

COVID-19 and Persons with Disabilities

The members of the Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities (ACPD) are concerned that during this COVID pandemic there have been many measures undertaken by the City of Hamilton in support of all citizens that have had an alternate impact upon persons with disabilities.

The following are but a sample of concerns and challenges surrounding COVID faced by persons with disabilities before, during and after provisions and restrictions were imposed and subsequently lifted by the City or province.

Transportation

- lack of communication from the City about, and unsatisfactory service adjustments related to accessible transit
- Accessible Transportation Services was closed with no options for contact with them where necessary
- Taxi Scrip program was unavailable to purchase scrip for many months restricting transportation options for persons with disabilities unable to travel via either DARTS or HSR
- service alternate to pick up persons using a wheelchair by DARTS upon request from typical HSR bus stops was activated with no consultation whatsoever with members of ACPD resulting in many limitations including persons with other forms of mobility needs (e.g. users of a walker) being excluded
- insufficient communication from the HSR and DARTS to the general public, and more specifically to all persons using DARTS, of the DARTS and HSR bus stop pick-up process

- wait times for arranging trips via DARTS increased dramatically to the point where callers would be required to wait 15 to 20 callers ahead in line which is contrary to agreement with ACPD in years past where callers should have no more than 4 - 5 caller wait times

- online trip booking with DARTS was cancelled with no notice to passengers of this change

- requirement for customers using walkers, wheelchairs, scooters and all other personal mobility devices to travel with a companion aboard the HSR was not communicated nor immediately possible for persons with disabilities wishing to travel aboard the HSR

- when travelling aboard the HSR by persons using a mobility device there was an obligation for an untrained companion to deploy the ramp as bus operators did not leave their seats

- DARTS utilized two special vans to transport customers who failed the COVID-19 screener, but these vans were also used to transport other healthy customers

- DARTS ran a program that would pick a customer up at a bus stop throughout the City for customers who could not enter through the rear doors, but this was not communicated effectively

- persons with walkers were excluded in the users permitted to use DARTS in lieu of HSR if not previously DARTS registered

- need for DARTS to be compliant with AODA regulations regarding assisting passengers with aids they bring aboard a bus, especially during the period of Covid where such assistance would reduce the need for personal assistants

- the limitation of 1 person per DARTS van was not effectively communicated

Retail and Commercial Business Access

- floor decals and signage related to physical distancing requirements are not user-friendly for persons with disabilities, in that they are not uniform in design and do not contain any tactile walking surface indicators. They are used in lieu of other forms of instruction, however, they are inaccessible to persons with limited or no eyesight
- no information or regulations were put forth to recommend physical distancing measures for persons with various assistive devices
- there was no direction from the City to retail or other businesses (e.g. animal care) to provide consideration for persons with disabilities as accommodation to use services or patronize businesses.
- some temporary outdoor patio set-ups blocked accessible parking spots and curb ramps
- lack of open, accessible restrooms in public spaces causing issues for persons who because of medical conditions require washroom access
- dedicated one-way store entrances and exits create extended travel distances for persons with disabilities already restricted from full access because of their disability. Alternatives were unavailable demonstrating a clear lack of consideration

Personal Care

- when the pandemic started everyone was mandated to hold a single job, which left people who hire personal care attendants independently as a secondary job high and dry and needing to make alternative arrangements which may not have been possible limiting their full and proper care
- dedicated senior shopping hours are too early for some people and employees aren't equipped to offer assistance to persons with disabilities
- some retail store outlets restricted hours of operation requiring patrons to shop during shorter hours causing more people into potential contact with each other which was contrary to health recommendations for distancing
- residential care facility evictions

City of Hamilton Services and Administration

- felt like the City abandoned the AODA and all its requirements and guidelines established for transportation, built environment, etc.
- no flexibility in altering regulations for persons with disabilities
- lack of representation by or consultation with persons with disabilities on the Emergency Operations Centre Team
- accessible pedestrian signals were disabled, but notification of this change was not provided in an accessible format
- the digital divide, being the gap that exists between individuals

who have access to modern information and communication technology and those who do not, disproportionately hits the disabled population and is compounded by employment programs and libraries, often used for public internet access, being closed by emergency orders

- residential care facility evictions

General

- increased social isolation, loss of personal support workers, disruption of vital health services and difficulties accessing basic necessities and information

- the digital divide, being the gap that exists between individuals who have access to modern information and communication technology and those who do not, disproportionately hits the disabled population and is compounded by employment programs and libraries, often used for public internet access, being closed by emergency orders

ACPD therefore respectfully requests that consultation be made with the aforementioned Committee when developing future policies and procedures, with the understanding that Public Health Services and the City's Emergency Operations Centre, hold the public's health as paramount. However, some policies and procedures have had unexpected consequences for persons with disabilities. The Committee believes they may be able to mitigate some of these consequences.