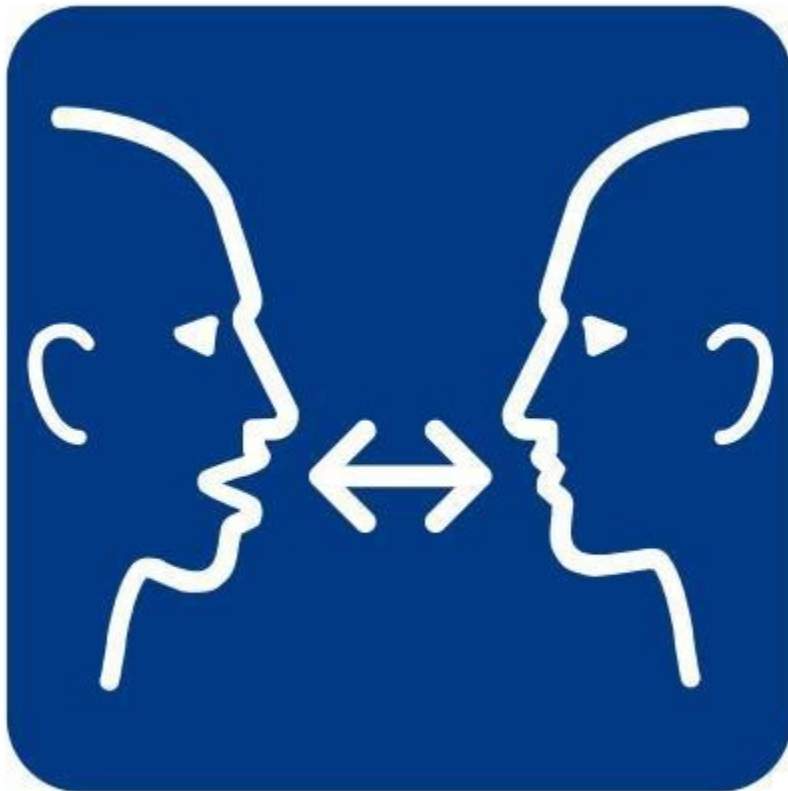


# **Accessible Communication**

**Guidelines for making services and businesses accessible  
for people who have disabilities that affect their  
communication**



Communication Disabilities Access Canada

These guidelines are intended for businesses, private, public and non-profit organizations and government services. They are useful for managers, front-line staff and policy makers who are responsible for providing face-to-face and telephone customer services, hosting meetings and events, and communicating information in any way to and from the public. In this document, we provide general suggestions on ways to make services accessible for people who have speech, language and communication disabilities that are not primarily caused by significant hearing or vision impairments.

These guidelines accompany CDAC's 40-minute webinar on [Making Services Accessible for People who have Speech, Language and Communication Disabilities](#).

We recommend that you connect with The Canadian Hearing Society, The Canadian Association of the Deaf and The Canadian National Institute for the Blind for information on accessibility for people who are culturally Deaf, oral deaf, or deafened, hard of hearing, or who are blind, or partially sighted. Contact the Canadian Deafblind Association for information about people who are deaf and blind.



Communication Disabilities Access Canada (CDAC) is a national, non-profit organization. CDAC promotes accessibility, inclusion and human rights for people who have speech and language disabilities. For information about CDAC, our projects, resources and courses go to <http://www.cdacanada.com/>



# Table of Contents

<b>Background</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Accessible Communication</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Disabilities That Affect Communication</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Communication Methods</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>People Who May Need Communication Supports</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Identifying Communication Support Needs</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Arranging Appointments</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Communicating</b> .....	<b>9</b>
If the person’s speech is difficult to understand .....	9
If the person uses a letter or picture board.....	10
If the person uses a communication device .....	10
If the person has difficulty understanding what you are saying .....	11
If the person has a hearing loss .....	11
If the person has a support person with them. ....	12
<b>Communication Tools</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Communication Assistance</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Telephone Services</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Reading and Written Information</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Websites and digital information</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Privacy</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Environment</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Specific Contexts</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Healthcare and Emergency.....	16
Police, Legal and Justice .....	17
Human Rights Agencies.....	18
<b>Accessible Communication Checklist</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Resources</b> .....	<b>22</b>

# Background

Being able to communicate is something many of us take for granted. Speaking and understanding, reading and writing are skills that most of us use every day. We communicate to express our feelings, thoughts and opinions, to ask questions, to get things we need and to give information to others. We communicate with lots of people and for many different reasons. For example, we might ask for things we want in a store; discuss our medical concerns with a doctor; order a meal in a restaurant; interact with a bank teller about our finances, or call a taxi company to book a ride. Being able to understand and be understood is fundamental to getting goods and services in our community, whether that is through face-to-face interactions, writing, online or communicating over the telephone.

In Canada, there are approximately 440,000 people who have speech and language disabilities that are not caused by Deafness or significant hearing loss. They may have cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, Down Syndrome, learning disability, fetal alcohol syndrome, cognitive or intellectual disability, acquired or traumatic brain injury, aphasia after a stroke, dementia, head and neck cancer, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, or Multiple Sclerosis and other conditions.

Like everyone, people who have disabilities that affect their communication, have the right to access your services. They cannot be discriminated against, denied or given inferior services because they have a disability. Their rights to equal access to goods and services are protected by:

- The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982)
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)
- Federal, provincial and territorial human rights codes and accessibility laws

The basis of all good communication includes a respectful attitude and being a good listener. These skills are more important than ever for people who have disabilities that affect how they understand what people are saying or express themselves. In addition, they may require you to do some things differently so that both of you can effectively communicate with each other.

[Watch Glenda Watson Hyatt's TedX Talk on the importance of communication access.](#)

# Accessible Communication

We all need to make sense of information and to be able to express ourselves when using services. It is frustrating if we don't understand information given to us, or if we can't get our message across to a cashier, a waitress in a restaurant, a dentist, a bus driver or anyone who works in our community. People who have disabilities that affect their communication can face daily and significant challenges and frustrations when communication breaks down.

Fortunately, there are things that you can do to make your services communication accessible, so that everyone can:

- Understand information given to them
- Communicate effectively in-person and over the telephone
- Use the communication methods they think are best for them
- Read and understand written information
- Complete forms, take notes and sign forms
- Navigate and use the organization's website and social media
- Communicate and participate at meetings, forums and public events

# Disabilities That Affect Communication

Disabilities that affect communication can occur in one or more of the following areas:

- Speaking
- Understanding what others are saying
- Reading and writing

Some of the main types of disabilities affect communication include:

**Hearing:** For people who are deaf or have a hearing loss it can be difficult or impossible to hear what a person is saying and sometimes their own speech may not be easily understood.

**Movement:** People who have disabilities such as cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis may have difficulty moving their muscles to speak, use gestures, turn pages in a book and write.

**Cognition:** People who have intellectual disabilities from birth or acquire brain injuries or dementia or Alzheimer's disease later in life can have difficulty remembering, learning, understanding, or problem-solving that can make communication challenging.

**Language:** People who have aphasia after a stroke or accident may have difficulty understanding others, speaking, reading and writing. The experience of aphasia is similar to being in a foreign country where you know what you want, but you have problems understanding others or expressing yourself.

In addition to having communication challenges, people can have multiple disabilities. People who are deafblind have limited hearing and vision. They are unable to use these senses to receive communication. People who have cerebral palsy, may be unable to speak, walk or physically manipulate objects. People who have autism spectrum disorder may experience challenges learning and using language, as well as interacting with other people.

Regardless of the cause of the disability, people who have disabilities that affect their communication are individuals and they communicate in their own, unique ways.

They can also communicate more effectively when they are given appropriate communication supports.

[Click here for more information about disabilities that can affect communication.](#)

# Communication Methods

People communicate in different ways because of the type of disability they have, as well as their personality, preferences, needs, skills and access to clinical services and device funding. Most individuals use a variety of ways to communicate. Some ways that people communicate include:

- Speech
- Body language, facial expressions and gestures
- Pointing or looking at objects and people
- Sign Languages (e.g. American Sign Language, Langue des signes Québécoise, Signed Exact English, and Adapted Sign Language)
- Writing, typing or drawing
- Spelling on a letter board
- Pointing to pictures, symbols and/or written words on a communication display
- Using a communication device

[Click here for more information](#)

# Communication Barriers

People, who have disabilities that affect their communication, can experience a range of barriers when accessing goods and services in their communities. They report that people often:

- Ignore them, and speak to the person with them
- Underestimate their abilities to make their own decisions
- Speak about them as if they are invisible
- Assume they cannot hear or understand what they are saying
- Restrict them to answering yes and no questions rather than letting them use their communication boards or devices
- Pretend to understand their messages when they don't

In addition, service providers may not give them:

- The time they need to communicate
- Information in ways they can read and understand
- The supports they need to communicate at meetings, and public events or in critical situations such as healthcare, police, legal and justice services

[Click here for more information.](#)

## **People Who May Need Communication Supports**

People have communication support needs if they need assistance to understand, express themselves or interact with others.

They may:

- Speak in a way that is hard for you to understand
- Communicate using a picture or letter board, writing, or a communication device
- Have difficulty communicating exactly what they want to express
- Show you a card or tell you they have a disability that affects their communication
- Look confused, shrug or gesture that they don't understand what you are saying
- Defer to someone to answer for them
- Answer in ways that suggest they may not have heard or understood what you said
- Give inaccurate, irrelevant, unclear or rambling answers to questions

## **Identifying Communication Support Needs**

Essential services or services that an individual uses routinely, such as hospital, doctor's office or dental clinic, may want to ask an individual to identify their support needs ahead of time and with the person's permission, keep a record of their support needs on file.

Questions might include accommodations around appointment arrangements, how the person communicates, what they want the service provider to do when communicating with them, whether they want someone they trust to assist with communication, whether they



require support to understand spoken and /or written information, and whether they have requirements for communicating over the telephone, reading, completing and signing forms.

[Click here for a questionnaire about communication support needs](#)

## **Arranging Appointments**

People, who have communication support needs, usually require more time for an appointment because it takes longer for them to communicate. You may want to schedule an extra 15-20 minutes or arrange an appointment at the end of the day so that you can go over the allotted time. When appropriate, it may also be helpful to send the person a list of questions that will be asked during the appointment so that they can prepare their answers ahead of time by writing them out, or programming them into a communication device. If the person needs to follow-up with you after a meeting, discuss whether they will do this via phone, text or email communication.

## **Communicating**

- Treat the person with respect by talking directly to them, not just the individual who might be with them.
- Speak naturally and clearly, using your normal tone, volume and rate.
- If you can, move to a quiet, well-lit place to communicate.
- Do not underestimate the person's abilities.
- Be patient. Do not rush the conversation.
- Ask what you can do to make communication go smoothly. People who communicate in different ways are the experts on how they communicate and what they want you to do.
- Give the person opportunities to communicate what they want. Avoid guessing and overuse of Yes and No questions.

### **If the person's speech is difficult to understand**

- Watch the person as they speak.

- Move to a quiet area with no distractions.
- Take the time to get familiar with the person's speech. It gets easier the more you listen and the person may need to repeat what they are saying a few times before you understand.
- Do not pretend to understand the person's message if you don't. Politely tell the person if you do not understand their message, so that they can say it another way, show you what they are talking about, spell it out verbally, write it down, use a communication device or point to letters, words or pictures on their communication board.

### **If the person uses a letter or picture board**

- If it is not obvious, say, "Please show me how you communicate." The person will either demonstrate or show you their communication instructions.
- If the person uses their hand to point to items on a board, say the letter, word or picture out loud that they select.
- If the person uses a way other than pointing, such as an eye gaze to select items on his/her communication board, they probably have someone with them to assist you communicating with them.
- It helps to write down the items that the person selects so that you can keep track of the message.
- If the items that the person selects do not make immediate sense, try putting the words together into a sentence.

### **If the person uses a communication device**

- Stand or sit in front of the person. Do not look over their shoulder or ask how they use the device.
- Wait for the person to construct their message.
- If you don't understand the speech, tell the person and they will either repeat it or indicate that you can read the screen.

## **If the person has difficulty understanding what you are saying**

Some people, not everyone, may have difficulty understanding what you are saying.

People may want you to:

- Make sure the person is attending to you before you speak.
- Use clear, everyday language.
- Avoid using unnecessary words, jargon, technical terms and long, ambiguous sentences.
- Pause between your sentences. Allow time for the person to understand or to speak, nod, signal “yes” or use their communication board or device.
- If there is a communication assistant present, this person may rephrase what you are saying or use other strategies to support the individual in understanding what you are saying.
- Show the person what you are talking about by:
  - Using gestures
  - Pointing at objects, people or pictures
  - Writing the key words that you are saying
  - Drawing a picture or diagram

## **If the person has a hearing loss**

- Find out if the person uses a hearing aid, if they have it, and if it is working.
- Sit in a place where the person can see you when you are speaking.
- Speak normally, do not yell or shout, or talk too quickly.
- Reduce background noise.
- Explore other ways of communicating such as writing, typing or showing examples of what you are talking about.

[Click here for more information from The Canadian Hearing Society \(CHS\)](#)

### **If the person has a support person with them.**

The individual may have someone with them who can assist with communication, such as a family member, friend or support staff. It's important to:

- Speak directly to the individual, not to the accompanying person.
- Ensure that the individual has access to their support person when needed.
- Accept the person's messages as conveyed to you by the support person.
- If you are unsure about a message conveyed by the support person, ask the individual, "Is that what you wanted to communicate?"
- The support person may also help the person understand what is being said.
- Do not assume the support person makes decisions for the individual.
- Check with the individual before sharing any confidential information with the support person and if required, have them sign a privacy agreement.

## **Communication Tools**

Many people use and own their own pictures, symbols, letter boards and devices to communicate. These systems are often customized for their use specialized communication clinics. Businesses and most organizations are not expected to provide a communication device for a person to use when interacting with them.

However, it is useful to have a pen and notepad available if an individual wants you to write down what you are saying or if they want to write a message to you.

Essential services, such as healthcare and emergency services should have basic picture, letter boards available that people can use in these situations. Speech-Language Pathologists can help to develop and train service providers in how to use these tools.

[More information on communication tools](#)

# Communication Assistance

Some people may require communication assistance when interacting at a meeting, public consultation, conference, committee or in an important situation, such as a healthcare setting or when communicating with police and legal professionals. While some individuals may have a person who can provide this assistance, there may be times when an individual does not have someone to assist and/or requires the organization or service to help them to find and/or pay for these services in the same way as they would pay for sign language or translation services.

In critical, high risk situations, a qualified Speech-Language Pathologist may be required to assist with communication.

CDAC has a database of people who have taken training in how to assist with communication in general, non-critical situations as well as Speech-Language Pathologists who are trained to support victims, witnesses and accused in justice situations. Please note these services are not accredited or accountable to CDAC.

[Click here for more information and to access the CDAC communication assistance database](#)

# Telephone Services

If you or the individual needs to connect by telephone, find out they want to use their speech, a device or a communication assistant. Depending on the nature of your services, you may need policies and procedures in place to ensure that the individual with a communication disability has authorized the assistant and that you are speaking to that person over the phone. Alternatively, the person might want to use email, social media, video call, or other text-based communications instead of the telephone.

# Reading and Written Information

Whether it is a brochure, an announcement, a note, flyer, booklet, document or a web page, it is important that your information can be read and understood by your intended readers. It is a good idea to use the principles of plain language when producing all your written information, because everyone benefits from understanding your information. Plain language is a style of writing that uses everyday language.

Plain language uses:

- Language at approximately a Grade 5 reading level.
- Short, simple words.
- Sentences that are no longer than 15 words.
- No unnecessary information, jargon, and terminology
- Organizes main points of information into short paragraphs, lists and bullets.

In addition, plain language has guidelines for the type of font to use as well as size of font, use of color, contrast and images. There are a number of online resources that provide guidelines for writing plain language documents. In addition, some organizations offer plain language services and will review and make suggestions to make your information easier for people to read.

Some people may require reading materials in alternate formats such as large print, or electronic copy. Other people may want human assistance to support them to read and understand a written document.

[Click here for more information about making reading materials accessible](#)

## Websites and digital information

In addition to using Plain Language Guidelines to make content and layout of a webpage easy to read and understand, all websites must comply with the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

[Click here for Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#)

## **Forms, Note-taking and Signatures**

Not being able to physically hold a pen does not mean that a person cannot approve or sign a document. People who cannot write and who understand the meaning of a document may use an alternative mode for signing. Alternatives range from an X, a stamp, a thumb-print, or assistance from an approved person. Depending on the situation, you may want to negotiate a formal arrangement for signatures with the individual.

Make your forms easy to read and understand by following plain language guidelines. Some people will want to complete them on their home computer, especially if they use switches or other alternate access methods. Your forms must comply with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and provide the option to save the document without losing everything, as some people who require communication supports may need to take frequent breaks. Accessible forms should also allow a person to access a spell checker, dictionary and predictive text.

Alternatively, some people will want human assistance to complete a form and take notes.

## **Meetings, Public Events and Workshops**

If you organize meetings and events, it is important to offer communication assistance as part of your accessibility options, in the same way that you offer sign language interpreting and attendant services. A person may need you to help find a communication assistant for them or pay for a person they know who can assist them. It is also helpful to give people the agenda ahead of time as the person might want to prepare a written message or program what they want to say in their communication device. If you are chairing or moderating an event, make sure you give people the time they need to communicate their messages.

[Click here for more information about accessible meetings](#)

# Privacy

Be mindful of the individual's right to privacy. While an individual may use a support person to assist in daily activities, they may not want to share aspects of their personal life with that person or anyone else. It is the person's responsibility to negotiate privacy agreements with their communication assistant. However, in some situations your organization may require a communication assistant to sign an agreement to protect everyone's privacy (e.g. group counseling).

# Environment

Use signs that are easily recognized by people and put them in areas that are well lit and can be seen by people who use wheelchairs and other mobility devices. Make sure your workspace is well lit because people who use communication boards and devices need appropriate lighting to see and use their communication systems. It is a good idea to have a quiet area, with no distractions, that you can use so that you can concentrate on communication.

# Specific Contexts

## Healthcare and Emergency

In a healthcare situation, patients who have conditions that affect their communication may require assistance and tools to communicate about their healthcare and to give informed consent to treatment.

The following guidelines and resources may be useful:

- Understand the [key concepts](#) in providing communication supports that patients may need to reveal and exercise capacity to communicate about healthcare decisions.
- [Identify](#) and record a patient's communication support needs.
- [Identify the support person](#) that the patient authorizes to assist with communication and/or decisions and arrange signing of confidentiality, if required.



- Ensure the patient has access to healthcare and emergency specific [communication tools](#) they use or need at all times.
- Use best [communication practices](#) to support a patient in one or more areas of understanding, problem solving, decision-making and/or expressive communication.
- [Hear and acknowledge](#) the patient's questions, concerns, opinions and decisions.
- Engage a [Speech Language Pathologist in critical situations](#) and if there is evidence of undue persuasion, coercion or abuse of power.
- [Document how communication supports](#) were provided and how decisions were made.

[Click here for more information on communication tools for healthcare settings](#)

[Click here for communication tools in emergency and disaster situations](#)

## **Police, Legal and Justice**

Police, Crowns, Defense Counsel, Court Accessibility Coordinators, Victim services and Judges must make their services accessible for victims, witnesses and accused persons who have disabilities that affect their communication. The following guidelines and resources may be useful:

- Understand [barriers to justice](#) for a victim/witness or accused person who has a disability that affects communication.
- Recognize the [legal framework for Communication Intermediaries](#) in justice services.
- [Identify](#) a victim/witness or accused person who has a disability that affects communication and explore the supports they may require throughout the justice process.
- Engage a qualified Speech-Language Pathologist who is trained as a [communication intermediary](#) to assess and provide communication supports at earliest possible stage of the process.
- Ensure the individual has access [to communication tools](#) they use or need at all times.

- Use best [communication practices](#) to support the victim/witness or accused person in one or more areas of understanding, problem solving, decision-making and/or expressive communication.
- [Document how communication supports](#) were provided throughout the process.

[Click here for information about access to police, legal and justice situations](#)

## Human Rights Agencies

Human rights commissions and tribunals must provide and protect a person's right to communication accommodations and supports.

The following resources may be useful:

- Understand the [contextual factors](#) and the [barriers](#) that individuals may experience when communicating about their rights.
- [Identify](#) and record an individual's communication support needs.
- [Identify the support person](#) that the individual **authorizes** to assist with communication and/or decisions
- Recognize authentic [communication assistance](#).
- Arrange for support person(s) to sign confidentiality agreements, if required.
- Ensure the individual has access [to communication tools](#) they use or need at all times.
- Use best [communication practices](#) to support the individual if required in one or more areas of understanding, problem solving, decision-making and/or expressive communication.
- [Hear and acknowledge](#) the person's questions, concerns, opinions and decisions.
- Engage an impartial, qualified [Speech-Language Pathologist](#) if:
  - the individual has a complex communication disability or no obvious way of communicating
  - there is evidence of a conflict of interest, undue persuasion or coercion from support person(s)
- [Document how communication supports](#) were provided and how decisions were made

# Communication Access Symbol

The image here shows two heads facing each other in profile, with ears and eyes. One head has an open mouth as if speaking. There is a two-way arrow going between the heads illustrating a two-way interaction. The image is white on a blue background.



Just as the wheelchair symbol indicates accessibility for people with mobility disabilities, the communication access symbol shows that an organization is prepared to make every effort to make its services accessible for people with disabilities that affect communication.

It shows that communication:

- Involves two or more people
- Is about interaction
- Is about giving, as well as receiving information
- Is about listening and watching

Display the communication access symbol with the caption “Let us know if you have any communication needs when using our service”. If possible, have a low desk section for people who use wheelchairs and signage and it should be at a height that is easily read from the height of a wheelchair.

[Click here to download the communication access symbol](#)

# Accessible Communication Checklist

When you meet a person who has a disability that affects their communication, do you:

- Talk respectfully in a normal, tone and volume
- Take time to communicate
- Talk directly to the person, not about them or to the person with them

## **When communicating, do you:**

- Ask the person how they communicate (if it is not obvious)
- Watch and respond to their body language, gestures, pointing to objects, items on a communication display
- Avoid overusing yes and no questions
- Give the person the time they need to communicate
- Ask permission to guess if you think you know what they are communicating
- Tell the person if you do not understand their message and give the person opportunities to repeat or use other ways to communicate their message to you
- Use everyday language if the person has difficulty understanding

## **When providing telephone services, do you:**

- Give extra time to communicate with a person who has unclear speech or uses a device over the telephone
- Provide alternate options for telephone services such as in-person meetings, text, email, Skype and social media
- Have procedures in place for a person to use an authorized communication assistant over the telephone

## **When hosting appointments, meetings and public forums, do you:**

- Provide the agenda ahead of time
- Offer communication assistance as part of your accessibility options (e.g. sign language, communication assistance, attendant services)
- Help find and pay for a communication assistant, if the person does not have someone to assist.
- Offer extra time for an appointment or meeting

**When providing written information, and if requested, do you:**

- Offer to read and explain documents
- Take notes, write down instructions or appointments
- Assist with filling in forms and / or provide an electronic version of the form
- Give written information in plain language that is easy to read and understand
- Offer alternate formats, such as large print or electronic copies
- Provide an accessible website that complies with the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
- Accept alternate signatures or authorized signers

**Does your space have:**

- A quiet, well-lit space to communicate
- Low service desks and counters for people in wheelchairs
- Signs that are easy to understand and positioned where people can see them

**Does your organization have:**

- A Go-to person who has taken extra training in communication accessibility
- A person who has a disability that affects communication on your accessibility advisory committee
- A process to train all existing and new staff
- An accessible complaint process
- An accessible process to respond and resolve complaints
- An internal or external organization or person who can advise on how to resolve communication access complaints

# Resources

## CDAC online courses

<http://courses.cdacanada.com>

## Communication Access Resources and Symbol

<http://www.communication-access.org/>

<http://www.communication-access.org/resources/symbol/>

## Communication Assistance Database

<http://www.cdacanada.com/communication-assistance-database/>

## Plain Language Guidelines

<https://www.scopeaust.org.au/service/accessible-information/>

## Access to Healthcare

<http://www.patientprovidercommunication.org>

<http://www.cdacanada.com/projects/access-to-healthcare/>

## Access to Police, Legal and Justice Services

<http://www.access-to-justice.org/>

## Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

<https://www.w3.org/WAI/WCAG21/quickref>

## Accessible Forms

<https://doccenter.freedomscientific.com/doccenter/archives/training/accessible-forms-in-word.htm>

## Accessible PDF Forms using Adobe Acrobat Pro

<https://www.washington.edu/accessibility/documents/pdf-forms/>

## **The Canadian Hearing Society**

<https://www.chs.ca>

## **Canadian Deafblind Association**

[http://www.cdbaontario.com/about/index\\_e.php](http://www.cdbaontario.com/about/index_e.php)

## **Canadian Deaf Association**

[http://www.cdbaontario.com/about/index\\_e.php](http://www.cdbaontario.com/about/index_e.php)

## **Canadian National Institute for the Blind**

<https://www.crowdp.ca/en/partners/canadian-national-institute-blind-cnib>