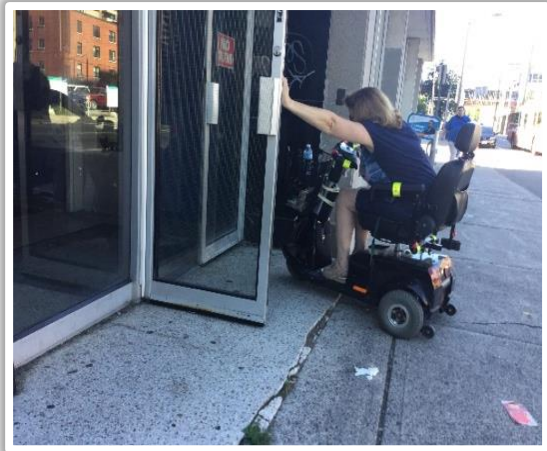


# ACCESSIBILITY MATTERS

## Are 'Accessible' Walk-in Clinics Accessible to All?



Linda Paul struggling to gain access to a walk-in clinic.

Few 'accessible' walk-in clinics are truly accessible to people in wheelchairs and scooters, says the Ottawa Disability Coalition<sup>1</sup> (ODC).

The ODC, whose mission is to build a community in which persons with disabilities have equitable access to the same opportunities as every other Ottawan, was responding to concerns around gaining access to medical care with the same independence and dignity that able-bodied people expect.

2018. Each of these clinics self-identified as being accessible or partially accessible on the website of the Champlain Local Health Integrated Network (LHIN), which serves Ottawa and the surrounding area<sup>2</sup>.

To investigate the accessibility of clinics, the ODC audited by telephone 24 clinics over the summer of

The purpose of the audit was to raise awareness with the individual clinics and the Champlain LHIN about the problems someone had persons with disabilities have been experiencing. A number of people had previously reported to the ODC that the clinics were not accessible for their needs.

### Audit Questions

The audit examined areas that are vitally important to people using wheelchairs.



- Do the main entrance and bathrooms have power buttons?

For example when persons with multiple sclerosis are ill, especially those with a progressive form of the disease, they are in a heightened state of weakness, and opening doors without power buttons is often not possible.

- Can you register independently? Is the reception counter at a reasonable height?  
If you're sitting in a wheelchair with your head below the top of a high reception counter, you are invisible to clinic staff.
- Are the bathrooms uncluttered and roomy enough to accommodate a wheelchair or scooter?  
Are the sink, faucet, and soap dispensers within easy reach? Are there grab bars?  
If it is a struggle to go to the bathroom at a walk-in clinic, the only alternative may be to visit a hospital's emergency department. Can you get the door closed?
- Is there accessible parking?

## Results

Few clinics succeeded in meeting all the criteria, although some did better than others. Sadly, the only area met across the board was accessible parking, and this usually isn't even the responsibility of the clinic. Some clinics also lacked power buttons at entrances and/or grab bars in the bathroom to allow people to use it without assistance.

## Why it Matters

Walk-in clinics can be a necessity for persons with disabilities. If a person with progressive multiple sclerosis experiences an infection, their immune system not only gears up to fight the infection but also exacerbates existing MS symptoms such as fatigue, weakness or visual disturbances. In some cases, paralysis can exist until antibiotics address infections. If common issues such as a tooth or bladder infection occur on the weekend, these individuals will have no choice but to visit emergency rooms if clinics are not barrier-free.

Ensuring clinics are accessible is also an action that indicates that persons with disabilities are deserving of the same independence and dignity that able-bodied persons take for granted and shows a commitment to equality of opportunity.

## Recommendations

To the province

- Develop standards under AODA requiring walk-in clinics become fully accessible.
- Develop a summary offence that consequences clinics that falsely advertise accessibility
- Engage the disabled community around using the Customer Service feedback loop
- Require LHINs confirm accessibility before the information is posted on their websites

## Footnotes

1. <https://www.ottawadisability.com/about-1>
2. <https://www.champlainhealthline.ca/listServices.aspx?id=10072>
3. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/accessible-customer-service-policy>
4. <http://www.cmaj.ca/content/188/14/993>