

FAQS ABOUT THE CITY OF BOSTON CLOSED CAPTIONS ORDINANCE

What is the City of Boston Closed Captioning Ordinance?

The [Ordinance Related to Closed Captioning](#) in places of public accommodation requires all businesses in the city of Boston to turn on the “closed captioning” (CC) feature of TVs that are viewable by the public in their establishments.

When does the Closed Captions Ordinance Take Effect?

This ordinance is in effect now. It was passed unanimously by the Boston City Council on December 7th, 2022, and signed into law by Mayor Michelle Wu on December 9th, 2022.

Why was this ordinance passed?

This ordinance was passed in order to ensure that all customers and patrons of businesses in Boston have equal access to the information that is being broadcast on TVs in public areas. It will provide access for those who are Deaf or hard of hearing, older adults with hearing difficulties, people who speak a language other than English, and many others.

Who does this ordinance apply to?

This ordinance applies to all “places of public accommodation” in the City of Boston. In other words, any business or entity that is open to the public. This includes, but is not limited to, restaurants, bars, gyms, hairdressers, nail salons, libraries, banks, hospitals, and others. However, captions are only required to be turned on if the TV is displayed for the public to watch.

What is Closed Captioning?

Closed captioning (CC) is a service delivered by the TV programming providers, that puts text of the dialogue and other audible information on the screen. The signal is included with the movie or TV show and needs to be decoded in order to be displayed.

How do I know if my TV has captions?

All television sets manufactured after 1993 are required to be equipped with a decoder¹ that produces captions. With the onset of cable and satellite set-top boxes, the decoding is often done by those boxes. More recently with streaming services, their apps provide both the captioning signal and the decoding ability within their service.

What am I required to do under the ordinance?

If you have any televisions in your business that are displayed for members of the public to watch, you are required to turn on closed captioning for that TV. Members of the public include, but are not limited to, customers, patrons, clients, patients, and others.

Does closed captioning cost anything?

No. Closed captioning is a free technology that is built into television broadcasting, cable signals, and streaming services. You are not required to pay for any captioning services.

What if my TV doesn't have closed captions?

All televisions manufactured after 1993 have closed captioning. If your TV predates 1993 and does not have closed captioning, you are not required to purchase a new TV. However, you are encouraged to do so in order to gain all the benefits of having a more accessible business.

How does turning on closed captioning help my business?

By enabling the closed captioning feature, you are making your business more accessible and welcoming to thousands of Boston residents and visitors who may not be able to hear the TV. These customers will now have equal access to the entertainment, news, or other information you are providing, and you will be eliminating a barrier to access that previously required people to ask for captioning to be turned on. It also helps your staff by no longer requiring them to take time from their usual duties to find a remote and try to figure out how to enable captions.

¹ “The Television Decoder Circuitry Act of 1990 required that television sets with screens 13 inches or larger manufactured for sale in the United States must have built-in closed-caption decoder circuitry that allows viewers to display closed captions on their sets.” The deadline for compliance was 1993. (Source: [University of Washington](#))

**What about captions in languages other than English?**

The ordinance does not require translations of captions. Broadcast and cable television generally only offer captions in English, although some support Spanish captions for Spanish language programming. Streaming services increasingly offer both audio and captions tracks in a variety of languages. The purpose of this ordinance is to ensure access to information being provided in audio format for those who may have difficulty hearing it. Therefore, enabling captions in any language that serves that purpose will be considered compliance.

What happens if I don't turn closed captioning on in the TVs that are located in my business?

Enabling captions is now a requirement for businesses in the City of Boston with public facing TVs. The City of Boston Disabilities Commission will be working cooperatively with businesses that are not in compliance, to provide resources and information about how to enable closed captions. Any reports of noncompliance will be addressed on an individual basis.

If the City of Boston receives a report that captions are not enabled at a particular business, The Disabilities Commission will reach out with resources. In the case of repeated or egregious noncompliance, the Commission may make a referral to the Mayor's Office of Consumer Affairs and Licensing (MOCAL) regarding entertainment licenses.

What if I keep all my TVs on mute?

Even TVs that are on mute must have closed captioning turned on.

Are any businesses exempt from this ordinance?

Only large public entertainment venues such as theaters and concert halls are exempt from this City ordinance. They are not, however, exempt from any other city, state, or federal requirement to provide reasonable accommodations to persons with disabilities. In addition, no business is required to purchase a TV under this ordinance. Only those with existing public-facing TVs must comply.

Where can I get more information?

More information can be found on the Disabilities Commission website at boston.gov/disability. You can also contact the Disabilities Commission (via email at disability@boston.gov or by calling 617-635-3682).