



**GUIDELINES FOR INCLUSIVE DESIGN  
UNIVERSAL WASHROOM FACILITIES  
FOR ALBERTA INFRASTRUCTURE FACILITIES**

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# Guidelines for Inclusive Design

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## Design Standards for Universal Washroom Facilities in Public Buildings

### Table of Contents Page

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- Overview ..... 3
- Context..... 3
- Inclusive Design – Why Does it Matter? ..... 3
- Rationale ..... 4
- Applicable Regulatory Issues ..... 5
- Proposed Design Strategies ..... 5
  - 1. Design Option – Universal Toilet Room ..... 7
  - 2. Design Option – Multi-user/Common sink area, separate Toilet Room ..... 8
  - 3. Design Option – Multi-user, Common sink area ..... 9
  - 4. Design Option – Universal Toilet Rooms..... 10
  - 5. Design Option – Improvements to Existing Facilities ..... 11
- Proposed Signage Strategies ..... 12
- General Washroom Signage ..... 12
- Accessible/Barrier Free Washroom Signage ..... 13
- Risk Analysis/GBA+ ..... 14
- References and Source Material..... 15

# Guidelines for Inclusive Design

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## Design Standards for Universal Washroom Facilities in Public Buildings

### Overview

The Government of Alberta (GOA) and the Ministry of Infrastructure recognize the diversity of Albertans and strives for equality and inclusion in its policies, programs, and physical facilities. Building on the recently implemented Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) program, consideration is given not only to identity factors – age, education, culture, language, income, and physical abilities – but also to gender identity and expression. These evolving best practices apply to all provincially owned buildings in order to meet the needs of Albertans now and in the future. The Guidelines for Inclusive Design – Universal Washrooms is intended to support discussions around access and use of public spaces, and provide direction to consultants, facility managers, and client ministries.

### Context

Public washrooms represent one area where binary gender conformity is actively observed and managed. The *Canadian Human Rights Act* and the *Criminal Code* were updated in June 2017 to affirm the rights of all people to use a washroom that corresponds to their gender identity.

Gender-designated facilities lack privacy and discourage accessibility for many users, including: those with mobility issues, the transgender and non-binary gender community, and those requiring assistance, such as the elderly or children. As well, current building codes support the distribution of washroom facilities by gender, resulting in a poor correlation between demand and availability, and the potential for over- or under-building capacity. In contrast, the prevalence of universal washrooms (alone or in combination with gender designed stalls) in Europe provides an alternate model, which is increasingly being adopted by many municipalities, private organizations, and governmental bodies in North America.

Gender-based advocacy has influenced design for inclusivity. There is a developing best practice to use ‘universal’ instead of ‘gender neutral’ or ‘all gender’ labels. It is important to note that these best practices are not a response to any particular group, but a holistic strategy that supports the well-being and quality of life for all Albertans. Consideration has been given to a range of design factors including: access and circulation, physical security, operation and maintenance costs, capital construction costs, signage, and other design strategies. The GOA is committed to being a leader in the advancement of gender equality and the development of best practices in universal design standards, policies, and procedures.

### Inclusive Design – Why Does it Matter?

The discussion of inclusive design is part of Infrastructure’s development of best practices for all GOA facilities. The provision of universal washrooms in public facilities is an opportunity to

address the evolving needs of Albertans and promote inclusivity and equality for all. The design strategies in these Guidelines are intended to:

- address the needs of all users of public and GOA owned facilities;
- respond to input from users, planners, and facility managers;
- conform to all required building code standards;
- identify requirements for clear, inclusive, and function-based signage;
- ensure integrated design to address all aspects of the interior environment; and
- enhance safety, privacy, and comfort through best practices and forward thinking design.

Benefits of a comprehensive strategy for Universal Gender Inclusive Washrooms include:

- inclusivity for people with physical disabilities;
- inclusivity for families and caregivers;
- increased privacy for users;
- greater degree of personal choice in type of facility;
- increased efficiency in use of washroom facilities; and
- future flexibility in meeting needs.

## Rationale

Every Albertan has the right to live and work in an environment that is safe and supportive of their needs. Providing a greater range of washroom types, including gender inclusive options, promotes safety and ease of use by all users, including intuitive wayfinding, comfort through choice, privacy, and accessibility.

The right of individuals to use a washroom corresponding to their gender identity is not only supported by decades of case law, but is also affirmed under both federal and provincial legislation. Recently, Bill C-16 was passed to update the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and the *Criminal Code*; further enforcing the violation of discrimination based on gender identity or expression. The Province of Alberta has supported these measures with the *Alberta Human Rights Act*. In June 2018, Alberta passed legislation to create a third, non-binary gender marker, 'X', for all official government identification, such as driver's licences and birth certificates.

Building codes are also evolving to better facilitate safe access to buildings and facilities for all people. Barrier-free measures have been mandated to accommodate people with challenges or impairments including visual, hearing, cognitive, language, and mobility. The Inclusive Washroom Guidelines offer a number of solutions, which meet best practices and conform to the current *Alberta Building Code*.

## Applicable Regulatory Issues

### Existing and Future Code Issues Affecting Washroom Design:

Issue	Alberta Building Code 2014	Future Direction/Best Practices
Signage (Barrier-free)	Section 3.8.3.1 Accessibility Signs (2) "A washroom...designed to be barrier-free shall be identified by a sign consisting of the International Symbol of Accessibility [ISA]..."	Refer to 'Proposed Signage Strategies' section: Modified ISA to be accepted in lieu of existing ISO/DOT 50 ISA.
Signage (Barrier-free)	A-3.8.3.1.(1) and (2) Accessibility Signs Appendix A, Page A-41 illustrates examples of signage using the traditional binary male/female pictogram. Municipal Affairs has confirmed this is for explanatory information only, and is not a requirement.	Refer to 'Proposed Signage Strategies' section: Use of other options for pictograms other than human figure to be accepted.
Open layout for washrooms	3.7.2.2. Plumbing Facilities – Water Closets (17) "...room shall be designed so that water closets, urinals and lavatories are not visible from the entrance to the room." Inclusive washroom layouts used in numerous schools with toilets in cubicles and ganged sinks located in an open area visible from the corridor are not permitted.	Adoption of National Building Code standard which allows open design is expected in the next ABC update (early 2019).
Use of unisex cubicles in lieu of ganged cubicles in gendered washrooms	A-3.8.2.3 Washroom Appendix A, Page A-41 notes that sentence (4) "universal toilet rooms (unisex) should not be used as a substitute for making regular washrooms available." Note implications for non-gendered universal cubicles containing toilet and sink in lieu of traditional ganged, gendered toilet cubicles.	Municipal Affairs has confirmed that provision of the correct number of fixtures based on occupancy, and assumed 50/50 male/female split, meets code requirements. Appendix A material is 'not code, and is explanatory only'.
Provision of baby change tables	3.7 Not required.	Recommended in facilities, or in public areas (lobbies), which serve the public. To be located in areas accessible to all genders.

## Proposed Design Strategies

A variety of design options are required to address diverse facility types, functions, and scales of GOA built resources. Some newly built facilities may be suited to implement a fully universal and inclusive design, where others will require options that combine universal and gender-designated washroom typologies. In all cases, washroom designs must either conform to all current regulatory requirements in order to ensure occupancy permits can be issued, or through a process of developing alternate solutions based on the Alberta Building Code Functional Requirements (note, an alternate solution must be formally accepted by the Authority Having Jurisdiction as a written variance).

### Inclusive Washroom Design Guiding Principles:

- Provision of an integrated environment (e.g. lighting, finishes, fixture selection, acoustics), which holistically responds to the needs of the user, stakeholders, facility manager, and Owner.
- Conformance to all current regulatory requirements, including health and safety.
- Provides required capacity based on occupancy type and occupant load.
- Reflects universal design mandates (seven principles) and barrier free design strategies.
- Allows efficient use of space and optimizes circulation to and through the washroom facility.
- Promotes a sense of user safety, privacy, and comfort.
- Provides choice and autonomy.
- Supports sustainable design practices in selection of finishes, fixtures, and equipment.
- Provides flexibility by adapting to varying occupancy demands from all genders by offering gender inclusive use.

The most common designs are:

1.	Universal toilet room (single toilet and sink in a lockable room)
2.	Multi-user, non-gender designated space, enclosed ganged stalls, common sink area, and separate universal cubicles
3.	Multi-user, non-gender designated space, enclosed stalls containing private sink, and integrated barrier-free access
4.	Multi-user, non-gender designated space with enclosed stalls containing private sink
5.	Modifications to existing gendered washrooms, ganged stalls, and common sink area

A variety of options have been developed, which meet the intent of the guiding principles. The diagrams on the following pages are representations of possible solutions and are not to be viewed as prescriptive. Alternate designs are permitted in order to provide responsive solutions to the specific functional and programmatic needs of the client ministry within the framework of these principles. For example, collaboration with other groups, such as the Corporate Security team, may result in changes based on recommendations from hazard assessments and site reviews. Requirements for other programmatic areas, such as baby nourishment rooms, faith/meditation rooms, and smudging spaces, are not addressed in the Inclusive Washroom Guidelines. These areas should be identified in the Project Charter and Program, if required in the project.

## 1. Design Option – Universal Toilet Room

### .1 Planning Guidelines:

1. Full height (floor to ceiling) walls
2. Lockable door with availability indicator (vacant/occupied)
3. Must contain a toilet and hand washing sink/accessories
4. Must conform to all barrier free requirements, per Section 3.8 of the ABC 2014, if only one washroom is required by occupancy type and occupant load
5. Accessories required: toilet tissue dispenser, hand washing/drying, barrier free mirror, hygiene product disposal, grab bars, and coat hook
6. May contain a baby change station
7. Suitable for use by people with attendants, using assistive devices (e.g. walkers, strollers), or using due to larger open floor area
8. Suitable for small projects with low occupant loads

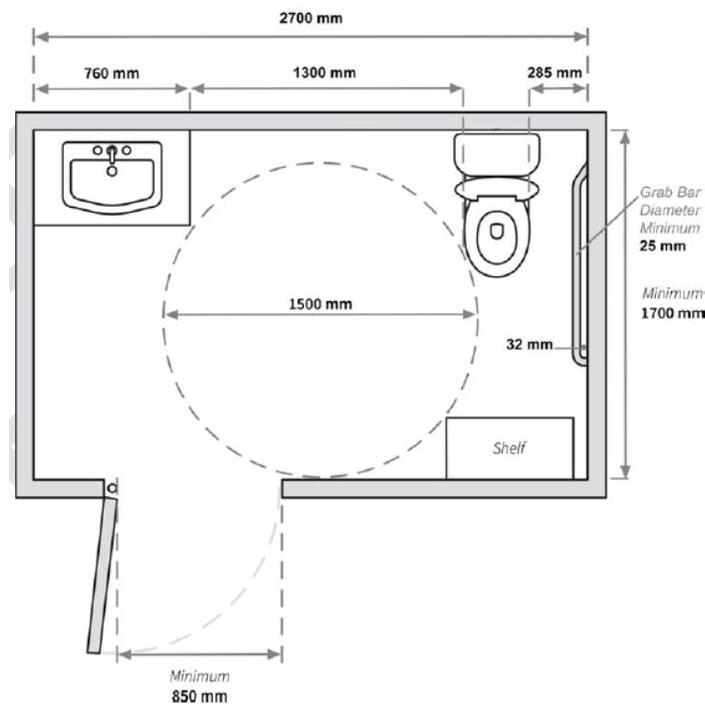


Figure 1 – Plan View

### .2 Consideration for use:

- Offers high degree of privacy and security, but can be a security hazard due to isolation and prevention of visual surveillance by others
- Offers barrier free access
- Common design with accepted typology
- Can create stigma if gender designated washrooms are available, but non-binary individuals are required to use single user option
- Note that ligature-free coat hooks are recommended; purse shelves are not recommended

## 2. Design Option – Multi-user/Common Sink Area, Separate Toilet Room

### .1 Planning Guidelines:

1. Full height (floor to ceiling) lockable doors with availability indicator on all stalls
2. Toilets to be located in stalls with full height partitions
3. Provision of non-gendered cubicles and lavatory area may offer space efficiencies, particularly if barrier free facilities are provided separately
4. Use of barrier free vestibule preferred over swing doors to provide visual screening of stalls and lavatory area to outside area
5. Accessories required in multi-user common area: hand washing/drying and mirror
6. Accessories required in multi-user stalls: toilet tissue dispenser, hygiene product disposal, and coat hook
7. Accessories required in separate toilet room same as Option 1
8. Baby change tables may be provided in universal toilet room(s)

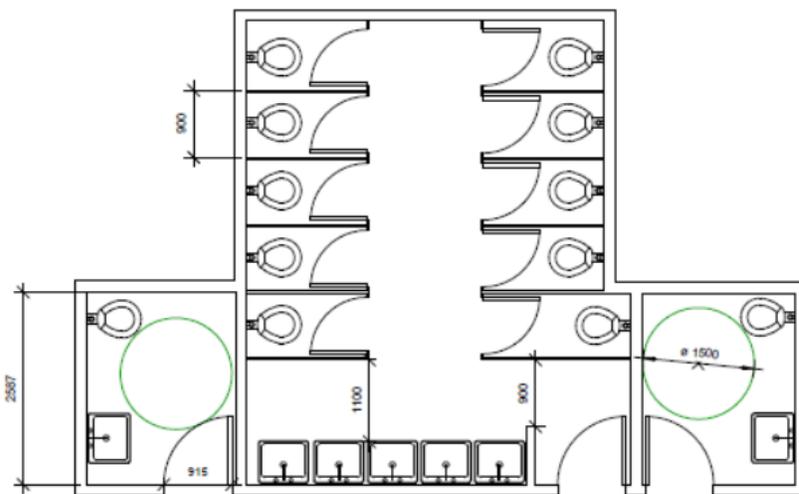


Figure 1 – Plan View

### .2 Consideration for use:

- Maximizes access to washroom for all genders
- Allows increased visual surveillance of area outside stalls by larger number of users
- Permitted by the *Alberta Building Code* if lavatory area is visually screened from public areas outside the space
- Separate access for standard cubicle and barrier free areas provides a choice of facilities, but may create stigma if access is limited to certain users
- Restrictive access to main washroom area discourages use and restricts circulation
- Note that ligature-free coat hooks are recommended; purse shelves are not recommended
- If monitoring or emergency access into stalls is required, full height doors and locks may be modified, and double-swing door may be used to suit client ministry requirements

### 3. Design Option – Multi-user, Common Sink Area

#### .1 Planning Guidelines:

1. Full height (floor to ceiling) lockable doors with availability indicator on all stalls
2. Toilets to be located in stalls
3. Barrier free facilities are provided within main washroom area providing equitable access
4. Common washroom area to be visually screened from public corridor without doors
5. Baby change tables may be provided in universal toilet room(s); however, lack of dedicated hand washing facility may be impractical

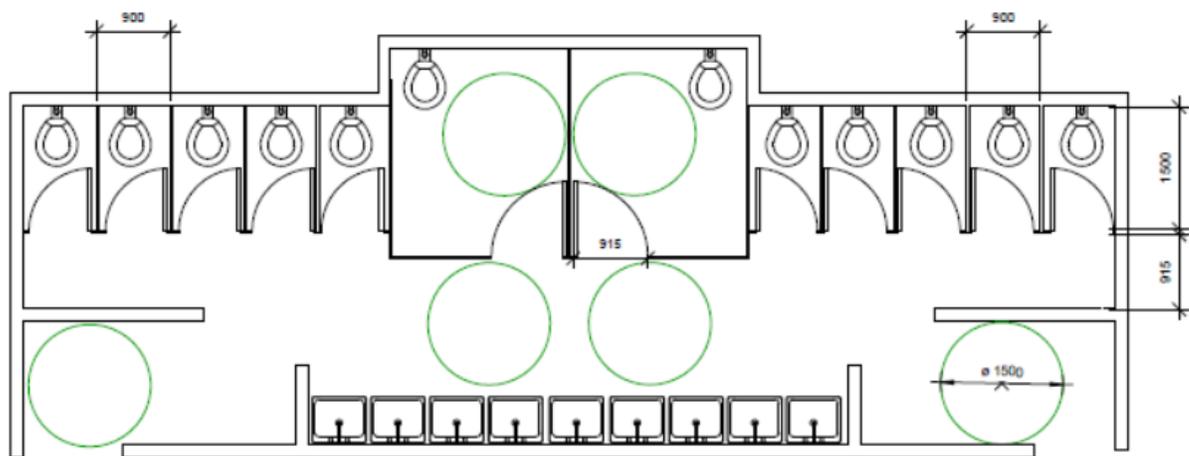


Figure 1 – Plan View

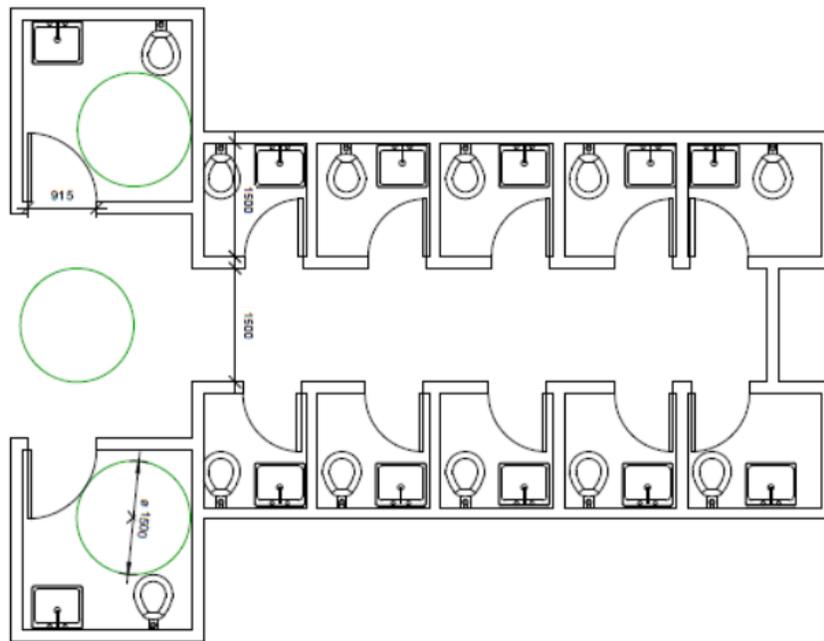
#### .1 Considerations for use:

- Maximizes access to washroom (no line ups in gender designated washrooms)
- Barrier free washrooms are incorporated into the main washroom area, providing equitable access, but reducing choice in type of washroom
- Allows increased visual surveillance of area outside stalls by larger number of users
- Free flow access encourages use and diminishes perception of gender-designated space
- Multiple access points encourage access and circulation through the space, but may not be suitable if a single access control point is required based on a security assessment
- If monitoring or emergency access into stalls is required, full height doors and locks may be modified, and double-swing door may be used to suit client ministry requirements

## 4. Design Option – Universal Toilet Rooms

### .1 Planning Guidelines:

1. Full height partitions and lockable doors with availability indicator on all cubicles
2. Toilets to be located in stalls
3. Accessories required in standard stalls: toilet tissue dispenser; hygiene product disposal; coat hook; hand washing and drying; and mirror
4. Accessories required in separate toilet room: refer to Option 1
5. Barrier free stall may contain a baby change station



**Figure 1 – Plan View**

### .2 Considerations for use:

- Maximizes access to washroom (no line ups in gender designated washrooms)
- Barrier free access if stall size is increased
- Increased costs due to duplication of lavatory fixtures, plumbing infrastructure (hot water distribution), and hand washing accessories within each stall
- Impact on floor area requirements are minimal
- Allows increased visual surveillance of area outside stalls by large number of users
- High degree of comfort due to privacy, but may not be suitable for areas with higher security requirements

## 5. Design Option – Improvements to Existing Facilities

Where project scope requires retention of a gender designated washroom design, such as within existing facilities, certain strategies can be applied to approach best practices. Gender designated facilities are familiar and widespread, so development of an approach which does not require complete reworking will offer an interim solution in the evolution of the building.

Options for improving existing facilities include:

- Provide signage that supports use by gender diverse people by focusing on the service not the user.
- Provide hand washing fixtures and waste receptacles within barrier-free cubicles. Barrier free cubicles should be available for use by people with mobility challenges, but not restricted for use by others who may prefer more privacy.
- Provide door locks on cubicle partitions with clearly legible 'vacant' or 'occupied' graphics or text.
- Provide full height cubicles that extend from ceiling to floor, or with minimal gaps between floor and the bottom of the door, in ganged stall washrooms.
- Enclose urinals in cubicles and provide clearly legible signage. Note that urinals will not be provided in new builds, but may remain in existing facilities if the renovation scope and budget are limited.
- Ensure that entrances are visible to public areas for intuitive wayfinding. Mirror placement within the washroom should be carefully considered to ensure privacy from public corridors, particularly where urinals are not fully enclosed in a cubicle.
- Where mandated by program requirements, such as for public facing facilities, provide baby change tables accessible to all users. Consideration should also be given for areas where parents can feed their child in a comfortable and hygienic space.

## Proposed Signage Strategies

Signage influences how building occupants encounter, experience, and navigate through space. As a graphic component of wayfinding, signage complements and clarifies the intuitive use of space, and is essential to help occupants make choices between different scenarios (as is the case when multiple washroom options are available). Signage must provide consistent and clear communication through the use of simple, universally recognized, and understood messages. Barrier free standards, as identified in the *Alberta Building Code*, must be applied to all projects

### General Washroom Signage

Washrooms are providing opportunities for public discussion, awareness, and education on inclusivity and acceptance. The purpose of washroom signage, as with design in general, should be to provide information in a manner that does not highlight differences between various groups, but instead acknowledges and addresses potential barriers. The development of best practices in signage design is intended to remove potential systemic barriers for all users.

Currently, national and provincial building codes require use of the International Symbol of Access (ISA) for barrier free washroom facilities, but does not prescribe signage requirements for other washrooms. Pictograms based on the human figure are widely used to identify male, female, and unisex washrooms; however, this accepted practice does come with challenges, particularly when the range of gender identities are considered. Variations of the traditional, binary male or female pictogram have been employed, but have resulted in limited success or even unintended exclusion of the same individuals/communities it sought to address. Despite the best of intentions, any pictogram of human figures, by the very nature of abstraction, will carry inaccuracies and challenges as a means of communication.

Best practices for signage design are based on four guiding principles:

1. Emphasize the service provided and not the user
2. Simplicity encourages clarity
3. Consistent standards
4. Educate to embrace change

Effective signage must use simple images and minimal text. Pictograms should have a strong image that clearly communicates the intent to assist understanding and user comfort in accessing and using facilities. Text can be limited to a single word ('Washroom' or 'WC') for additional clarity. Initially, changes in existing buildings may require additional explanatory text as part of the transition to a new standard. As these policies are developed, input from multiple groups should be sought to better inform the process. Programs to educate building users, staff, and the general public to reinforce the key messages, social context, and benefits cannot be overlooked. Having policies to ensure that new standards are consistently implemented across GOA owned facilities will ensure that new signage standards fit seamlessly into GOA visual communication standards and support their adoption and acceptance.

Recommended signage for washrooms:



Example of barrier free washroom signage



### Accessible/Barrier Free Washroom Signage

The ISA was adopted in 1968 by international standards organizations, such as the International Standards Organization (ISO), and remains the current standard for Canadian national and provincial building codes. Signage for GOA facilities should comply with current standards and utilize the ISA to designate barrier free facilities.

ISA (ISO/DOT 50) – current standard



### Stall Occupancy Indication Signage

Signage indicating the availability of washroom stalls should use a variety of modes to be as universal as possible and ideally should be activated by the user operated lock mechanism. In addition to text, consideration should be given to the use of color and tactile cues, such as braille for visually impaired users.



## Risk Analysis/GBA+

	RISK	MITIGATION	ACTION
1.	Change of existing facilities or signage creates confusion with users.	Provision of clear signage and information to facility users to clarify graphics, language, and use.	Signage standards package to be developed.  Incorporation of new guidelines into the Technical Design Requirements.
2.	Ensuring new design standards provide compliance with regulatory requirements.	Communication with 'Authorities Having Jurisdiction' to achieve consensus.	The Technical Services Branch has achieved consensus with Municipal Affairs regarding interpretation of the <i>Alberta Building Code</i> , relating to washroom signage. Resolution regarding visibility of shared lavatories is required.
3.	Perception of physical security concerns with new washroom designs.	Provide information based on actual precedents. Demonstrate how new design achieves greater privacy, while promoting safety through visibility and openness.	Reference material sourced.  Coordination with the Corporate Security team on the Physical Security Guidelines is required.
4.	New design does not meet needs of Owner, users, and facility manager needs.	User and advisory group consultation to achieve consensus and engagement.  Employ GBA+ toolkit to identify and address needs.	GBA+ training in progress.
5.	Perception of negative impact of universal washroom design on construction budgets and approval process.	Analysis of existing washroom design, compared to proposed design, illustrates quantitative changes to gross area, unit cost, and overall construction cost.	Preliminary analysis based on comparison of current standard and options quantifies increase in gross area. Refer to case study in Research Paper (see Appendix A).

## References and Source Material

### Regulatory Standards/Legislation:

*National Building Code of Canada*, 2015, National Research Council Canada  
[www.nrc-cnrc.gc.ca/eng/publications/codes\\_centre/2015\\_national\\_building\\_code.html](http://www.nrc-cnrc.gc.ca/eng/publications/codes_centre/2015_national_building_code.html)

*Alberta Building Code 2014*, Municipal Affairs  
[www.municipalaffairs.alberta.ca/cp\\_building\\_codes\\_standards](http://www.municipalaffairs.alberta.ca/cp_building_codes_standards)

Barrier-Free Design Guide 2017 – Design for Independence and Dignity for Everyone, Fifth Edition, Safety Codes Council [www.safetycodes.ab.ca/Public/Pages/Publications.aspx](http://www.safetycodes.ab.ca/Public/Pages/Publications.aspx)

Alberta Bill of Rights, [www.gp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/A14.pdf](http://www.gp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/A14.pdf)

*Alberta Human Rights Act*, [www.gp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/A25P5.pdf](http://www.gp.alberta.ca/documents/Acts/A25P5.pdf)

*Canadian Human Rights Act/Bill C-16* (Mas.2016)  
<https://lop.parl.ca/Content/LOP/LegislativeSummaries/42/1/c16-e.pdf>

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 15, 1982, Government of Canada  
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### General Design Information:

Designing for Inclusivity: Strategies for Universal Washrooms and Change Rooms, HCMA Architecture and Design, Version 1.0. [https://hcma.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Designing\\_For\\_Inclusivity.pdf](https://hcma.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Designing_For_Inclusivity.pdf)

Inclusive Washrooms: A Solution Through Signage  
[http://entro.com/media/uploads/Entro\\_Inclusive%20Washrooms\\_A%20Solution%20Through%20Signage.pdf](http://entro.com/media/uploads/Entro_Inclusive%20Washrooms_A%20Solution%20Through%20Signage.pdf)

### Design Guidelines:

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Government of Alberta Corporate Identity Guidelines  
[https://corporateidentity.alberta.ca/downloads/Alberta\\_Corporate\\_Identity\\_Manual.pdf](https://corporateidentity.alberta.ca/downloads/Alberta_Corporate_Identity_Manual.pdf)

Gender Inclusive Washroom Proposal, University of Alberta Students' Union, 2018  
[www.su.ualberta.ca/media/uploads/638/GIWProp.pdf](http://www.su.ualberta.ca/media/uploads/638/GIWProp.pdf)

Checklist for Accessibility and Universal Design, The City of Edmonton Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC),  
[www.edmonton.ca/city\\_government/documents/PDF/ChecklistAccessibilityUniversalDesign.pdf](http://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/documents/PDF/ChecklistAccessibilityUniversalDesign.pdf)

Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identities and Gender Expression, Alberta Education  
<https://education.alberta.ca/media/1626737/91383-attachment-1-guidelines-final.pdf>

Building a Path to Parks and Recreation for All: Reducing Barriers for Trans & Gender Variant Community Members, The Trans and Gender Variant Inclusion Working Group, April 2014  
<https://transgendervariant.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/building-a-path-to-parks-recreation-for-all-2.pdf>