

Accessibility Guidelines

For Organizers & Facilitators

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Introduction

This document was created in the spring of 2015 by members of **Accessibilize Montreal** as part of the “**By and For Us: The Community at the Head of the Organization**” project, organized by the **Center for Community Organizations (COCO)**. This event brought together community organizations who center the leadership of people who work and organize on issues relating to their own lived experiences. The goal was to create mutual learning spaces and to reflect on how best to center marginalized communities in community organizing.

Accessibility must be integral to event organizing, and thus organisers must consider how to set accessibility norms before an event is launched. Organisers should aim to create a framework where people’s autonomy can be cultivated. This work must be premised on the idea that **people know their needs best and must be empowered to make their own decisions** with regards to how they move in and out of spaces, react to their personal experiences, and engage with material.

The goal of this document is to help facilitators and event organizers create more **accessible** spaces, in the broadest sense of the word. This means working to create events that **take into consideration people’s diverse needs and lived experiences**. Concrete strategies can be used to ensure that people who are so often excluded are able to attend and participate more fully. Ultimately, accessibility is a constant work-in-progress based on the community and individuals involved. Please keep in mind that **this list does not include everything that might need to be taken into consideration**.

Further, we hope that this is a dynamic document. Please feel free to contact us at access4mtl@gmail.com with questions, edits or suggestions for improvement. Thank you for your time and energy!

- Accessibilize Montreal & the Centre for Community Organizations

Pre-Event Guidelines

Providing accessibility information to participants allows for an **event's norms to be understood and clarified ahead of time**. This also gives people the power to choose whether or not they attend an event and if so, how they participate.

- Remember to provide the information **as early as possible**, ideally a week ahead of time! This will ensure that people have sufficient time to make any necessary arrangements, such as adapted transport and childcare.
- Be transparent about the access that you do or do not have**. It is critical to be specific and honest about the reality of the space!
- Don't assume everyone knows or understands all aspects of accessibility. When possible, **include links to videos or websites** that allow participants to inform themselves ahead of time.
- What accessibility means shifts and changes with the context and the people!** It is important that event organisers and facilitators continuously educate themselves, and are able and willing to adapt to new situations as they arise.

Considerations before promoting an event:

- Is the event description, relevant documents, and/or website written in **plain language**?
- If possible, **promote the event on multiple platforms**. For example, a listserv or local radio station, in addition to an Eventbrite or Facebook event.

Consider how to provide **necessary accessibility information** for participants, **without overwhelming them with details!** You could:

- Providing the **contact information** of someone who can provide more specific accessibility details. Ideally, this is a **name, phone number & an email address**.
- If you have a website, have a **clearly labelled 'Accessibility'** section to centralise information.

Event Promotion

Here is a **quick list** of some of basic accessibility information to include in any **promotional material**.

Venue specific accessibility information:

- Provide an **exact address**, including the postal code.
- Whether the venue **wheelchair accessible**. This means, no steps with ramp and/or elevator access. If a wheelchair inaccessible venue is chosen, include number of steps and if there is a handrail.
- Is there a **gender-neutral** and **wheelchair accessible washroom**?
- Is the **lighting** fluorescent, non-fluorescent or otherwise?

Event specific accessibility information:

- Have a **clear agenda** of the day's roll-out. This should include any breaks, workshop blocks and a finish time.
- Is the event **scent-free**?
- Will there be **ASL/ LSQ interpretation**? Is it upon request? If so, provide a clear deadline by which to make requests.
- Will there be **childcare** available? Is it upon request? If so, provide a clear deadline by which to make requests.
- If it is a film screening, will there be **closed captioning**?
- Are there **documents that can be circulated** ahead of time?

Interactive Accessibility

Signal Badges

You can provide **interaction signal badges** to all your participants. This is a system which was first developed in Autistic spaces and conferences. They help people tell everyone who can see their badge about their communication preferences.

- Red:** I do not want anyone to approach or interact with me, except in the case of emergency. You can reply to questions I ask you but that's it.
- Yellow:** Unless I approach you first, I will only interact with people I already know.
- Green:** I'm interested in interacting but I find it difficult to initiate interaction, so I'd be happy if others initiate interaction with me

All participants should be given all 3 badges, so that they can change their badges over the duration of the event as needed!

For more information, visit:

<https://autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ColorCommunicationBadges.pdf>



Interactive Accessibility

Fidget Toys

Provide “**fidget toys**”, especially for longer meetings. For example, “stress balls,” Rubik’s cubes, small stuffed animals, etc. Make these available to everyone, not just those people who you think “might need them.” Colouring pages are another good option!

Chill Space

Try to provide an option for a “**chill space**,” “chill room,” or “chill corner.” That is, a quiet and calm location that is well-marked and preferably with a closed door. This is especially important for longer and larger meetings and events.

- “**Chill spaces**” are important for participants to be able to have a “time-out” if they are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, overstimulated etc.
- Provide seating, a few snacks, and **quiet activities!** Options include colouring pages, paper and pencils, clay and fidget toys!
- You may also have **an active listener** on standby in the chill space, especially if the content of your event is personal, emotional, or traumatic in nature.

Sensory Accessibility

It is important that people's **different sensory needs** are taken into consideration when planning an event. This section will outline a series of sensory considerations.

Scent-Free Spaces

Many people have **chemical sensitivities** that can severely impact their participation in events. It can help to ask participants to refrain from wearing, and the venue from using:

- Bodysprays, perfumes, and colognes
- Shampoo and conditioner
- Lotions and deodorant
- Cleaning products
- Dry erase markers and sharpies.

Participants **must be notified in advance to avoid these products** to facilitate a scent-free, or scent-reduced, space. Scent-free policies and practices are not meant to apply to food smells or body odours.

For more information, visit:

https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/scent_free.html

Sensory Accessibility

Lighting & Sound

Ideally, there is an option for **non-fluorescent lighting in the space**.

- ❑ **Bring other lamps and/or turn off lights** during daytime if enough natural light is present, etc. If fluorescent lighting will be used or is the only option for lighting, include this in the information sent out prior to the event.

Be aware of the **acoustics** in the room as some spaces get really loud easily, especially if there are multiple people talking at once, or small group discussions.

- ❑ **Consider changing spaces** or installing noise dampening materials. Loud spaces can be hard for people with sensory difficulties, hearing loss and auditory processing difficulties.

Seating Arrangements

Have a variety of options for **seating** if possible. This can include chairs with armrests and solid backs, padded chairs, open space for wheelchairs, mobility devices, and service dogs.

- ❑ **Be aware of configuration of group.** Chairs arranged in a circle are helpful for visual and auditory access, but only up to a certain size and number of people.
- ❑ Make sure to **keep spaces for folks with hearing loss and/or vision loss** to sit closest to the facilitator and flipchart/board/screen. Make sure to announce this option out loud and in writing.

Food Accessibility

Providing **food and beverages** is useful for keeping participants energised and engaged. Here are some considerations:

- Don't assume** you know why someone has a particular dietary restriction! And don't ask, either!
- When possible, provide **Kosher and Halal options!**
- Keep condiments, especially those that contain dairy or eggs** (like cheese, sour cream, and mayonnaise) away from meat, and make sure each item has its own serving utensil.
- By serving at least **50% vegetarian or vegan food**, you will meet the needs of most people. Where possible, serve pork-free, beef-free, and vegetarian food from a separate table. Use a **separate area on the BBQ**, or a separate BBQ, for vegetarian/vegan foods.
- Provide **nut and gluten free** options!
- If there is buffet-style food, be sure to **label everything** and include ingredients where possible.
- Food-centric events can be triggering** for some people (for example, with a history of eating disorders). Portioned out food can make things less overwhelming.
- Provide **food vouchers/money** for food to anyone who may need if food is not offered at the event.
- Have **people available to help with serving** and carrying plates of food.
- Always have **straws** available.
- Keep **food off of floor level** to reduce distraction for service dogs.

This section draws heavily from the work of the **McGill University Social Equity & Diversity Education Office**.

Communications

Language & Interpretation

In order to make your event as accessible as possible, make sure to clearly inform participants of the **languages that will be used** during the event.

- ❑ If possible, all **material sent out before the event** should be made available in both English and French.
- ❑ **Translation headsets** can minimise the ambient noise during the event. However, if this is not possible, provide whisper translation.
- ❑ Provide signed interpretation, both ASL (American Sign Language) and LSQ (Langue des Signes du Québec) for participants who may need it. Note that **ASL and LSQ interpreters** book up early. Make sure to book them as early as possible!
- ❑ If you are using any videos at any given point, **provide captions**. This will cover a significant proportion of people. However, if you know that there will be participants who sign, **signed videos are ideal**. If the video itself isn't captioned, possible, provide a transcript of the audio.



Communications

Audio & Video

Events commonly use audio and videos to enhance to the experience for event participants. Consider:

- Videos should be **captioned** whenever possible (and if not captioned, subtitled is an okay option). If not captioned, provide a transcription of the video.
- Make **transcription of audio content** available during the event, in addition to being made available afterwards online.
- Provide a **recording of the event** (with captions and transcription) if possible for people who can't be at the event and/or people who might need to hear/see things again in order to process, remember, and understand them.
- Consider having people designated to be “**whisper readers or translators**” to read written content to individuals who might not be able to/might not be comfortable with reading. That being said, this only works for people who can hear well enough for this to be an option.

Communications

Presentations

Presentations can be the core of many events. Here couple things to consider for workshops and presentations:

- ❑ Ensure that **agendas are written out** clearly and read out loud.
- ❑ Use **plain language** as much as possible. Avoid jargon, technical terms and academic language. If you need to use more complicated language, make sure there are clearly provided explanations. This applies to both in person examples, in any written text.
- ❑ Explain and/or write out all **acronyms and abbreviations**.
- ❑ Be aware that **metaphorical language** may not be understandable to all participants. Reduce the amount of metaphors used and kindly explain the metaphors you do use.
- ❑ If writing on a dry-erase board, chalkboard, flip chart, etc., try to write as clearly as possible and **avoid using cursive!** Write big and leave lots of spaces between words.
- ❑ Use a lot of **contrast**. For example, use dark coloured markers on light paper, use white chalk if using a chalkboard. Avoid brightly coloured/light coloured pens and markers.
- ❑ **Read out** what you write out for the group, and hand-outs, and ensure there are subtitles on video clips. Assume that some people can't read or can't read fast enough to keep up.

Communications

Documents

Please note that specifics around accessible graphic design facilitation is beyond the scope of this guide. Here are a couple key considerations:

- Send out handouts** in advance whenever possible, with ideally all handouts sent in one e-mail. **Send PDFs** ahead of time. Use Optical Character Recognition (OCR) for screen reader access.
- Documents sent out should have **concise and descriptive names** or titles. Example: "Agenda_ June 6 2015.PDF"
- Avoid long chunks of text** when possible. Break up blocks of text and use **bullet points**.
- Consider **bolding parts of sentences** in order to communicate key ideas.
- Don't use "justified text" when formatting documents. "**Left aligned**" is considered to be the most readable and best option.
- For longer documents and handouts, provide a **short summary** of the most important points of the document. The summary should be approximately 2-5 sentences (depending on the length of the document) and highlight the most important points and key words.
- Provide **written descriptions** of all images.
- Use **sans serif fonts** for typed documents. Good ones include: (Arial, Helvetica, Verdana).
- Do not use a font size smaller than **12 points**.

Accessible Facilitation

Being a facilitator can be both challenging and rewarding work. Try to **be aware of your own needs and accessibility needs** as the facilitator. You have the right to also feel comfortable in a space. If you are comfortable talking about or expressing your own needs to the group, it can help others feel less singled out. This can also help the group better know how to be supportive of you as a facilitator.

Here are some other things to consider when facilitating different groups.

- Offer **different ways to participate** besides speaking. Examples include texting a number, writing things down and submitting during a break, listening, note taking, or doodling in the corner.
- Always **include the option to pass** and never position this option as less valid than other ways of participating. Pro-actively announce the option to pass during activities. Don't leave it to participants to have to bring it up.
- Speak and **communicate as clearly as you can**. Ask for support in this if necessary.
- Explain choices** and motivation behind activities as much as possible.
- Invite people** to participate who may be trying to speak but are having difficulty entering the conversation.
- Model expectations for group activities** and/or involvement. For example, if you ask the group to do a "check-in," demonstrate what you mean by that.
- Be open to trying **different ways of facilitating** (including small groups, hands-on activities, etc.) to match the needs of the group.

Physical Accessibility

Physical accessibility is a central aspect of making any event accessible:

- There should be **ramps, or no stairs, at every door**. Anything over 2 cm could pose a barrier for some mobility aid users. Please highlight with yellow paint any small lips or cracks (tripping hazards).
- If there is only **one wheelchair or step-free entrance**, please invite all attendees to go through this door as a statement of solidarity.
- If the event is not on the first floor, make sure there is a **wheelchair accessible elevator**.
- There should be **automatic doors or permanent door stops** for the duration of the event for entryways and bathrooms. If this is not possible have people stationed and designated to help with doors.
- Bathrooms should have a **wheelchair accessible stall**. This means a bigger stall with a door that opens inward and grab rails.

For guidelines, visit:

www.bradleycorp.com/download/2066/3931_ADA_Design_Guide.pdf

- There should be a **gender-neutral washroom** available. You can easily make bathrooms gender-neutral by covering the logo on the door, and by also adding a note that says “gender-neutral bathrooms,” or a simple sign with an image of a toilet would do.
- Consider performing an **accessibility audit** of your event space.
- Any ramps, sidewalks, or building entrances are shoveled and **cleared of snow** in winter.

Event Accessibility

Getting There

- The event should be close to an **accessible metro and/or bus line**.

For public transit accessibility information, visit:

<https://www.stm.info/en/access>

- An exact address should be provided** a week or more in advance for adapted transport users to be able to book their rides.
- Do not send out simply a link to GoogleMaps**. If you do send a link to GoogleMaps, make sure you also write out the address fully, including the postal code.
- Inform participants if there is any **construction** that may limit access.



Event Accessibility

Scheduling & Timing

Try to ensure that your target audience will be available at the time of the event.

- Be aware of people's **religious holidays**, care schedules, transport schedules, and daily activity schedules (school, work, art, etc.)
- Make sure the agenda takes into account for **adequate breaks and time** between sessions, for travel between events and health breaks. This should be the case even if you tell participants to take breaks as they need/want to.
- Keep **track of time** and keep group updated about time. Ask someone to act as a timekeeper if you need to.
- End on time** even if the agenda is not finished. This is especially important for anyone who uses adapted transport, but is also in terms of accessibility in general.

Event Accessibility

Financial Accessibility

Financial limitations can severely impact how and if someone participates in an event. Here are some things to consider:

- Make all events **sliding scale** or pay-what-you-can. Or better yet, free!
- Offer **travel reimbursement** when possible. This can be in the form of bus or metro tickets, money for adapted transport, or providing wheelchair accessible transport, etc.
- Provide compensation** for people's time whenever possible. This includes facilitators, participants, and consultants.
- Offer private ways of asking for things** like access needs, bus tickets and food vouchers.
- Don't assume people have a computer** or access to Internet on a regular basis.
- Don't have a **dress code**.
- Have **childcare available**. Pay childcare workers whenever possible.

Feedback & Evaluation

Ideally, your event will be a space where participants can actively engage and constructively critique organisers and facilitators! **Feedback and evaluation** is integral to effective event planning and for ensuring that future events are more accessible. A couple recommendations:

- If possible, create a **group brainstorm session** where critiques and solutions can be generated together (participants and organisers) in the event space.
- Provide **evaluation forms at the beginning** of the event if possible.
- Using the **same evaluation forms** for your events makes the evaluation process more consistent both for the organisers and participants.
- Can you **ask specific questions relating to accessibility** in the evaluation process?
- Give people the option of sending **in their evaluation forms via email**. Sometimes people need time to reflect and/or it is easier for them to write with a computer vs. by hand. Write the email address directly on the evaluation form.
- Allow the time and space for people to **orally provide feedback**.

Finally, have a **clear and designated time for the main organisers** to reflect amongst themselves about the event in general, but more specifically regarding accessibility. Some questions to ask yourselves:

- Who was not represented?** Why and why not?
- How can our organizing be **more accessible and anti-oppressive**?
- Do I **feel resistant** to changing some of my practices? If so, why?

Post-Event Follow-up

Post-event follow-up is important to ensuring that the event is well-wrapped up.

- ❑ If possible, send **typed versions** of any handwritten content (flipcharts, chalkboard notes, etc.) out to participants after the event.
- ❑ If possible, send any **available transcriptions of audio and video** content.
- ❑ Provide a **recording of the event** (with captions and transcription) if possible for people who can't be at the event and/or people who might need to hear/see things again in order to process, remember, and understand them.
- ❑ Ensure that everyone who is supposed to be paid from the event knows how to file the needed paperwork. When possible, **provide templates**.

COCo

Centre des organismes communautaires
Centre for community organizations