



REPORT FOR ACTION

Communicating COVID-related information and impacts to people living with disabilities

Date: November 3, 2020

To: Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee

From: Chief Communications Officer

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The Chief Communications Officer is reporting back on measures in place and changes to process moving forward to help communicate COVID-related information and impacts to persons living with disabilities, as requested by the Committee on July 3, 2020.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Communications Officer recommends that:

1. The Toronto Accessibility Committee receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact arising from this report.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on Friday, July 3, 2020, the Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee referred the following to Executive Committee:

<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2020/ex/bgrd/backgroundfile-149034.pdf>

At its meeting on July 21, 2020, Executive Committee adopted the following on consent:

[EX15.14: City of Toronto COVID-19 Response and Accessibility](#)

8. City Council direct the Chief Communications Officer, Strategic Communications along with any other applicable City Divisions to consolidate and disseminate information on supports and services for persons living with disabilities, highlighting any services changes, additions or disruptions of new or existing services and report back by the November 16, 2020 meeting of the Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee.

This was adopted by Council at its July 28, 2020 meeting.

COMMENTS

The City of Toronto is committed to sharing timely and accurate information with Torontonians through a variety of methods, intended to be accessible by design. It is recognized that people living with disabilities face challenges that make access to key information even more critical.

The Strategic Communications Division provides communications services that help ensure the public has a clear understanding of the City's policies, priorities and programs. The division is responsible for providing strategic and corporate communications planning, project management and media relations to inform the public about City programs, services and emerging issues.

When developing communications materials, the City's Accessibility Unit is available to provide guidance and/or recommendations based on the requirements of the

- Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005
- City of Toronto policies and standards including the Corporate Accessibility Policy, Digital Accessibility Standard, Web Application User Interface Standard and Writing for the Web Guidelines
- Principles of Universal Design or other leading accessibility practices.

Internal City stakeholders, including staff from the Accessibility Unit, are members of a newly-established public education working group, co-led by Strategic Communications and the Emergency Operations Centre. The group's mandate is to focus directly on strategies to reach communities at high risk of COVID-19. It is expected that the work of this group will help bolster efforts to reach those most at risk, including people living with disabilities, those who do not speak English or French, newcomers, lower-income, and vulnerable populations. The working group will use grassroots methods to circulate the information including through existing City relationships with community groups, agencies and networks.

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, information has been changing rapidly, as has public health advice. As a result, the primary authoritative sources of information are the City's website toronto.ca, the City's media briefings and the City's corporate social media channels. The City of Toronto is committed to providing equitable access and opportunity to people with disabilities by ensuring digital services and programs and emergency information is accessible by design for visitors to toronto.ca and corporate social media accounts.

In advance of the 2021 provincial compliance deadline, the City's official website currently conforms to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 Level AA and meets accessibility requirements under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

The City has established standards and training for corporate developers and content creators across all divisions to champion best practices in application development, web content and design, and writing clear and actionable content using plain language.

As a companion to the information currently provided on the COVID-19 web pages, the City of Toronto introduced a chatbot as a new communications channel to help residents and businesses with common COVID-19 questions. The City's chatbot, which is AODA-compliant, uses artificial intelligence technology to provide a question and answer service. The chatbot includes an audio feature to allow users to click for a text to speech experience; which is useful for people with vision disabilities or difficulty reading.

Over the past eight months, as staff looked to virtual solutions for meetings, media briefings and resident engagement, the use of Webex has increased extensively. As the City's enterprise standard video conferencing tool, Webex is a secure platform that integrates with the City's existing technology assets, aligns with security standards and policies, responds to the unique needs of City divisions and allows for efficient coordination between the City, its Agencies and Corporations and residents. During COVID-19 the City activated live captioning within this tool and Technology Services staff are currently collaborating with Cisco, the Webex platform developer, to rapidly improve accessibility for online engagement participants. To date, more than 95.5% of the identified bugs have been addressed. To help communicate the City's commitment to improving the Webex experience and provide consistent instructions on how residents can participate in virtual events, Strategic Communications worked with multiple divisions to develop a centralized page titled [Participate in City Virtual Engagement Events which includes accessibility information](#).

The City leverages key social media platforms Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube to reach residents, businesses and visitors on a daily basis. Although each platform provides varying degrees of accessibility features, Strategic Communications ensures all posted content provides appropriate tagging for images, avoids text overlays on graphics, and linked content – such as web pages or PDFs – meets accessibility standards. All videos or animated clips include captions (closed captions or embedded) or links to a full transcript of the content delivered by the video. To date, more than 2,300 social media messages specifically about COVID-19 health measures, service updates and new programs have been posted by the City.

Since March, the City has delivered an exceptional level of accessibility at all COVID press briefings by providing both an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter and deaf interpreter (DI). Each briefing is livestreamed with real-time closed captioning. Staff review and make corrections to the saved captions after every briefing to ensure all recordings available on the City of Toronto YouTube channel are accurate. To date, there have been more than 110 official briefings posted to YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/user/thecityoftoronto>

There is more work to be done, especially to better understand some of the impacts of COVID-19 such as the effect mask-wearing has on people with disabilities. Strategic Communications has initiated an additional step when working with divisions to understand how any changes to services may impact the disability community. The intent is, once identified, to communicate these impacts clearly through corporate channels in order to help build understanding and promote safe behaviours.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS
