
- applies to all organizations in Ontario with at least one employee

4 **Transportation Standards:** This standard is the only one that is sector-specific; that is, it relates specifically to modes of transportation that come under the jurisdiction of provincial and municipal governments.

Due to the volume of public responses, it is not known when the final standard (Built Environment) will be released.

5 **Built Environment Standards:** The goal of the proposed standard is to break down barriers in buildings and other structures for people with disabilities by proposing requirements in areas such as:

- entrances, doorways and ramps;
- parking spaces;
- signs and displays; and
- recreation, such as parks and trails

We anticipate that only new construction and renovations will be required to comply with this standard and that it will eventually be integrated with the Ontario Building Code (OBC).

Source: Ministry of Community and Social Services