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Multi-Year Accessibility Plan

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1. General

1.1 Introduction

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.

1.2 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.

1.3 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. The listening didn’t stop there though. We continue to listen to you and welcome your feedback on this plan, our feedback process, our progress reports, and any other issue you encounter.

Our feedback process is easy. Simply share your feedback, 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**; or,
- 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 (if not anonymous) directly to take the appropriate actions.

You can also use these channels to request this plan or our progress reports in a print, large print, Braille, or audio format. Or, if you communicate using sign language, you can contact us by using the Canada video relay service (VRS) and our phone number above.

2. Consultation

VIA Rail recognizes that people – our customers and staff – are critical to identifying and removing barriers. Passengers with disabilities help to identify, understand, and remove barriers they experience and ensure that our plans address those barriers. At VIA Rail, all our staff, from senior leadership to front-line employees, need to be equipped and able to provide accessible services and demonstrate their commitment to making this plan a reality.

2.1 Developing This Plan

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, and we identified projects to address those barriers. We collaborated with community partners to develop and prioritize our accessibility projects. 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

2.2 Our Customers

Our Commitments

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.

Customer experience is incredibly valuable to us at VIA Rail. We rely on our passengers to inform us about their experiences and to let us know where we can improve. The feedback customers submit about their experiences to our Customer Care agents helps us identify barriers. 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.

2.3 Our Staff

Our 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.

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

Striving for universal accessibility requires a culture change at VIA Rail. All members of our organization need to understand that improving accessibility is a core part of their roles. Each employee at VIA Rail will develop the internal understanding that service delivery involves providing a welcoming and consistent experience to all passengers.

Every employee has a different role to play and VIA Rail wants to ensure that every staff member can participate in the process of planning our future. VIA Rail's leadership is committed to making universal accessibility a reality and to bring accessibility into every decision. VIA Rail's executives and managers have committed to:

- actively and visibly participating throughout the implementation of the Accessibility Plan and its projects;
- engaging directly with peers and employees to promote accessibility in everyday decisions at VIA Rail; and,
- collaborating to ensure the employees at VIA Rail receive the support and resources required to overcome barrier points and adapt to change.

Accessibility training is a critical piece to weaving accessibility into the fabric of our organization. We are currently reviewing our training programs for all levels of employees, from senior management to front-line employees to ensure that any gaps in the current program are addressed. We will continue to redesign our training courses to make sure that our staff are equipped with the tools to serve our passengers well. VIA Rail staff will continue to be trained on accessibility when they are hired and will receive refresher training every three years.

2.4 Universal Accessibility Advisory Committee

To be successful in our accessibility improvements, we must include people with disabilities early and often. We are creating an advisory committee so that passengers with disabilities can participate in the search for accessible solutions that work for everyone. Members who represent a broad range of people with disabilities and seniors will lend their knowledge and lived experience to VIA Rail. The advisory committee will meet regularly to review projects and plans and to guide our work on accessibility. Once established, we will include them in our project planning, ask them for feedback, and seek advice on accessibility.

3. Areas Described Under Section 5 of the Accessible Canada Act

3.1 Barriers and Changes Underway

Our Commitments

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.

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

VIA Rail has maintained a long-standing commitment to hearing first-hand what our passengers find challenging about using our services. Striving for universal accessibility involves engaging in an ongoing process for the identification, removal, and prevention of barriers.

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.

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 are non-verbal.
<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.

It is important at VIA Rail that we are aware of the work that is required of us. In order to improve something, you must first identify and then understand the problem. We plan to continuously learn from our passengers in order to remove barriers and prioritize solutions. Below is our initial starting point, which highlights some of the changes underway as we begin to address the barriers outlined above.

3.1.1 Trains and On-Train Services

VIA Rail is addressing these barriers 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.

Windsor-Quebec City Corridor trains: A new fleet of trains for the Windsor-Quebec City Corridor. During the train design phase, VIA Rail held workshops with accessibility partner

organizations to discuss improvements and to get feedback on the new trains to be delivered by 2025. Participants' comments informed the final design of the trains.

On-board announcements: A new 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.

3.1.2 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 test 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 and spiral ramp from the ground floor to the lower level.

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 SARA.

In-station announcements: For information to be 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 departure, and track assignment.

Curbside 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.

3.1.3 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, accessible food menus 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. Passengers who use screen reader technology can now visit our website to view most of our menus as accessible PDF documents.

3.2 Planned Improvements

Our Commitments

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

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 to them. 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 groups to make meaningful changes that have a long-lasting impact.

Short Term (2021-2022)

3.2.1 Built Environment: Station Accessibility Analysis

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.

3.2.2 Procurement: Accessible Procurement Process

VIA Rail is tailoring our services and processes to reflect a more inclusive Canada. VIA Rail is 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.

3.2.3 Design and Delivery of Programs and Services: Surveys on Communication

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.

3.2.4 Transportation: Accessibility Analysis and Reference Guide for Trains

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 takes into account feedback from workshops we held in 2018, 2019, and 2020, and, produce a reference guide that will be used as a baseline for when we refurbish or purchase new trains in the future.

Medium Term (2022-2023)

3.2.5 Employment: Improved Recruitment Process

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

3.2.6 Information and Communication Technologies: Sign Language Video

VIA Rail will hold workshops to consult with the community. Using the information gathered, VIA Rail will create an initial sign-language video to explain our services to sign language users.

3.2.7 Communication: Improved Accessible Communication

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.

Long Term (2023-2025)

3.2.8 Built Environment: Station Accessibility Improvements

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 taking into account 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 Braille station maps, autonomous wayfinding, and quiet areas. The end goal of this plan is to prevent and remove barriers and standardize our stations as much as possible.

3.2.9 Transportation: Corridor Train Delivery

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.

4. Recap

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.