

September 2023

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Multi-Year Accessibility Plan



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Background

Across Canada, 6.2 million people, or 22% of the population, identify as having a disability.¹ This number is projected to increase as our population ages. As such, VIA Rail is committed to tailoring our services to these changing demographics by being one of the most accessible mobility options by providing a smarter way to move people. We understand the importance of offering barrier-free transport, which is why we have taken important actions to create an environment in which all people can travel autonomously and confidently.

VIA Rail is committed to improving accessibility and creating a seamless experience, from booking your trip, arriving at our station, boarding the train, and accessing on-board services, until you arrive at your destination. Improving accessibility will not only improve the experience for people with disabilities but will create a better experience for many other passengers as well. This includes people travelling with young children, passengers with heavy luggage, and older adults. We are transforming VIA Rail to be more welcoming, comfortable, and dignified for all our passengers. This Multi-Year Accessibility Plan is our first-ever accessibility plan. VIA Rail acknowledges the barriers in our service, and our plan summarizes actions we will undertake to remove them.

Universal Accessibility Policy

VIA Rail published its first-ever Universal Accessibility Policy on June 25, 2020. The policy, presented below, sets forth our vision, principles, and commitments to improve the accessibility of our service.

¹ 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability

VIA Rail Universal Accessibility Policy

Vision

At VIA Rail we do more than move passengers. We strive to be Canada's most accessible national and intercity mode of transportation. Our vision is to move people by ensuring access to a sustainable, affordable, and accessible means of transportation. By promoting better accessibility, we are improving the customer experience for all our passengers as part of a barrier-free Canada.

Principles of Universal Accessibility at VIA Rail

VIA Rail acknowledges and strives to provide service that:

- is welcoming for all our passengers;
- provides a safe, comfortable, and convenient journey;
- respects each individual's autonomy, dignity, and independence;
- enables full participation through an inclusive and intuitive environment; and,
- offers meaningful options for passengers.



Our Commitments

VIA Rail values all our passengers and we pledge the following commitments:

Our Culture: We will continue to be agents of transformation to foster a culture of respect and dignity.

Leadership: We aim to integrate accessibility into decision-making processes at all levels of our organization so that we can continually improve the passenger experience.

Continual Engagement: We value the experience of our passengers and will seek their input to imagine new possibilities for travel on our network. We will report back to you regularly regarding the progress we make.

Training: We will equip ourselves with the training and tools needed to serve you well.

Communications: We will provide clear and consistent information in a timely manner for all our passengers.

Listening to You: We recognize that you know what is best for you and we strive to create an environment where you feel comfortable requesting those services.

Barrier-Free Access: We strive to remove barriers and avoid creating new barriers across all our stations, trains, and digital platforms.

Proactive Design: We will work to provide you with flexible options to access our services.

Collaboration: We will create community partnerships to continuously improve accessibility to our services.

General

Description of Feedback Process and Contact Information

To stand by our Universal Accessibility Policy and its commitments, particularly “Listening to You,” this plan was developed with the feedback from various stakeholders. We continue to listen to you and welcome your comments on this plan, our feedback process, our progress reports, or any other issue you encounter.

Our feedback process is easy. Simply share your comments, anonymously or by including your name and contact information, through any of the following channels:

- calling **1-888 VIA-RAIL (1 888 842-7245)** or TTY **1 800 268-9503** for people who are D/deaf, deafened, or hard-of-hearing;
- commenting in the form on the website at viarail.ca/en/contact-us, or viarail.ca/fr/nous-joindre;
- emailing us at customer_relations@viarail.ca or relations_clientele@viarail.ca;
- sending us a message through one of our social media platforms: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Instagram](#);
- mailing us at:

Customer Relations Officer
VIA Rail Canada Inc.
CP/PO BOX 8116 SUCC CENTRE-VILLE
Montréal (Québec) H3C 3N3

Our Customer Relations Officer will acknowledge receipt of your feedback and follow up with you directly (if not anonymous) to take the appropriate actions.

Alternative Formats

You can use any of the methods of communication above to request this plan, a description of our feedback process, or our progress reports in a print, large print, Braille, or audio format. If you communicate using sign language, you can contact us by using a Video Relay Service and our phone number above.

Delivery Time Frames for Alternative Formats

We will provide our accessibility plan, a description of our feedback process, and our progress report to you as soon as feasible, but, at the latest, 45 days after the day on which the request was received, in the case of a request for a document in Braille or audio format; or in the case

of a request for a document in any other format, 15 days after the day on which the request is received.

Consultations

VIA Rail has maintained a long-standing commitment to hearing firsthand what our passengers share about the barriers they face during their travel experience. Striving for universal accessibility involves engaging in an ongoing process for the identification, removal, and prevention of barriers.

To develop VIA Rail's first accessibility plan, we gathered a list of barriers to our passengers based on the interactions they have had with our staff. After that, we identified projects to address those barriers. We then reached out to various disability advocacy organizations to have the best representation possible in the feedback we were seeking for our plan. We presented to them the projects we intended to include in our accessibility plan and asked them if the projects sufficiently met the needs of people with disabilities.

These exchanges were held in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the context and to proceed safely, we took a virtual approach. We offered two options to participate in these feedback sessions. One way we did this was by sharing our accessibility plan with our community partners by email and allowing them to add their comments and recommendations to the document. The other way we did this was in virtual meetings during which we reviewed the plan together and then had our partners give us their feedback on it. We then applied the comments and recommendations received from the various organizations consulted on the plan.

The following community partners representing people with disabilities provided their feedback:

- Kéroul
- The Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB)
- Spinal Cord Injury Ontario (SCIO)
- Canadian Hearing Services (CHS)
- The Rick Hansen Foundation (RHF)
- Canadian Arthritis Patient Alliance (CAPA)
- Arthritis Society
- Autism Canada

Our Customers

Customer experience is incredibly valuable to us at VIA Rail. The feedback customers submit about their experiences to our Customer Care agents helps us identify barriers to accessibility. This information is also shared with service staff at stations and on-board trains. We track the information closely to identify ways to improve and remove these barriers, either through policy, procedure, or operational changes.

The following table summarizes some of the barriers that have been shared with us.

Partner Identified Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reservation system requires further updates to be fully accessible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Digital platforms could benefit from more accessibility features.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support person policy could be more clearly defined.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communication systems in stations and on trains require improvements to be universally accessible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sign language offerings would improve accessibility.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inform passengers of all the accessibility options so they don't need to ask.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evacuation plans should include a Braille version.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staff need to be better informed on helping passengers with specific needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trains can have barriers for boarding and on-board movement for persons with mobility challenges.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accessible rooms may be isolating.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer alternative communication methods for passengers who do not communicate verbally.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer quiet areas, a place of refuge with minimal sensory stimulation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure accessible and inclusive recruitment practices.

Universal Accessibility Advisory Committee

To be successful in our accessibility improvements, we must include people with disabilities early and often. With that in mind, we created an advisory committee so that passengers with disabilities can participate in the search for accessible solutions that work for everyone. The members of this committee represent a broad range of people with disabilities and seniors. They lend their knowledge and lived experience to VIA Rail.

The advisory committee meets regularly to review projects and plans and to guide our work on accessibility. The members participate in our project planning, and they give feedback and advice on accessibility.

Planned Improvements

At VIA Rail, we are always working hard to improve our services and make it easier and more enjoyable for you to travel with us. There are many ongoing projects, some of which are specific to accessibility and others which have an accessibility component. Here we have set out our planned projects over the short-, medium-, and long-term.

The planned projects identified below include improvements in accessibility for trains, stations, services, and communications. These projects require our organization to work collaboratively, both internally and externally, with our passengers and advisory group to make meaningful changes that have a long-lasting impact.

Built Environment

Station Accessibility Analysis (2021-2022)

The first step to creating standard, universally accessible stations is to analyze the current state of affairs at every station. To identify, prevent, and eliminate barriers, VIA Rail will conduct an analysis of the accessibility of its network. Having an inventory of the accessibility features each station offers will allow us to create a plan to update and standardize the stations. The largest and most frequently used stations will be prioritized.

Station Accessibility Improvements (2022-2025)

The station accessibility analysis conducted during the short-term phase will inventory and highlight areas in and around stations that need improvement. This will be done through a customer-journey approach by considering site and building accessibility as well as building navigation. A few necessary upgrades are already known. Over the next few years, our major stations will see improvements such as: updated curb cuts, automatic doors, and autonomous wayfinding. The end goal of this plan is to prevent and remove barriers and standardize our stations as much as possible.

Procurement of Goods, Services and Facilities

Accessible Procurement Process (2021-2023)

VIA Rail is tailoring our services and processes to reflect a more inclusive Canada. We are improving the purchasing process by including an accessibility lens. By changing the culture for all employees to be more aware of accessibility, we will ensure that universal accessibility is considered in the initial stages of all projects.

Design and Delivery of Programs and Services

Surveys on Communication (2022-2023)

VIA Rail will conduct surveys on communication changes to make sure that they work. The responses provided in these surveys will allow us to better serve our passengers.

Transportation

Accessibility Analysis and Reference Guide for Trains (2021-2023)

VIA Rail wants to prevent and eliminate barriers on-board our trains by using the feedback gathered from people with disabilities to make sure that the trains we purchase or refurbish adhere to best practices for accessibility. We will complete an analysis that considers feedback from workshops we held in 2018, 2019, and 2020 to produce a reference guide that will be used as a baseline for when we refurbish or purchase new trains in the future.

Corridor Train Delivery (2023-2025)

One of VIA Rail's most exciting projects to come will be the delivery of 32 new Siemens trains by 2025. Some of the accessibility features on the trains will include: wheelchair lifts; Braille seating numbers; Braille, embossed and high-contrast signage; surface transitions; automatic doors; more grab bars and mobility-aid seating options; accessible washrooms; and screen displays indicating travel information in text.

Employment

Improved Recruitment Process (2021-2024)

Our human resources team will improve its recruitment process by analyzing its processes to be more inclusive and by training its recruitment staff on unconscious bias.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

Sign Language Videos (2021-2023)

VIA Rail will hold workshops to consult with sign language users. Using the information gathered, VIA Rail will create an initial sign-language video to explain our services to sign language users. Since the first publication of its Multi-Year Accessibility Plan, VIA Rail has expanded its initial sign language video project from a single video for our home page to a video for each section on our accessibility page, and a video describing how to use our new reservation system.

Hearing Loops at Ticket Counters (2022-2023)

Based on recommendations received in the feedback of our Multi-Year Plan and from our advisory committee members, VIA Rail has decided to add hearing loops to ticket counters at select train stations. Once the first hearing loop have been added, we will conduct tests on the technology to assess its effectiveness. If the technology is effective, VIA Rail would like to extend the project to several stations across the country.

Autonomous Wayfinding in Train Stations (2023-2025)

Based on recommendations received during workshops held with our community partners, VIA Rail would like to test out an autonomous wayfinding solution for its train stations. If the solution proves effective and is a viable option, the organization would like to expand the project to several of its largest stations.

Communication, Other Than ICT

Improved Accessible Communication (2022-2023)

VIA Rail will perform an analysis of its accessible communications. After the analysis is complete, VIA Rail will create an accessible style guide for our communications. Employees will then be trained on the guide to make sure VIA Rail's communications are as inclusive as possible.

Provisions of CTA Accessibility-Related Regulations

VIA Rail Canada is subject to the following regulations the Canada Transportation Agency (CTA) has made under 170(1) of the Canada Transportation Act: Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations (ATPDR).²

At VIA Rail, we are aware of the work expected of us to improve accessibility. To improve the accessibility of our services and our infrastructure, we must first identify the barriers to people with disabilities, then remove these barriers, and prevent the creation of new barriers to accessibility. We plan to continuously learn from our passengers to remove barriers and prioritize sustainable solutions. Below is our initial starting point, which highlights some of the changes underway as we begin to address the barriers outlined above.

Trains and On-Train Services

VIA Rail is addressing the barriers in our trains head-on with this multi-year plan and the recent purchase of 32 new Siemens trains at a cost of nearly one billion dollars. These actions set in motion the initial steps for VIA Rail to change the course of its history regarding train accessibility and include the following:

² 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 45, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 23, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 225, 226, 227, 229, 230, 231, Schedule 1

Québec City-Windsor Corridor trains: A new fleet of trains for the Québec City-Windsor Corridor. During the train design phase, VIA Rail held workshops with accessibility partner organizations to discuss the needs of persons with disabilities and the improvements to make to the design of our new trains. Later, these same partners were invited to test the new accessibility features on a full-scale model of the train cars. Lastly, to wrap up the consultation process, some of these partners were able to give us their feedback on their experience in the new train during tests conducted in August 2022. Participants' comments informed the final design of the trains.

On-board announcements: An on-board announcement service for people who are D/deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing and/or people with hearing loss. Now, when a passenger submits a Special Service Request (SSR) or informs VIA Rail staff of their barrier, the passenger will receive all public announcements in a visual format.

Special Service Request hours: Expanded hours for Special Service Request (SSR). Previously, passengers wishing to make a reservation with an SSR were only able to do so during daytime hours. Now requests can be made 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

Station and In-Station Services

As VIA Rail has grown over the years, the government has acknowledged the need to update its train stations and provided funding to modernize our busiest stations. Here are a few examples of what has been done to improve accessibility in some of our stations.

Ottawa Station improvements: The Ottawa Station has been called VIA Rail's laboratory. It has earned a gold certification for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) and has introduced numerous accessibility improvements. A few of the most notable improvements have been the creation of an accessible business lounge, a raised railway platform, and a new elevator.

Service Animal Relief Areas (SARAs): SARAs have been installed at 83 stations throughout VIA Rail's network. SARAs are a new amenity for service animals to relieve themselves. Directional bilingual signage with Braille has been put up inside and outside of stations to guide users to the SARAs.

In-station announcements: To make sure information is accessible to everyone, in-station announcements are now offered in both audible and visual format by way of audio announcements through speakers and visual announcements displayed on screens. In 2020, VIA Rail updated its public announcement system in stations to ensure passengers in boarding

areas inside terminals have access to both visual and audible public announcements relating to safety, security, train departures, and track assignment.

Station entrance and train platform assistance: To better serve our passengers' needs, we now offer curbside assistance at 10 of VIA Rail's busiest stations. Most curbside assistance areas have been designated with signage near main entrances. Customers who place a Special Service Request for this service will be met by a VIA Rail staff member near the station entrance and then be escorted to the platform to board their train. The same service is offered when customers get off the train. They can be accompanied to the station's exit.

Communications

Communication is one of the areas where VIA Rail has recently focused much of its attention to improve accessibility. Over the past couple of years, VIA Rail has removed some of the biggest barriers to communication, including the following:

Website: VIA Rail's website is where most passengers go to learn about our train routes, services, and to purchase their tickets. A significant effort has been made to improve the site, including an accessibility section, station profiles containing each station's accessibility features, and an accessibility booking widget.

Large print, Braille, screen reading: While onboard, passengers can now request a safety card in large print and Braille that explains the train layout and the important features of the train in case of an emergency. Similarly, passengers can request menus in Braille or large print.

Recap

When VIA Rail was founded in 1977, it inherited passenger train cars and stations from other railways. These included trains from the 1940s, which were not designed for accessibility. Some VIA Rail trains today predate Canada's accessibility standards. Like VIA Rail's trains, many of our stations are old, some over 100 years old. These stations serve millions of passengers every year and are a workplace for hundreds of employees. Our stations and trains need to be as barrier-free as possible. We hope to achieve this with this Multi-Year Accessibility Plan and an organizational push to raise awareness about accessibility.

We believe that to take meaningful steps towards universal accessibility at VIA Rail, we must apply our efforts consistently throughout the organization. VIA Rail is committed to the ongoing coordination of universal accessibility, across all our departments, to ensure that we take active

steps to identify, remove, and prevent barriers. This Multi-Year Accessibility Plan outlining our commitments and timelines will be monitored by our dedicated accessibility team.

VIA Rail is an organization that does more than just move passengers. We believe in making our commitments a reality. This is just the beginning, and we need your help. We will continue to rely on our passengers and persons with disabilities to guide us and join our efforts in creating one of Canada's most accessible mobility options.

love
the
way™

viarail.ca

