

RENTING

Policy sends landlords back to school

Industry preparing to be more service oriented to disabled

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

A new provincial policy that outlines a standard for providing better customer service to those with disabilities is rolling out Jan. 1, and the Federation of Rental Housing Providers of Ontario is trying to make sure its members are up to speed on what they need to do to comply.

The Accessibility Standard for Customer Service is part of the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act and applies to all organizations (public, private and non-profit) that provide goods or services either directly to the public or to other organizations in Ontario, and that have one or more employees in Ontario.

It requires that all organizations have a plan in place to train employees on how to provide service to those with disabilities. According to the Ministry of Community and Social Services, accessible customer service is not about ramps or automatic door openers.

"The customer service standard is about being prepared to deal with customers who are in different circumstances — it's not about things covered by other policies like the structure of the building," says Vince Brescia, president and chief executive officer at FRPO (www.frpo.org).

It's about understanding that people with disabilities may have different needs.

That can mean simply training a concierge to say, "How can I help?" and making small changes to how customers with disabilities are served.

"It's a new challenge but not necessarily onerous; it's something new for them to learn and we're prepared to learn and comply," says



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According to the Ministry of Community and Social Services, one in seven Ontarians face barriers to accessing homes, jobs, goods, services, education and community and social activities.

Brescia.

There are potential penalties for non-compliance. To help kick-start the education process for its members, FRPO recently provided a webinar to members to help get them up to speed on the requirements.

"We had good attendance and huge take-up on the forms and policy guide we've created."

FRPO is also holding half-day education sessions on the customer service standard Nov. 23 and 25 in Toronto, which will focus on the requirements under the standard and how to effectively provide customer service to residents/tenants

with a disability.

The goal of the program is not only to improve service now, but also to prepare for the future when the aging population begins to experience greater challenges.

According to the ministry, one in seven Ontarians face barriers to accessing jobs, goods, services, education and community and social activities, but that will increase to one in five Ontarians within 20 years. Baby boomers represent 40 per cent of the income share in Ontario and as they age it is expected that they will drive government to meet their needs and demands.

Rental housing providers and

property managers will no doubt be one of many sectors on the front lines that will need to have staff that can help individuals in their buildings who have accessibility issues.

"We've developed some template policies our members can put in place to help them get ready," says Brescia.

"We've recommended they get those and adapt them to their own circumstances as they see fit. We're also recommending the appropriate staff get training so we're putting on a couple of training sessions for people in the industry so they can get their staff trained and ready for Jan. 1."

According to the guidelines, if an organization has fewer than 20 employees it must create a plan or policy that says it will become prepared to address accessibility for individuals with disabilities, and they must train employees about how that will be done. If an organization has 20 or more employees, it must have a written policy and produce an annual report indicating how it is progressing or meeting the policy.

"There are definitely new administrative requirements, so there is a new cost from that perspective," says Brescia.

The accessibility policy includes a plan for communicating with persons with disabilities and a plan for ensuring employees are trained and familiar with the different types of assistive devices persons with disabilities use.

They must also be trained and understand the role of service animals and have a plan on how to deal with them. There is also a requirement to have a plan for dealing with support persons.

For property managers and building owners, this means having a plan in place to communicate with those who might be challenged by a service outage or other malfunction in their residence.

"So if someone is blind and has someone with them to guide them, or if someone is deaf or mute and they have someone speak on their behalf — you have to have a communications plan if there are interruptions in service or accessibility and you have to have a feedback process in place — ways to get feedback from people that accommodate their types of disabilities," explains Brescia.

FRPO has developed a detailed policy guide for members. "The ministry has useful information that is generic, but not specific to the industry," he says.

More info is available at www.frpo.org and www.mcsc.gov.on.ca.