



Ombudsman
Toronto

Listening. Investigating. Improving City Services.

Ombudsman Susan Opler's 10 Steps to Help Toronto's Public Servants Respond Fairly to Difficult Behaviour

From time to time, City of Toronto staff serving the public may encounter someone whose behaviour is unacceptable. Such behaviour may include the use of profane or abusive language or repeated calls, visits or emails.

These situations are difficult. All members of the public have the right to receive fair service from their municipal government. At the same time, City of Toronto staff have the right to a workplace free of harassment and discrimination.

I suggest these steps to help City staff handle these challenging situations in a way that fairly and effectively balances the rights of both the public and City staff.

- 1 Listen.** Let people talk—or vent—without interrupting. Allow them to feel heard. Treat everyone with respect, humanity and kindness. Don't talk down to anyone.
- 2 Empathize.** Try to de-escalate the situation by showing that you understand what the person is concerned about. Assume that something beyond their control is causing them to behave unacceptably. They are likely feeling upset, angry, frustrated, or scared, or experiencing the effects of trauma. Be calm and try not to get upset or take the behaviour personally. Show compassion.
- 3 Focus.** Don't think only about the person's behaviour. Instead, be on the lookout for an issue you can address. If something has gone wrong and you can fix it or apologize, please do.
- 4 Support.** Try to help. Provide meaningful referrals if possible. And if you feel uncomfortable or unable to handle the situation, immediately involve your manager.



- 5** **Warn.** If someone's behaviour is still preventing the City from serving them or others fairly, management should ask them to stop and calmly warn them that if the behaviour doesn't stop, other steps will be necessary. It helps to have an Unacceptable Behaviour Policy that is available to the public. Send the person something in writing, outlining the unacceptable behaviour in detail (with examples) and telling them that it must stop immediately, or you will have to consider imposing an Alternative Service Arrangement (ASA).
- 6** **Impose Reasonable Limits.** If an ASA is unavoidable, figure out how you can continue to serve the person fairly. This may be by saying that you will not consider an issue that you have already fully addressed, and/or by limiting how they can communicate with you (for example, only by letter) for a defined period of time.
- 7** **Explain.** If you do have to impose an ASA, explain why, with details and examples of the unacceptable behaviour. Provide the end date, when you will review whether there is an ongoing need for the ASA. Tell the person if they don't believe the ASA is fair, they should contact Ombudsman Toronto to complain.
- 8** **Review.** Every ASA must have a clearly communicated end date. When that date comes, review whether you need to extend the ASA (because the person has breached its terms), or whether you can resume trying to serve the person in the usual way. If you need to extend the ASA, follow steps 6 and 7 again, setting a new end date for the ASA. If you don't need to extend the ASA, it will end on the date you told the person it would, and no action is required.
- 9** **Reflect.** Continually ask yourself whether you are doing all you can to provide fair service to the person whose behaviour is challenging you, and don't be afraid to revisit or revise your approach.
- 10** **Document.** Record in your file everything you do under steps 1 to 9. If there is ever a question of whether you treated the person fairly, you will be able to point to your records to show your sensitive, careful and thoughtful handling of the situation.