



Report summary

**Lived Experiences of Individuals Facing
Barriers to Access Government Services**

2026



Report summary: Lived Experiences of Individuals Facing Barriers to Access Government Services

Large print, braille, MP3 (audio), e-text and DAISY formats are available on demand by [ordering online](#) or calling 1 800 O-Canada (1-800-622-6232). If you use a teletypewriter (TTY), call 1-800-926-9105.

© His Majesty the King in Right of Canada, 2026

For information regarding reproduction rights: droitdauteur.copyright@HRSDC-RHDCC.gc.ca.

PDF

Cat. Em20-226/2026E-PDF

ISBN 978-0-660-98863-4



Title of the report: Lived Experiences of Individuals Facing Barriers to Access Government Services

Author of the report: Farhana Islam

Why this study

Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) is committed to addressing barriers faced by marginalized and underserved populations, focusing on easing access and increasing benefit uptake. To do this, ESDC needed to understand their real-life experiences. This study helped answer 3 big questions:

- How do people in vulnerable situations experience government services
- Why are some people left out of services, even when they need them most
- What lessons and promising ideas can help improve services

What we did

We held three online focus groups with twelve service providers who work with people facing barriers. In addition, we did twenty-nine in-person interviews with people who have faced many different challenges when trying to get government services.

What we found

Barriers still exist and can leave people out. People still face barriers like confusing steps, unclear instructions and fear of making mistakes. Some remain out of reach or still have trouble using online services. These issues often cause stress, especially when filling out government forms.

Being alone or isolated makes it harder to get benefits. Seniors, youth, people with mental health challenges, and those living in poverty for many years are more likely to feel isolated and miss out. Things like age, gender, disability, and big life changes often affect how Indigenous, newcomer, and low-income people experience services.

People with low income often can't afford housing, don't have a stable address, or access to basic things like phone and internet. This makes it hard for them—and for service providers—to stay in touch. Many also find it hard to understand money matters or deal with complicated government systems.

Groups like seniors, youth, people with disabilities, and those living in poverty need extra help to make sure they don't miss out on benefits.



Personal and caring support helps people accessing benefits. Participants said they want more personal help, in-person services, and better coordination between programs. They prefer a system where they only have to tell their story once. Many rely on support from family, friends, case workers, and service providers to stay connected.

A major barrier appears when people move from provincial to federal programs. In programs like Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works, people have case workers to help them. But when they switch to federal benefits, they lose that support and must figure things out on their own.

Online services are hard for many people. Many participants have trouble using online services. This includes not having access, not feeling confident, or not knowing how to use the Internet. Not feeling comfortable online is a big issue, especially for people aged 50 and older. They often said they don't know how to use the Internet, which makes them feel nervous. They also worry about making mistakes or being tricked online.

Most participants prefer receiving help in person. Over 2/3 of the persons we have interviewed in this project said they feel more confident and supported when they talk face-to-face with staff. They also said they worry less and feel sure about what to do next when they get help in-person. Almost everyone said they were happy with in person services.

What it means

This project helped us understand more about what life is like for people in vulnerable situations. It showed some important areas to pay attention to:

- reinforcing programs like Service Canada's Community Outreach and Liaison Services (COLS) and the Service Referral Initiative so they can reach more people at risk
- better sharing of information between different levels of government
 - this makes it easier to find people who need support and helps them access services
- building cultural awareness across the organization so staff have the training and support they need to understand different experiences
- more support for individuals—such as community workers and family members—who help people in vulnerable situation
- direct assistance for people with complex situations
- digital services designed from the start with the needs of those most at risk



Contact us

Strategic and Service Policy Branch, Service Policy and Strategy Directorate, Service Research Division

Email: esdc.nc.sspb.research-recherche.dgpss.cn.edsc@hrsdc-rhdcc.gc.ca