

Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency

Accessibility Action Plan 2022 – Updated



Atlantic Canada
Opportunities
Agency

Agence de
promotion économique
du Canada atlantique

Canada

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Catalogue No. AC2-11E-PDF

ISSN 2817-2922

General

Vision

To be the most accessible and inclusive public service in the world.

Guiding principles

- Nothing without us: persons with disabilities are involved in the design and implementation of the strategy
- Collaboration: departments and agencies work in collaboration with each other, with bargaining agents, and with other public, private and not-for-profit organizations
- Sustainability: the strategy prioritizes actions that will have an enduring impact
- Transparency: the strategy is developed and implemented transparently, and departments and agencies will report openly and transparently on their efforts to remove barriers

Goals

Six goals are key to realizing the vision:

1. employment
2. built environment
3. communication, other than ICT
4. design and delivery of programs and services
5. procurement of goods, services and facilities
6. transportation

Contact

The person designated to receive feedback on behalf of ACOA is:

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Format

You may use the contact information listed above to request a copy of the accessibility plan in an alternate format, such as large print, Braille or audio. You may also use the contact information listed above to request a copy of the feedback process description in an alternate format.

Feedback

The [Accessible Canada Act](#) clearly indicates that the Agency has a duty to develop and implement a system to receive, and respond to, feedback from employees and clients on any issues relating to accessibility, or a lack thereof. As such, the Agency has developed a [secure online tool](#) that any ACOA employee or client can use to report any barrier(s) to accessibility and/or suggestions for improvement. All information reported will be kept confidential.

You may also provide feedback directly to the person listed under Contact above. Receipt of feedback will be acknowledged in the same manner by which it was received.

Summary

For too long, there have been barriers that block persons with disabilities from working and thriving in Canada's public service. The time is right for a culture change. We could build a better Canada by including the knowledge and expertise of persons with disabilities in all aspects of our work.

The Government's Accessibility Strategy sets out how we can identify, prevent and remove obstacles – physical, systemic and cultural – to the participation of persons with disabilities. This strategy aims to create an environment where persons with disabilities can flourish. When persons with disabilities can focus on their work and their service to Canadians, everyone benefits.

The goal from the outset has been simple but monumental: to make Canada's public service the most inclusive public service in the world.

During federal consultations, public servants with disabilities said that:

- they often do not feel a sense of belonging in their workplace;
- their essential accommodations are too often ignored, overlooked or dismissed;
- they face extensive barriers to securing a public service job;
- they experience harassment and discrimination at higher rates than other public servants;
- they have significantly lower chances for promotion; and
- they frequently feel disrespected or marginalized where their voices would be critically helpful.

The public service should mirror the people it serves. Canadians with disabilities should see themselves in the public service, as policy-makers, researchers, analysts, providers of services, spokespeople and leaders.

The *Accessible Canada Act*,¹ which received Royal Assent in July 2019, seeks to:

- *enforce the identification, removal and prevention of accessibility barriers for organizations under federal jurisdiction...; and*
- *ensure the full participation in society of persons with physical, mental, intellectual, learning, communication or sensory impairments.*

Roughly 6.2 million Canadians have a disability, and this number is expected to grow.² Therefore, the need to identify, remove and prevent accessibility barriers in Canada has never been greater. These barriers include physical obstacles, such as buildings without access ramps, as well as non-physical barriers, such as employment practices and hiring processes that can hinder the full participation of Canadians with disabilities in their communities.

The *Accessible Canada Act* requires that each federal department prepare an action plan outlining how it will make itself more accessible to people with disabilities, to create the most accessible and inclusive public service in the world. At ACOA, the development of the Agency's *Accessibility Action Plan* was accomplished through a series of internal consultations to gather thoughts on the design and implementation of the plan. The resulting plan focuses on key deliverables to make the Agency more accessible in five broad areas: Employment; Built environment; ICT; Design and delivery of programs and services; and Communications. Each area (or objective) presents where the Government of Canada is currently at, the barriers faced by ACOA employees, and how the Agency will overcome those barriers. As the Agency moves ahead with this plan, it will also develop a system to receive and respond to feedback from employees and clients, and will ensure that reporting on the action items in the plan is undertaken on a regular basis.

The Agency's goal, with this plan, is to create an accessible workplace where:

- employees with disabilities are representative of the workforce;
- all employees – those with disabilities and those without – can have fulfilling and thriving careers;
- accommodations are addressed in days, not weeks; and
- all employees are the focus of retention and promotion initiatives.

ACOA's duties under the act

Under the *Act*, all regulated entities, such as ACOA, have the following duties:

Accessibility plans – An accessibility plan needs to be created in consultation with people with disabilities. The plan must outline the strategies for improving and meeting legal accessibility duties. These plans have to be published and updated every three years.

¹ <https://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/A-0.6/page-1.html>

² Morris et al. (2018). *A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over*, 2017. Report prepared on the Canadian Survey on Disability. Statistics Canada, p.4.

Feedback tools – There would need to be a system in place to receive and respond to feedback from employees or clients.

Progress reports – Reports outlining how accessibility plans are being fulfilled must be drafted in consultation with people with disabilities, and describe how they will address the main concerns of any feedback received.

Disability – what is it?

Current status

In Canada, roughly one in five adults lives with a disability³ and faces one or more physical, social or economic barriers. These barriers can often keep them from being and/or feeling like equal members of society.

Many disabilities are not visible to the naked eye. We cannot see cognitive or learning disabilities, carpal tunnel syndrome, long-term effects from a concussion, or mental health issues.

Changing attitudes and removing barriers gives people with disabilities more job opportunities and the chance to thrive in the workplace.

Glossary

Disability is a complex, evolving matter. The term covers a broad range and degree of conditions. A disability may have been present at birth, caused by an accident, or developed over time. It may be physical, mental, psychiatric, social or economic. Here are some disability sub-categorizations:

1. Any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness.
2. A short-term physical impairment caused by an accident, such as a broken arm or a concussion.
3. A condition of mental impairment or a developmental or learning disability (e.g. ADHD, autism)
4. A mental health condition, whether short-term, episodic or chronic, such as depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder.

Accessibility means that people with and without disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate and interact with information, services and applications. The adoption of accessibility standards, guidelines and best practices ensures that systemic barriers are eliminated prior to individual accommodations.

³ <https://www.canada.ca/en/shared-services/corporate/publications/accessible-workspace.html>

Accommodation is a necessary measure taken to allow an employee to work to the best of their ability.

Barriers may be attitudinal, environmental or institutional. They may even be internalized.

ACOA's action plan

The section that follows provides an overview of how ACOA plans to address the Government of Canada's Accessibility Strategy and its goals, and where the Agency expects to be vis-à-vis these goals in 2023.

Employment

Where Government is as a whole

Statistics Canada's 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability found that 15.6% of the Canadian workforce (aged 25 to 64) consists of persons with a disability. However, in the 2017-2018 fiscal year, only 5.3% of public servants self-identified as a person with a disability.

Barriers that exist at ACOA

1. Promotion rates for persons with disabilities are lower than for those without disabilities, and separation rates are higher.
2. Existing recruitment and development programs are not fully integrated with regard to accessibility.
3. Employees with disabilities report lower satisfaction levels at work.

How ACOA will remove these barriers

1. Review existing development programs to ensure that persons with disabilities are represented and supported at each stage, from entry to exit.
2. Close the representation gaps for people with disabilities.
3. Advertise employment opportunities in an accessible format, particularly important on private sites (versus jobs.gc.ca). Look at our application process online (i.e. have community stakeholders look at it) and ensure it is not a barrier to people with disabilities.
4. Stakeholder organizations should be consulted as a resource when hiring.
5. Develop tools and training for supervisors to enable them to create inclusive teams, improving the culture at ACOA and, thereby, the satisfaction levels of employees with disabilities.

Built environment

Where Government is as a whole

Persons with disabilities report challenges in the workplace such as a lack of automatic door openers and poor signage and wayfinding. In the first survey on the development of the federal strategy, respondents noted that physical workspaces do not account for invisible disabilities such as environmental sensitivities, chronic pain, anxiety and autism.

Barriers that exist at ACOA

1. Physical barriers exist at ACOA, including doors with no push buttons, a lack of signage, etc.
2. Events and meetings are often inaccessible to all employees, and to the public (e.g., a lack of sign language).
3. Evacuation plans do not include provisions for the evacuation of employees with disabilities.
4. Lack of accessible washrooms.

How ACOA will remove these barriers

1. Develop a Disabilities Considerations Checklist of 5-10 items per location to make the physical workspace more accessible for all: signage (incl. pictograms); automatic push buttons for all access doors; etc.
2. Ensure events and meetings are accessible to all employees, and where applicable, the public (e.g., tables high enough for wheelchairs, sign language interpreters, etc.).
3. Draft evacuation plans that include information on how to evacuate an employee/visitor with a disability. Regular practices should be held, with the person(s) with a disability.
4. Create accessible washrooms at Head Office (Moncton, N.B.) and the four regional offices (Fredericton, Charlottetown, Halifax and St. John's).

Information and communication technology (ICT)

Where Government is as a whole

The current Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat [*Standard on Web Accessibility*](#) does not ensure that all ICT products and services are accessible: it only covers public-facing websites. It does not cover other aspects, including digital content. It is not intended as a complete accessible information and communications technology standard.

Barriers that exist at ACOA

1. ACOA has not yet adopted the GC Workplace Accessibility Passport.
2. Not all platforms are accessible to all users.
3. Wait times for workplace accommodations can be long.

How ACOA will remove these barriers

1. Adopt the GC Workplace Accessibility Passport.
2. All major new systems, both internal and external, launched as of 2023 are accessible.
3. Measure and reduce wait times for workplace accommodations.

Design and delivery of programs and services

Where Government is as a whole

The consultations that led to the proposed *Accessible Canada Act* found that:

- many persons with disabilities report that they do not receive equal quality of service;
- there are numerous barriers to communication, such as documents in formats that are not accessible; and
- persons with disabilities would like more opportunities to report service issues and suggest improvements.

Barriers that exist at ACOA

1. Many of ACOA's external-facing documents are in formats that are not accessible.
2. There is no feedback mechanism for clients with disabilities to report service issues and to suggest improvements.

How ACOA will remove these barriers

1. Ensure external-facing documents are in accessible formats and easy to find online.
2. Establish mechanisms for clients with disabilities to provide feedback and be engaged on service improvements.

Communications, other than ICT

Barriers that exist at ACOA

1. Templates and other documents are not fully accessible.
2. The AAAC workshops on accessible documents are not promoted through the events calendar and on Rendezvous.
3. The intranet does not meet current Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and plain language standards.
4. The Agency does not promote National AccessAbility Week, which starts on the last Sunday in May each year.

How ACOA will remove these barriers

1. Make all templates accessible by the end of fiscal 2022-2023.
2. Promote AAAC workshops so staff can learn how to create accessible documents/templates.
3. Redesign Rendezvous so that the format and new content, including photos, are accessible. Redesign will respect WCAG guidelines and plain language use.
4. Organize relevant activities for employees during National AccessAbility Week in May and promote communications around "International Day of Persons With Disabilities" (December 3), in conjunction with HR.

Procurement of goods, services and facilities

ACOA has reviewed all its policies, practices, programs and services, and has determined that there are no barriers in the area of procurement of good, services and facilities, at this time.

Transportation

ACOA has reviewed all its policies, practices, programs and services, and has determined that there are no barriers in the area of transportation, at this time.

Consultations

The accessibility lead and the accessibility coordinator put together an Advisory Committee consisting of employees who were disabled, who had a family member who was disabled, or who had a particular interest in making the workplace more accessible. The committee came together following a callout sent via email by the Champion of Inclusion, Diversity and Anti-Racism.

The final Working Group on Accessibility consisted of 13 employees, along with the accessibility lead and coordinator.

The working group was consulted on a regular basis, through virtual meetings, between June and November 2020, throughout the development of the action plan. Members' input was essential in developing the goals listed under "How ACOA will get there" for each objective. Brainstorming sessions were held to come up with tasks that could be included in the plan. These were then voted on to determine which should be prioritized and included in this first action plan.

Certain people on the Working Group are responsible for managing the tasks under each objective, ensuring that they are progressing toward completion.

Moving forward, it is the Agency's plan to hold consultations with organizations representing persons with disabilities as well as with clients with disabilities.

Collaboration

Many of the issues identified here regarding accessibility – such as developing and maintaining a vibrant network of employees with disabilities – are also issues for Employment Equity (EE) and Diversity Committee. It is suggested that the Accessibility Working Group and the EE and Diversity Committee join forces to work together to identify and address those issues that they have in common, rather than duplicating efforts.

Other considerations

ACOA's culture

Accessibility is not generally integrated into the everyday business of the public service. It is often treated as an afterthought. Although there are some accessibility initiatives across departments and across functions, these are often siloed. There is no governance to link initiatives together strategically, and there are few mechanisms for departments and employees to share best practices. In consultation for developing the federal strategy, respondents noted a need for a centre of expertise on accessibility.

Training

AAACT workshops will be promoted regularly through ACOA's events calendar and via articles on the Rendezvous site – the Agency's intranet.

The accessibility lead and coordinator are working closely with the Office of Inclusion, Equity, and Anti-Racism to develop a learning series with outside consultants, with an emphasis on people with disabilities. This series will focus on increasing awareness regarding people with disabilities at every level of the Agency with a primary focus on hiring, retaining and promoting those who have self-identified as having a disability while ensuring a more inclusive work environment.

National AccessAbility Week

National AccessAbility Week is an annual event to celebrate the contributions of people with disabilities. It also promotes inclusion and accessibility in communities and workplaces across Canada. The Act states that National AccessAbility Week will be celebrated each year starting on the last Sunday in May.