



December 2023

# Multi-Year Accessibility Plan: Year One Progress Report

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## Background

Across Canada, 6.2 million people, or 22% of the population, identify as having a disability.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> [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

We continue to listen to you and welcome your comments on this progress report, our plan, our feedback process, 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 deaf, deafened, or hard-of-hearing;
- commenting in the form on the website at [viarail.ca/en/contact-us](http://viarail.ca/en/contact-us), or [viarail.ca/fr/nous-joindre](http://viarail.ca/fr/nous-joindre);
- emailing us at [customer\\_relations@viarail.ca](mailto:customer_relations@viarail.ca) or [relations\\_clientele@viarail.ca](mailto: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 progress reports, our plan, or a description of our feedback process 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, the 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

To be successful in our accessibility improvements, we must include people with disabilities early and often. With that in mind, we created a Universal Accessibility Advisory Committee. 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.

Since this group is the most aware of the work we are currently carrying out, we've asked them if they would like to give their feedback on this progress report. We did this by sending each members a copy of the report in their preferred format. We asked them to provide any recommendations or feedback they thought would improve the report or be helpful for Canadians. We also asked these committee members to tell us how they would like to provide their feedback, for example, by email or in a virtual meeting. We brought together all the feedback in a central file for reference and included the information in the "Feedback" section below.

## Feedback

This subsection provides the feedback we received from our Universal Advisory Committee members on our progress report as well as general feedback we received about accessibility at VIA Rail since we published our Multi-Year Plan.

### **Feedback on This Progress Report**

Our Universal Accessibility Advisory Committee was very helpful and reliable for the feedback they provided on the report. We received feedback from nearly every member of the Committee.

In general, the feedback they provided could be separated into two categories: feedback specific to the progress report and general suggestions. Overall, most of the comments received were constructive. They focused on taking a slightly different approach to some projects. For example, provide more concrete examples of project results. Committee members also asked us to modify certain sentences in the text for greater clarity.

We made the necessary adjustments to the progress report for most of the feedback specific to the report. And we are taking into consideration the other feedback and suggestions.

Here are a few comments offered by the Committee members:

- “As a person who has difficulty with hearing, and is blind, I can say some stations have a very good audible system and others do not. Perhaps doing a little audit of the quality of the announcement systems in all stations might be a worthy project.”
- “It would be worth considering the inclusion of “plain language” as an alternate format available for request, to accommodate users with developmental, cognitive, and communications disabilities.”
- “VIA continues to move this needle forward in its aggressive plan to become fully barrier-free and practices its elements through its customer service lens. As a frequent user of VIA Rail, I commend the team for continuing its fine work on accessibility.”

## **Feedback on Accessibility at VIA Rail**

Customer experience is incredibly valuable to us at VIA Rail. Our reputation is built on the service we offer and our caring and friendly staff. That said, the feedback customers submit about their experiences helps us identify barriers to accessibility.

Some feedback we’ve received since we’ve published our Multi-Year Accessibility Plan relates to:

- improving the accessibility of our communications and media;
- offering sign language to our customers at stations and on trains;
- using more inclusive language.

Receiving this feedback is important to us. In addition to helping us identify barriers, we use it to find solutions to prevent the creation of new barriers and remove existing barriers. While there’s not always an easy fix to eliminating barriers, it doesn’t stop us from trying to remove the barriers as much as possible and finding a temporary solution in the meantime.

When we receive feedback from our customers or staff, the VIA Rail Accessibility Team reviews it to determine what is the cause of the barrier or issue. Then, we discuss our options to address it. We will often turn to our Advisory Committee members for advice or recommendations.

After having a better understanding of the barriers and our options, we try to resolve the issues. If our chosen solution to eliminating the barrier is a process, procedure or operational fix, the update to the way we do things is drafted and conveyed to the people affected by the change. If the solution requires us to purchase a product or service, we need secure funding for the new product or service then launch a public competitive bidding process. After the new



solution has been implemented, communications are sent internally, and sometimes externally, depending on the subject.

## Update on Our Progress

The projects below include improvements in accessibility for our trains, stations, services, and communications. We've provided the description of our objectives and initial timelines for each project. Below that, we are updating you on the progress we've made since we published our Multi-Year Plan. You will notice some project timelines start before the official launch of our plan. We were able to get an early start on our projects because VIA Rail understands the importance of accessibility and removing barriers.

## Built Environment

### **Station Accessibility Analysis (2021-2022)**

The first step to creating standard, universally accessible stations is to analyze the level of accessibility at every station. To identify barriers, prevent the creation of new barriers, and eliminate existing barriers, VIA Rail will conduct an analysis of the accessibility of its network. Having an inventory of the level of accessibility 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.

### **Progress Update**

We've got off to a great start with the Station Accessibility Analysis. We've inventoried the level of accessibility of the stations from the arrival at the location to the station entrance.

The analysis and inventory of these stations focused on:

- assessing the condition of the parking lot and curb ramps;
- counting the number of dedicated accessible parking spots;
- determining the safest and most accessible route of travel from the dedicated accessible parking spots to the station entrance; and,
- determining which station doors should be updated with a push-button automatic door.

## **Station Accessibility Improvements (2022-2025)**

The station accessibility analysis conducted 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 ramps and automatic doors. The end goal of this plan is to prevent and remove barriers and standardize our stations as much as possible.

### **Progress Update**

We've updated the majority of stations included in the scope of this project. The accessible parking spots and the path of travel from these parking spots into the station's building have been made compliant with the Canadian Standards Association's "Accessible design for the built environment" (B651-18).

The process of this upgrade has made the accessible parking spots safer, larger, and more noticeable. The curb ramps have been improved by relocating them to the most accessible path of travel, by making sure the slope is compliant with the B651-18, and by adding tactile walking surface indicators. Also, entrances to these stations have received ramps with railing (where needed), tactile walking surface indicators at stairs and ramps, and push-button automatic doors at stations entrance.

## **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.

### **Progress Update**

VIA Rail's Accessibility Team and Procurement Department have worked together to create VIA Rail's first accessible procurement process.

To help VIA Rail staff understand the importance of considering accessibility when purchasing goods and services, our team began by raising awareness. After making presentations on the importance of accessibility to all the teams this affects, our team focused on the procurement process.

We added accessibility checkpoints to the procurement process. One of the checkpoints we've added is a new accessibility section to VIA Rail's business case document for the purchase of new products and services. This means anytime someone tries to make a large purchase, they must fill out a section related to accessibility before requesting proposals.

In the accessibility section of the business case, we've also included an accessible procurement toolkit that has been shared with the entire company. This toolkit explains what accessible procurement is and provides examples of accessibility considerations for the procurement process. It walks the user through the process of assessing accessibility. The toolkit also provides contact information for users who need assistance when assessing accessibility.

Another checkpoint that has been added to the procurement process is the Procurement Department's accessibility validation. The procurement officer responsible for the project must validate that the VIA employee making the purchase has considered accessibility in their project. If there are any questions at this stage, they are directed to the Accessibility Team, who helps guide the VIA employee and procurement officer with their request.

Finally, we're working on a way to monitor the number of purchase requests made that have an accessibility component. This is a work in progress and will continue through 2024.

## 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.

### **Progress Update**

Through our Customer Satisfaction Surveys, we have been able to gather the following feedback related to our communication with our customers and their travel experience. Keep in mind that these surveys are sent to passengers randomly and not targeted at people with disabilities, so while the surveys do reflect the opinions of our passengers as a whole, the results are not meant to be viewed as accessibility specific.

#### **Booking Experience**

Overall, our customers find our website to be easy to navigate and that it makes reservations online simple. Most of our customers make their reservations with us online using a computer or a mobile phone, or by calling our Customer Care Agents. Satisfaction with making

reservations with us is generally quite high with the overall booking experience at around 85% for respondents who were somewhat satisfied or very satisfied.

Satisfaction with the ease of navigation, the availability of information and clarity of information on our website is rather high. Most of these categories receive near 90% satisfaction rates for respondents who were somewhat satisfied or very satisfied.

### Travel Experience

Passengers have expressed relatively high levels of satisfaction with the train station experience. Satisfaction levels for the ease of finding the train gate averages around 90% for respondents who were somewhat satisfied or very satisfied, whereas satisfaction levels for finding station exits and in-station messages average around 80% for respondents who were somewhat satisfied or very satisfied.

### Specific Service Requests

Around 80% of our passengers who asked for a specific service request were either somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with the service they received.

We will continue to monitor these surveys to keep an eye out for trends and areas that need improvement.

## 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.

### **Progress Update**

VIA Rail's Accessibility Team has worked with the Rolling Stock Department and our Customer Care Agents to create our first "Accessibility Train Reference Guide." The Guide is complete and ready for use. It contains the most important dimensions and accessibility features in our fleet of accessible train cars. This Guide will mainly be used by our Customer Care Agents when assisting customers with questions about dimensions and accessibility features in our trains.

However, the Guide will also be used by VIA Rail staff during the refurbishment or purchase of new trains.

### **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 for signage throughout the train; embossed and high-contrast signage; surface transitions; automatic doors; more grab bars and mobility-aid seating options; accessible washrooms; screen displays indicating travel information in text; and an audio redundancy for the on-screen messages.

### **Progress Update**

The delivery of our new Corridor fleet is well underway. To date, 6 of 32 trainsets are in service in the Quebec City-Windsor Corridor. A total of over 42,000 passengers have taken trips on our new trains. The feedback about these trains has been overwhelmingly positive. We look forward to seeing you on board!

## **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.

### **Progress Update**

Our human resources team has been working on ways to improve our recruitment process by making it more accessible and equitable to people with disabilities. To help them in the process, they hired a firm to do a gap analysis and then started to implement the recommendations. Below are some of the actions we're taking to help ensure a fair and equitable recruitment process:

- Making sure all candidates know they can ask for arrangements in the recruitment process and continued support as an employee.
- Creating an Employee Resource Group (ERG) for people with disabilities.
- Creating a company-wide statement on Diversity and Inclusion with a specific mention of disability.

- Participating in job fairs specifically targeted at people with disabilities.
- Participating publicly in disability and accessibility-related campaigns, events and activities.
- Ensuring marketing and signage includes people with disabilities.
- Increase self-reporting of employees with disabilities.
- Offering mandatory unconscious bias training to employees.
- Document hiring practices to make them more accessible, including having an inclusive written Recruitment policy.

## 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.

### **Progress Update**

We've created several American Sign Language (ASL) and Quebec Sign Language (LSQ) videos. We now have an introductory video on the top of our website that explains the home page and the location of our accessibility page where additional sign language videos can be found. The most important travel information for our passengers is summarized in the videos on the accessibility page.

There are six videos in each language, for both desktop and mobile versions of the website, for a total of 24 videos.

Our new reservation system will also have a tutorial video in both ASL and LSQ for desktop and mobile phone users. The video walks the user through the reservation process step-by-step to make booking easier for sign language users.

## **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 loops 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.

### **Progress Update**

After deploying the first phase of the hearing loops at ticket counters project in Ottawa, Montreal, and Toronto Stations, we've decided to expand the project to nearly half of our stations. Some 40 of our stations are now equipped with a hearing loop at a ticket counter. This new service will facilitate communication for both our passengers and our staff.

## **Autonomous Wayfinding in Train Stations (2023-2025)**

Based on recommendations received during workshops held with our partners in accessibility, 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.

### **Progress Update**

Ottawa Station has been the chosen location for this project. The type of technology used has yet to be determined, but it will be a digital solution. While we have been approached by various companies and accessibility partners, a fair public procurement process has been conducted to choose the best autonomous navigation solution for this project. To help us understand how our customers use the technology and to adjust our solution to best meet the varying needs of our customers, we will perform user tests with approximately 10 persons with various types of disabilities. The official launch of this autonomous wayfinding project is slated for 2024.

## **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.

## **Progress Update**

VIA Rail worked with a consultant to do a benchmark of accessible communications across the world. That benchmark was used as part of a gap analysis conducted on VIA Rail’s direct communication to customers. The gap analysis was then used to create an “Accessible Communications Guide” for VIA Rail staff. The Guide is in use across the organization to make our internal and external communications more accessible.

The next phase of this project will be to update the communication resources our customer support team uses to communicate with our customers. This update will respect the best practices in the “Accessible Communications Guide,” such as using plain and inclusive language, accessible formatting, and alternative format documents. The second phase of this project will carry on through 2024.

## **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).<sup>2</sup>

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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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



## **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:

**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.

## Our Work Continues

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 and remove barriers, and prevent the creation of new barriers. Our Multi-Year

Plan outlines 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. 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.