

# Federal Initial Accessibility Plan



## Table des matières

Background.....	3
STO policy on universal accessibility .....	3
General information .....	4
Description of the feedback process and coordinates .....	4
Alternative formats .....	4
Consultations .....	5
Comittee on universal accessibility .....	5
Anticipated improvements.....	6
Employment.....	6
Built environment .....	7
Information and communication technologies .....	8
Communication, other than information and communication technologies .....	9
Procurement of goods, services and facilities .....	10
Design and delivery of programs and services .....	11
Transportation .....	13
Conclusion .....	14

## Background

According to the latest data from the Institut de la statistique du Québec (2022), 21.0% of Quebec residents aged 15 years and over have a disability. That comes to approximately 1,422,020 people. The most frequently reported disabilities are related to pain, flexibility and mobility. Those functional limitations, when they significantly and persistently limit participation in day-to-day activities, correspond to the definition of a person with a disability. The obstacles they face in their daily lives often involve accessibility.

Pain is the most common disability they face, afflicting 12.7% of them, followed by flexibility and mobility in 7.6% and 7.4% of cases, respectively. There are also sight and hearing impairments, which can present obstacles when using public transit, and although less frequent, they still come to 4.7% and 3.3%, respectively. It should be noted that as the population ages, those proportions are bound to increase.

In that regard, in accordance with the provincial requirements and further to the 2004 revision of the *Act to secure handicapped persons in the exercise of their rights with a view to achieving social, school and workplace integration* (R.S.Q., c. E-20.1), the STO is also required to comply with the federal requirements set out in the *Accessible Canada Act* (S.C. 2019, c. 10).

To that end, the STO has prepared its first federal initial plan, aiming to propose solutions for improvements in the short- and medium-term as part of a process to make public transit accessible and inclusive for everyone.

## STO policy on universal accessibility

For the past 20 years, the Société de transport de l'Outaouais (STO) has been working on universal accessibility for public transit as a key component of society, tabling three development plans in the process:

- the Plan for the 2009-2014 period, adopted by the STO in 2009 and updated in 2011;
- the Plan for the 2015-2019 period, adopted by the STO in 2016; and
- the Plan for the 2021-2025 period, adopted by the STO in 2020;

In addition, the STO integrated a component dedicated to accessibility as part of its 2017-2018 internal strategic plan, thereby attesting to its sustained commitment to inclusive mobility. Accessibility constitutes one of the three guiding principles of that strategic plan, with the stated objective of **making the public transit system universally accessible**, subject to the following sub-principles:

- usable by everyone;
- a simple and intuitive experience;

- accessibility adapted to each person's physical ability;
- a safe environment; and
- assisted access to information.

## **General information**

### **Description of the feedback process and coordinates**

In order to ensure we meet our commitments, our policy on universal accessibility was developed in collaboration with the different internal stakeholders. This approach led to a status report on the actions that have already been taken and those still in process, and priorities focused on the quality and feasibility of initiatives rather than their mere quantity.

Mindful of achieving a more rigorous and thorough follow-up, we remain open to all manner of feedback. Your comments in that regard, provided through our consultation process or as a question on universal accessibility, are all welcome. Your contribution is essential to the continuous improvement of our services.

That is why we have a simple feedback process for the general public, associations of representatives, STO employees and local residents. All you have to do is share your comments, either anonymously or by indicating your name and coordinates, in one of the following ways:

- call 819-770-3242 for people who are deaf or hard of hearing;
- email Hugues Charron at [accessibilite@sto.ca](mailto:accessibilite@sto.ca)
- send a letter to:

Customer Relations  
Société de Transport de l'Outaouais  
111 rue Jean Proulx  
Gatineau, Québec J8Z 1T4

Our customer relations agents will acknowledge receipt of your feedback and respond directly to you (as long as you provide your name and coordinates).

### **Alternative formats**

For the above-indicated communications, you may request this plan, a detailed version of our feedback process, and our progress reports, in paper version, large print, Braille or audio format. If you use sign language, you can contact us by calling the above number and using the video option.

Please note that for Braille or audio format, we will get back to you within 45 days following receipt of the request. For documents requested in any other format, the response time is 15 days.

## **Consultations**

As part of its 2021-2025 accessibility plan, the STO conducted a three-week public consultation exercise in July 2020. The aim was to collect testimonials and suggestions from the public related to obstacles and difficulties encountered when using STO buses. Given the constraints due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the consultations were mainly online, and resulted in comments from 239 participants.

The information collected will be used to draw up a list of current and potential obstacles affecting accessibility to STO services, and to identify certain action priorities.

At the same time, several partners throughout Gatineau were consulted between September and October 2020, including representatives of public organizations and people from the disabled community. Those meetings helped expand on the analysis of the issues, taking into account not only the regular public transit system, but also adapted transportation.

Finally, the STO has set up a technical committee on universal accessibility, mandated to follow up on the plan and the implementation of the actions identified.

## **Committee on universal accessibility**

So far in 2025, the STO has focused on its upcoming plans:

- 2026–2030 universal accessibility plan;
- 2026–2035 strategic plan; and
- federal initial plan.

This approach stems from our determination to adapt our actions to users' actual needs while ensuring their feasibility over the short- and medium-terms.

Mindful of the importance of dialogue if it is to get an accurate picture of the situation, the STO will want to strengthen its collaborative approach. To that end, it intends to start by reconstituting the internal technical committee on universal accessibility by bringing together several of its departments.

That could be followed by a more sustained commitment to external stakeholders — namely representative organizations, associations and other stakeholders — to ensure a more closely monitored, continuing and more structured dialogue to foster active construction.

## Anticipated improvements

To date, in 2025, a summary of the advances made between 2021 and 2024 has been prepared, including an evaluation of the sustainability of the actions underway and a list of possible improvements through the following:

- accessibility of vehicles, trips and routes;
- accessibility of stops;
- accessibility of the environment;
- technological upgrades;
- employee training;
- communication tools; and
- customer relations.

In fact, those themes will be reflected in the different strata of the initial plan, in the following areas:

- employment;
- the built environment;
- information and communication technologies;
- communication, other than information and communication technologies;
- the procurement of goods, services and facilities;
- the design and delivery of programs and services; and
- transportation.

## Employment

- **Accommodation measures [ongoing]**

The STO has a policy on adaptation measures, mainly in relation to individual medical situations. When an employee presents with a particular condition, an outside doctor fills out a form, and the in-house doctor examines the employee to set in place the recommended accommodations for a specified period. Those accommodations mainly concern bus drivers, involving adjusted seats or the addition of air conditioning.

For new hires, a pre-employment form is also required. According to the information provided, an in-house nurse reviews the situation and, if necessary, identifies the measures to be applied.

In addition, the Centre administratif Antoine-Grégoire (CAAG) and the Centre d'entretien et d'exploitation (CEE) are accessible, namely thanks to the presence of elevators and washrooms equipped with automatic door openers.

## Built environment

- **Work with Gatineau and internally on reviewing the addition of sidewalks that will help make stops accessible, and follow up [2025 – ongoing]**



In the interest of universal accessibility and continuous improvement, the STO is regularly asked by Gatineau to comment on plans for upcoming repair work. On those occasions, the STO uses the opportunity to recommend accommodations needed to have the stops comply with accessibility standards, thereby helping to progressively optimize accessibility throughout the system. In 2024, the STO reviewed and commented on ten repair projects. However, failure to follow up in the

field while the work is underway can sometimes jeopardize the application of the prescribed criteria. For that reason, one of the objectives would be to identify an in-house contact in charge of rigorous monitoring throughout the process, in close collaboration with Gatineau.

In 2024 as well, an effort was made to prioritize, based on criteria such as the number of riders with reduced mobility, the presence of strollers or the number of riders at stops, which led to the identification of and accommodations at eight priority stops. Those accommodations were paid for out of the annual universal accessibility budget.

The STO intends to maintain and strengthen those actions in the coming years, again in the ever-present determination to build an inclusive system that is accessible to all.

- **Launch of new discussions with Gatineau regarding snow clearing [2025 – 2029]**

The accessibility of bus stops in winter remains a major issue for the STO. Most of the stops become difficult to access as a result of snow accumulation and lack of coordination between the different parties in charge of snow clearing.

Currently, Gatineau is responsible for clearing snow from the roads and sidewalks, while the STO is in charge of clearing snow from the bus turnout, which is the area between the road and the sidewalk where riders board the bus. That division of responsibilities has resulted in fragmented management and uncoordinated intervention delays, making it generally difficult to take the bus.

Before 2022, Gatineau cleared the snow within 24 hours after a storm. Since then, that timeline has changed to 72 hours, exacerbating accessibility issues at stops and surrounding sidewalks.

Although the STO is currently in the process of a call for tenders for a snow clearing contract of bus turnouts until 2030, discussions are already underway with Gatineau to find a transitional solution for after that. Those discussions aim to come up with an optimized and realistic approach that would meet the expectations of riders while taking into account operational constraints. For that reason, this project needs to be staggered over several years, and will require time, consideration, discussion and negotiation.

- **Furnishings for new STO bus shelters [2025 – 2027]**

In line with its commitment to improve the customer experience and promote universal accessibility throughout its system, the STO is progressively deploying a new bus shelter model. In 2024, 40 of those new bus shelters were installed, marking the first tangible phase of the project. An action plan is currently in the works to guide deployment over the coming years, in particular for 2026 and 2027. The new models are currently on pre-order.

To date, the new bus shelters installed in 2024 have no complementary furnishings. In order to ensure optimal comfort and accessibility for all riders, the STO plans to systematically introduce at least one bench in each of those shelters. The intention is to meet the needs of people with physical limitations and seniors, but also, naturally, of anyone passing by. Leaning seats will also be installed in some bus shelters to provide a partial solution for people who cannot fully sit, while optimizing the available space.

These accommodations directly enhance the universal accessibility of STO facilities, and are part of an inclusive approach aimed at offering more comfortable, safer and more equitable public transit services for everyone.

## **Information and communication technologies**

- **Improving the Infobus tool [2025 – 2026]**

The Infobus tool is a service that enables riders to obtain information about the arrival of the next bus at their stop, either by phone or SMS.

To date, only arrival times have been provided. We are currently testing ways to provide more information and to do so homogeneously by phone and SMS by integrating data in real time on accessibility at the stop, as well as on bus direction and arrival time.

That will be followed by a second development phase, aimed at improving the information provided on work underway. So far, only the phone option indicates whether a stop is temporarily out of



commission. The objective is to standardize both the phone and SMS messages, and to add a new feature: the date when service will resume at the stop in question.



### Communication, other than information and communication technologies

- **Upgrading of information panels at stops throughout the system [2021 - 2026]**

One of the features of universal accessibility that the STO has been working on over the past few years is upgrading the information panels at bus stops to improve the visibility of information, including making the bus stop number and the route destination larger. In 2024, 34 panels were upgraded, and the work should be completed in 2025 – 2026.

At the same time, for each stop, the STO will prepare an inventory on universal accessibility data (height, sidewalk width, presence of a continuous sidewalk, immediate and obstacle-free environment, etc.) to update our internal databases.



- **Encourage exchanges with associations and representatives of people with disabilities to identify current priorities, positive aspects and weaknesses [2025 – 2030]**

In terms of the new orientations in universal accessibility, one of the main objectives is to introduce more regular discussions with organizations, associations and representatives of people with disabilities through structured annual meetings.

This approach aims to provide a continuous consultation phase that is more attentive to the needs expressed by the users concerned, while at the same time giving the STO the chance to explain the options, technical constraints and feasibility limits of its projects. This would help build a relationship of transparency, co-construction and mutual understanding.

Of course, setting up such a process raises organizational issues: to date, there is no specifically designated agent to address universal accessibility, and coordinating those actions would require involvement by several departments. Some degree of internal structuring would be required to support this approach over time and ensure that it works.

The ultimate objective is to make universal accessibility a shared responsibility, transversally integrated across all STO organizational practices.

## **Procurement of goods, services and facilities**

- **Acquisition of new buses [2025-2028]**

The STO has a new bus procurement plan to make its fleet 100% accessible by 2028 – 2030. In late 2024, there were still 91 non accessible (no access ramp) buses 379-bus fleet.

Over the coming years, 15 accessible buses will be added (including 4 electric buses, which will not be immediately put in service) if the financing and delivery parameters work out as expected.



## Design and delivery of programs and services

- **Updating of the driver guide [2025 – 2026]**

The STO driver guide currently includes several elements related to accessibility, including detailed instructions on the use of the access ramp and the procedure for boarding people using a wheelchair. It also contains essential information on:

- the list of buses with access ramps;
- accessible stops throughout the system; and
- directives on the transportation of certified assistance and emotional support animals.



However, in order to better meet evolving universal accessibility standards and assist personnel in dealing with the range of riders' needs, an updated guide, which should be available by 2025–2026, will address the following:

- strengthening the interpersonal skills of drivers on greeting and assisting riders with disabilities or other functional limitations;
- systematic checking of access ramps before each shift to ensure they are in good working order; and
- integrating best practices for communication and assistance, with emphasis on respect, safety and inclusiveness for all.

This update will help make the driver guide a key training and awareness tool, aligned with the principles of universal accessibility and STO values regarding equity, respect and inclusion.

- **Customer relations response time [ongoing]**

In 2022, STO customer relations handled 46,990 calls.

In order to access information more readily, people who are less comfortable with technological information tools can obtain information by phone. In addition, the STO aims to monitor response times and set a maximum wait time target.

- **Accessibility and quality criteria at points of sale [2025 – 2027]**

There are close to 50 points of sale throughout Gatineau where bus passes and tickets can be purchased. While those businesses are generally accessible, they have not yet been evaluated.

In 2021, quality and accessibility criteria were set out to evaluate the physical facilities at STO ticket points of sale. Those points of sale must now be checked to determine whether they meet the

updated criteria. Ultimately, we will be able to post the level of accessibility of each point of sale directly on our website to better inform users.

## **Transportation**

- **Guaranteed accessible routes [ongoing]**

The STO system currently has 12 accessible routes (including 2 school routes accessible to everyone). A route is considered accessible if it meets the following two criteria:

- every bus on the route has an access ramp; and
- most (currently 9 out of 10) of the stops are accessible.

The most recent data, from late 2024, indicates that 76% of the STO bus fleet was accessible. However, based on the distances they covered, those accessible buses provided 80% of the trips made.

That proportion of accessible trips will increase as the new buses are acquired.

- **Accessibility of park-and-rides [2025 – 2027]**

The STO currently has 16 park-and-rides throughout its system. Those facilities play a strategic role as points of transfer between cars and public transit, facilitating intermodality and encouraging the use of public transit.

In terms of universal accessibility, one of the priorities is to draw up a full status report on each of those infrastructures. That analysis will indicate the accessibility of each site by identifying:

- physical or environmental obstacles limiting access;
- non-compliance with current accessibility standards; and
- weaknesses in terms of signage, safety or comfort.

This baseline diagnosis will be used to develop targeted corrective measures aimed at readjusting or improving the accessibility of those spaces, and guarantee a seamless, safe and inclusive experience for all users, regardless of their needs or functional limitations.

## **Conclusion**

With this federal initial plan, the STO is confirming its awareness that continuing improvements are needed to improve universal accessibility.

Whether in regard to the built environment, communication systems, transportation systems, discussions with different parties, etc., universal accessibility aims to not only meet specific needs but also to make the transportation experience simpler, more pleasant and more inclusive for all users. That work is constantly evolving and has a real impact on many people.

By improving accessibility, the STO enables more people to choose public transit and at the same time strengthens its image of an attentive, modern and accessible public service.

Thus, we are duty-bound to continue in this direction in order to obtain beneficial and achievable results for not only users but also society overall.

In order to do this and be alert to upcoming changes, an update will be prepared for the next progress report due in June 2026.