



# Canada's Disability Inclusion Action Plan



Canada's Disability Inclusion Action Plan, 2022

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## Message from the Minister

As Canada's Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, it is an honour to present Canada's first-ever Disability Inclusion Action Plan.

The Action Plan is a blueprint for change to make Canada more inclusive of the more than 22% of persons – or 6.2 million people – that identify as having a disability in our country. The Action Plan has 4 initial pillars: financial security, employment, accessible and inclusive communities, and a modern approach to disability. Simply put, the Action Plan aims to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in Canada. The work required to achieve this – to make Canada inclusive, fair, and free of physical, societal, and attitudinal barriers - will be extensive.

In the past, persons with disabilities in Canada have been discriminated against, marginalized, and excluded. This social and economic exclusion continues to be the lived experience of many persons with disabilities in our country. This is unacceptable and must be addressed. The Action Plan will do just that.

In 2020, the Government of Canada committed to developing this plan. This commitment built upon the important work that the Government had already undertaken on disability inclusion since 2015. This includes:

- appointing Canada's first-ever Cabinet Minister responsible for persons with disabilities
- passing and implementing the historic *Accessible Canada Act*
- establishing Accessibility Standards Canada
- acceding to the Marrakesh Treaty, which makes the production and international transfer of accessible books for people with print disabilities easier, and
- acceding to the Optional Protocol of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which strengthened the protection of the human rights of persons with disabilities in Canada

The Action Plan is the next major step toward achieving the full and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in Canada. In the spirit of "Nothing Without Us," we are working in close partnership with the disability community. The lived experiences of persons with disabilities have informed every part of the Action Plan. We heard about the valuable contributions that persons with disabilities make to our communities and to our economy. We heard that persons with disabilities face barriers to social and economic participation due to discrimination, stereotypes, and systemic exclusion. We heard about persons with disabilities having to make impossible choices – whether to buy food, pay rent, or get the necessary medication, equipment or therapies. These choices were made even more difficult by the pandemic. From coast to coast to coast, we heard you, and we hope you can see yourselves, and your experiences, reflected in the Action Plan.

As we implement the Action Plan, we will continue to look to persons with disabilities and community partners to ensure that it evolves to meet the changing needs of persons with disabilities.

This plan is for everyone. We all have family members, friends, neighbours and colleagues with a disability. We all have a stake in making sure that everyone can participate in and contribute to our society, without barriers, limits, or discrimination.

Disability equality and inclusion benefit everyone. Because when persons with disabilities have equal opportunities to contribute to their communities, have equal opportunities to work, have the same quality of service from their government, and enjoy the same quality of life as everyone else, we build a stronger economy – and a stronger country.

Leading by example, working in partnership with the disability community, and engaging with provinces and territories, we are confident that we can achieve a disability inclusive Canada that recognizes and celebrates the diversity, creativity, innovation, and contributions of persons with disabilities.

Carla Qualtrough

Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion

## Overview

Canada's Disability Inclusion Action Plan is a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to disability inclusion. It embeds disability considerations across our programs while identifying targeted investments in key areas to drive change. It builds on existing programs and measures that have sought to improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities, and establishes new and meaningful actions.

## Guiding principles

Canada's Disability Inclusion Action Plan is guided by the principles laid out in the *Accessible Canada Act*, including:

### “Nothing Without Us”

Persons with disabilities need to be involved in the development and implementation of all government systems, policies, programs and services.

### Human rights-based approach

Human rights principles need to guide the development and implementation of our systems, programs and processes, including the principles of equality, anti-discrimination, participation, and inclusion.

### Intersectionality

Government systems, policies, programs and services must take into account:

- the different ways that persons interact with their environments and,
- the multiple, and intersecting forms of marginalization and discrimination faced by individuals

## Objectives

The Disability Inclusion Action Plan has 5 key objectives:

1. improve the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities
2. reduce poverty among persons with disabilities
3. achieve the *Accessible Canada Act* goal of a barrier-free Canada by 2040
4. develop a consistent approach to disability inclusion across the Government of Canada and make it easier for persons with disabilities to access federal programs and services, and
5. foster a culture of disability inclusion

## Introduction

Welcome to Canada's first-ever Disability Inclusion Action Plan. This Action Plan was developed in dialogue with Canadians with a vision of an inclusive Canada. It is based on the understanding that disability inclusion benefits everyone.

Persons with disabilities represent a diverse and significant portion of the Canadian population. In 2017, 1 in 5 people in Canada aged 15 years and over—or about 6.2 million people—had at least 1 disability. There are different types of disabilities, and they can range from mild to very severe. Almost 1 in 3 Indigenous people have a disability—a much higher rate than that of the general population. Disability is also most prevalent amongst seniors—almost 2 in 5 of those 65 and over have a disability.

Persons with disabilities contribute to every aspect of our country. They contribute to the economy, to Canada's culture, and to the core of the nation. Persons with disabilities are trusted friends, neighbours, community advocates, and beloved family members.

However, persons with disabilities also face many challenges and barriers. These barriers create exclusion, and include:

- negative perceptions about what a person with a disability is able to do
- buildings, workplaces, and work tools that are not accessible, and
- more systemic barriers like rules and practices that exclude and discriminate

In addition, persons with disabilities have higher costs that limit their ability to save for the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the unique challenges and vulnerabilities that persons with disabilities face.

Canada's Disability Inclusion Action Plan strives to remove barriers and address these challenges directly.

The Action Plan focuses on actions, engagement, and outcomes. Disability is considered in all programs and services, including those that are not targeted to persons with disabilities. The Action Plan will evolve over time to respond to ongoing engagement with persons with disabilities. It will continue to reflect the realities of persons with disabilities in an ever-changing world.

## Journey to the Disability Inclusion Action Plan

The Action Plan builds upon other foundational work to help build a more equitable society, such as:

- the landmark *Accessible Canada Act* (2019)
- the 2019 National Disability Summit, and
- the creation of the COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group

In fall 2020, the Government of Canada announced it would create a Disability Inclusion Action Plan. In Budget 2021, the Government committed \$11.9 million over 3 years to undertake consultations to reform eligibility processes for disability programs and services.

During summer 2021, the Government launched an engagement process to seek input on the Action Plan and the Canada Disability Benefit from:

- disability communities
- researchers
- Indigenous organizations, and
- other stakeholders

This engagement included an online survey that ran from June through September 2021, and received thousands of responses from persons with and without disabilities.

In addition, the Government is providing funding to support disability organizations and National Indigenous Organizations to engage their communities on the Disability Inclusion Action Plan and the proposed Canada Disability Benefit.

The Government continues to host roundtables with:

- individuals with disabilities
- national disability organizations
- disability service providers
- organizations representing racialized persons with disabilities, and
- disability researchers

The roundtables seek views on key questions related to the design and delivery of the proposed Canada Disability Benefit.

Over the course of the engagement, persons with disabilities identified key priorities and areas for immediate action:

- they shared views on program and policy gaps and areas for improvement
- they identified challenges and barriers, and
- they voiced their concerns about the disproportionate impact the COVID-19 pandemic placed on persons with disabilities in Canada

The Action Plan is the culmination of the views and input received and sets the current direction for the Government. It provides immediate investments and sets the course for more actions to come.

## **Government of Canada context on disability action**

The Government of Canada and provincial/territorial governments each play a significant role in providing direct supports for persons with disabilities. The Action Plan is the Government of Canada's roadmap to consider persons with disabilities in all the systems and networks the Government operates in. While the Action Plan is focused on areas of federal responsibility, the Government will continue to work collaboratively with provincial and territorial governments, disability stakeholders, and persons with disabilities on its implementation.

## Actions

In concrete terms, the actions are organised under 4, mutually reinforcing pillars of action:

### Pillar 1 – Financial security

Persons with disabilities in Canada are less likely to experience financial security and more likely to live in poverty than persons without disabilities. Persons with disabilities also have heightened costs associated with disability.

The Action Plan will improve the immediate and long-term financial security of persons with disabilities and address long-standing financial exclusion and systemic inequities.

#### The reality today

- Working-age persons with disabilities are almost twice as likely as their peers without disabilities to be in poverty (23% vs 12% in 2017)
- In total, nearly 917,000 working-age persons with disabilities lived in poverty in 2017. Of them, more than 550,000 were living in deep poverty
- The rate of poverty was particularly high among those with very severe (nearly 34%) and severe (just over 28%) disabilities
- A 2020 crowdsourced survey from Statistics Canada found that just over 60% of working-age respondents with disabilities had difficulties meeting financial obligations or essential needs because of the pandemic

#### What we heard

We heard that improved financial security is the most urgent priority. Persons with disabilities struggle with the costs associated with living with a disability—costs related to housing, medical expenses and disability supports. We heard that people are paying for their medical equipment, prescriptions, supplements, and practitioner fees for medical services that are not government-funded. These costs are a significant burden for persons with disabilities already living on a fixed low income. Increased rent to live in an accessible building or in a neighbourhood close to medical services and amenities is another amplified cost.

We also heard that people simply do not have enough money to live a comfortable life. Many persons with disabilities report living well below the poverty line. We heard shared experiences of frustration with their current financial circumstances. We heard feelings of hopelessness, exhaustion and anger.

#### Actions

- **Develop a new Canada Disability Benefit** to reduce poverty and improve the financial security of working-age persons with disabilities

- **Undertake research to better understand the additional costs of disability** and how these costs impact the financial security of persons with disabilities
- **Update eligibility and improve access to the Disability Tax Credit**

## **Pillar 2 – Employment**

Persons with disabilities are under-represented in the Canadian labour market. Many persons with disabilities are unemployed or under-employed. Barriers to employment include lack of access to skills training and development opportunities and inaccessible workplaces. Persons with disabilities are also regularly subjected to workplace bias, discrimination and exclusion. Many workplaces are not disability inclusive.

The Action Plan will help:

- more persons with disabilities find and keep good quality jobs, advance in their careers, or become entrepreneurs
- employers make workplaces more inclusive and accessible, and
- increase the capacity of individuals and organizations that work to support disability inclusion and accessibility

### **The reality today**

- 59% of persons with disabilities are employed compared to 80% of persons without disabilities
- The employment rate is lower for persons with disabilities
- Employed persons with disabilities are more likely to work in lower-skilled jobs
- There are an estimated 1.9 million persons with disabilities aged 15 to 64 who are not in school or employed. 852,000 of these persons have the potential to work
- From 2009 to 2013, 84.3% of disability-related complaints received by the Canadian Human Rights Commission were about employment

### **What we heard**

We heard persons with disabilities place significant importance on obtaining meaningful jobs that match their education, skills, career aspirations, and interests.

The opportunity to participate in skills training will help:

- gain experience relevant to those interests and ambitions
- ensure long-term labour market attachment
- improve job satisfaction

We heard that a supportive work environment is one of the most important ways to help persons with disabilities find and maintain a job. This includes workplace adaptations and other supports. We also

heard that many employers might not be aware of the economic benefit of hiring persons with disabilities and creating a diverse workforce. Canadians highlighted the need to change the negative attitude and stigma of employers when it comes to hiring and retaining people with disabilities. We also heard that employers need resources and supports to ensure their hiring practices and work environments are as inclusive as possible.

### Actions

- **Implement an Employment Strategy for Persons with Disabilities** that will:
  - help persons with disabilities find and keep good jobs
  - help persons with disabilities advance in their careers or become entrepreneurs
  - support employers as they develop inclusive workplaces, and
  - aid organizations and individuals who support persons with disabilities in employment
- **Invest more than \$270 million in new funding through the Opportunities Fund** for persons with disabilities
- **Create a Disability Inclusion Business Council** to advise the Minister and act as national champions for disability inclusion within the business community
- **Launch a National Veterans Employment Strategy** with a goal of ensuring all Veterans, including those with disabilities, find meaningful work on release from the Canadian Armed Forces
- **Modernize the *Employment Equity Act*** by reducing inequalities and barriers to employment in federal workplaces
- **Improve supports for Canada Pension Plan Disability beneficiaries** in their attempts to return to work by designing a Return-to-Work Pilot Project
- **Embed disability inclusion within ESDC's existing labour market programs**

### Pillar 3 – Accessible and inclusive communities

Persons with disabilities face physical, communication, and attitudinal barriers to participating in their communities. This is because systems, services, and spaces:

- do not consider disability in their design
- do not understand the requirements for a disability inclusive space, or
- operate with false assumptions about disability

The Action Plan will address physical, communication, and attitudinal barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from fully participating in our communities and the economy, including barriers in:

- community buildings
- public spaces, and
- workplaces

## The reality today

- 50% of persons with disabilities reported experiencing barriers that limit their ability to move around public buildings and spaces
- Nearly half (45%) of persons with disabilities have encountered barriers related to information and communication technologies
- Persons with disabilities reported experiencing various communications barriers, including: over the phone (43%), in-person (40%), and reading and understanding written material (40%)

## What we heard

Originally titled “disability-inclusive spaces”, the name, focus and actions under this pillar were refined following feedback from our public engagement. This broader focus reflects feedback that disability inclusive spaces must go beyond physical access, and include communication, awareness raising, and inclusive system design.

We heard that the creation of more accessible community spaces is widely viewed as important. Persons with disabilities often feel like an afterthought in service provision and access to public space. Adaptations are needed for people to be able to participate. However, access does not equal inclusion.

We heard that we should make accessible design the primary design. For example, ramps should be the primary access mode, instead of placing them on the side of buildings. We also heard that creating inclusive spaces means more than making physical accommodations. It means making sure that design addresses the needs of people whose disabilities are not always visible, such as:

- providing calming spaces and quiet areas, or
- providing written information in large print

We heard that many persons with disabilities do not feel understood or appreciated. We heard this is exacerbated when community spaces and services are not accessible and inclusive. Persons with disabilities do not always feel welcome, and feel like an afterthought. We heard that there is a need to communicate and raise awareness about the value of persons with disabilities in the community and workplaces.

We heard that inaccessibility makes completing daily tasks out of reach for many people. We heard that these accessibility struggles in public spaces are frustrating and further add to stigma.

## Actions

- Provide funding to support the **production of alternate format reading materials** through the Centre for Equitable Library Access and National Network for Equitable Library Service. This funding aims to improve access to reading materials for persons with print disabilities
- **Create a new Equitable Access to Reading Program** that will launch in 2024 to 2025. This program will permanently improve access to alternate format reading materials for persons with print disabilities. Prior to its launch, persons with disabilities will be engaged on the programs' design

- **Develop new regulations under the *Accessible Canada Act*** based on existing or new standards, related to the priority areas under the ACA, such as information and communications technology
- **Implement the Federal Data and Measurement Strategy for Accessibility (2022 to 2027)**
- Undertake a **review of the accessibility of shelters** for victims of gender-based violence
- **Improve accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities in communities and workplaces through renovation, construction, and retrofit projects** under the Enabling Accessibility Fund (EAF). The EAF aims to make spaces more accessible

## **Pillar 4 – A modern approach to disability**

Many of the programs and services provided by the Government of Canada were designed without considering disability. Persons with disabilities are often forced to navigate complex and fragmented government systems that are:

- not accessible or inclusive, and
- do not reflect a modern understanding of disability or disability assessment

Government of Canada programs and services contain differing definitions of “disability” and the processes for applying and being deemed eligible for those programs can be very confusing and difficult to navigate.

### **Desired outcome and goal**

The Action Plan will address the challenges that persons with disabilities face in accessing federal programs and benefits. It will also ensure that the needs and perspectives of persons with disabilities are reflected in the Government's policies and programs.

### **The reality today**

- 30% of persons with disabilities report being treated badly or differently, often, because of ideas, beliefs or attitudes that others have about disabilities
- In 2020, 54% of discrimination complaints accepted by the Canadian Human Rights Commission were on the ground of disability
- Disability data in Canada is typically drawn from national surveys. These surveys are not always sufficiently large enough to provide reliable disaggregated information about specific sub-populations in a way that respects the confidentiality of survey respondents' personal information

## What we heard

We heard that a move towards single window access to government services would help persons with disabilities navigate the complexity of programs and services. We heard that what you tell the Government about your disability experience should be more important than the medical documentation currently required as proof of disability. The need to repeatedly prove disability, or qualify as having a disability for the purposes of one program, but denied for another is seen as unreasonable. We heard strong support for a simplified and central application process. A process where persons with disabilities do not have to consistently reapply and repeatedly prove their disability. We also heard that many persons with disabilities do not know what is available to them. Information is located on different websites and is the responsibility of different departments. Some individuals may need help completing the application process. Many disability programs are not accessible to qualified individuals because of the barriers in the application process. We heard that people feel they are not seen or understood in the process. The process should be made easier for applicants to share their lived experiences.

## Actions

- **Adopt a modern approach to disability across the Government of Canada**
- Work across government and with the disability community on how a **common definition of disability** could be used across the Government of Canada
- **Establish governance structures** across the Government of Canada that will help drive actions forward and embed the involvement of persons with disabilities into government systems and processes
- **Involve persons with disabilities in developing, implementing and monitoring the Action Plan.** This will be done by providing funding to support disability organizations and National Indigenous Organizations so they can engage persons with disabilities on the Action Plan
- **Fill disability data gaps and develop indicators to measure progress of the Action Plan.** This will be achieved by developing a Disability Data Improvement Strategy in collaboration with the disability community
- **Implement a Disaggregated Data Action Plan** to support data collection on diverse populations
- **Bring federal partners, Indigenous partners, regulated entities, the private sector, academia, the disability community and provincial/territorial partners together at events that promote inclusion** such as the Canadian Congress on Disability Inclusion
- Move forward with the Implementation of the **Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada.** This includes the commitment to **hire 5,000 employees with disabilities** in the public service by 2025
- **Publicly report on the Action Plan's** impact and progress