



Seattle Office for Civil Rights

Closed Captioning in Places of Public Accommodation Ordinance, SMC 14.05 Frequently Asked Questions

The Closed Captioning in Places of Public Accommodation Ordinance requires persons owning or managing a place of public accommodation to activate closed captioning on television receivers while in use in a public area when open to the public. This law was created through the organizing efforts of the Seattle Disability Commission. It seeks to promote equal opportunities and enable full participation in community life by addressing access barriers that impact deaf or hard of hearing people, people with learning disabilities, people with sensory disabilities, people with attention deficits, people with autism, and people who are elderly.

The Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR) is responsible for administering and enforcing this ordinance. SOCR conducts free and impartial investigations when someone believes there has been a violation of the law. SOCR does not provide legal advice or representation to parties involved in a claim. Compliance with the law is reached by SOCR playing a neutral role in the process.

SOCR also provides free technical assistance to businesses, community organizations, members of the public, and anyone else that is impacted by this law. This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document addresses some of the most common questions about Seattle's Closed Captioning requirements ([Seattle Municipal Code 14.05](#)).

If you are a customer with a question that is not covered by this FAQ, please contact SOCR at 206-684-4500 or email us at discrimination@seattle.gov. You may also contact us if you believe the law has been violated.

If you are a business or advocate with a question that is not covered by this FAQ, please contact SOCR at 206-684-4500 or email us at discriminationquestions@seattle.gov.

Reasonable accommodations for disabilities and language interpretation are always available.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This FAQ should not be used as substitute for codes and regulations. The reader is responsible for compliance with all code and rule requirements.

1. Why is the Closed Captioning Ordinance needed?

- **Hearing loss is widespread.** About 1 in 5 people have some type of hearing loss in one or both ears. Televisions are found in many places open to the public like waiting rooms, restaurants, coffee shops, and more. Those experiencing hearing loss do not have access to information in the same way as those who can hear.
- **Beneficial to many groups.** Closed captioning benefits those with disabilities, the elderly, and people learning a second language. It also helps everyone learn names, words, and to understand what is happening on the television when in noisy spaces.

2. What does the Closed Captioning Ordinance do?

Seattle's Closed Captioning Ordinance requires that closed captioning be turned on when televisions are in public places. The Federal Communications Commission enforces federal closed captioning protections that can be found [here](#). On July 25, 2021, the Washington State Human Rights Commission began enforcement of closed captioning amendments, located [here](#).

3. What is closed captioning?

Closed captioning is the written text on a television screen that match the words being spoken on a television show. The words can only be seen when the closed captioning function is turned on. Closed captioning may be in a language other than English.

4. Are there requirements for how the closed captioning appears on the television?

The Ordinance requires that the closed captioning have a black background color, white text color, and text font size of 24. The text font must also be either Arial, Calibri, Helvetica, Tahoma, or Verdana.

5. What is a public place?

A public place or "place of public accommodation" is any place where the public can gather or go, including bars, restaurants, health clubs, nail salons, waiting rooms, concert venues, electronic stores, sports stadiums, and more. For a full definition of public place, see [Closed Captioning Ordinance](#).

6. How do I activate closed captions?

[Apple TV](#)
[Comcast/Xfinity](#)
[DISH Network](#)
[DIRECTV](#)

[Hulu](#)
[Netflix](#)
[Verizon](#)

7. My business has a television in an employee-only area. Does closed captioning need to be turned on for this television?

No, not if the television is in an area that is not open to the public.

8. My business has multiple televisions showing the same thing. Does closed captioning need to be turned on for all of them?

Yes. Closed captioning must be on for all televisions in public areas, even if they are showing the same thing.

9. My business always has the sound muted on the television. Can I turn off closed captioning?

No. Even if a television is muted, it is required to have closed captioning turned on.

10. What if my business is using something other than a television, such as a projector, to display television programming?

The law applies to closed captioned television receivers. A closed-captioned television receiver is a receiver of television programming that has the ability to display closed captioning, including but not limited to a television, digital set top box, and other technology capable of displaying closed captioning for television programming.

11. What if my television can't display closed captioning?

Most televisions made after 1993 can display closed captioning. If your television does not have the technology to display closed captioning, you are not required to comply with the law.

12. I turned on the closed captioning, but the captions did not appear. How do I comply?

You may need to turn on closed captioning on both your cable box and your television. If you have done so and captions still do not appear, it may be because some television shows do not include closed captioning. One way to show compliance could be to change the channel to programming that is captioned, demonstrating that if captions were available, they would appear.

13. A customer asked me to turn off the closed captioning because they have a vision impairment. Should I turn off the captions?

Yes. The closed captioning may be deactivated upon request of someone who is vision impaired. When that person leaves the business, the closed captioning needs to be turned back on.

14. Are there any exceptions to this law?

If your business has a television that can be viewed during regular business hours in a public area, you must turn on the closed captioning. The only exceptions are:

- You do not have televisions in a public area.
- The television is incapable of displaying closed captioning.
- You are a seller of televisions that are available for viewing. In that case, at least one television for each model must have the closed captioning turned on.
- If there is a conflict between Seattle's law and state or federal law, the state or federal law will override Seattle's.
- This law does not apply to programming that is exempt from closed captioning requirements under state or federal law.

15. I am a seller of televisions that are available for viewing. Why does closed captioning need to be turned on for each model?

Closed captioning features, such as font, color, and placement of the captions on the screen, vary between models of television receivers. Customers who wish to take these features into account when making a purchase need to have captioning activated to make an informed decision.

16. Who will enforce this new law?

On November 15, 2019, the Seattle Office for Civil Rights (SOCR) will begin enforcement of this law. SOCR will receive complaints about businesses that are non-compliant.

17. What happens if my business is not in compliance?

Any business that is non-compliant will be sent an advisory letter. If the business does not comply within 30 calendar days, it will be subject to civil penalties.

18. Can I appeal the civil penalty?

Businesses may appeal a civil penalty by requesting a contested hearing before the Hearing Examiner in writing, within 15 days of the date of the notice of violation and issuance of a civil penalty. If a business fails to appeal a civil penalty, it shall be final and enforceable.

19. How do I report a violation?

- Submit a report [online](#).

- Send an email to discrimination@seattle.gov.
- Call us at 206-684-4500 or TTY 206-684-4503
- Visit in person at 810 Third Avenue, Suite 750, Seattle, WA 98104.

You will be asked to provide the date, location of the business, name of the business, and approximate time of the violation.

Have more questions? Call us at 206-684-4500, TTY 206-684-4503, or email us at discriminationquestions@seattle.gov.