

Shaping Canada's Disability Inclusion Action Plan:

April 2023 - Executive Summary

Bridging the gap between lived experiences and policy through a community-led, capacity building and knowledge-exchange approach



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Executive Summary and Recommendations

In 2020, the Government of Canada committed to creating a new Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP), aimed at improving the lives of persons with disabilities. The objectives of DIAP are to:

- Improve the social and economic inclusion of people in Canada with disabilities
- Reduce poverty among people in Canada with disabilities
- Contribute to the realization of a barrier-free Canada by 2040
- Improve access to federal programs and services for persons with disabilities and ensure that disability inclusion is considered in all Government programs, policies, and services
- Foster a culture of inclusion and a shift away from attitudes of ableism and discrimination

The DIAP includes four thematic pillars:

- **Financial Security** (i.e., developing a Canada Disability Benefit),
- **Employment** (creating a national employment strategy for people with disabilities),
- **Disability Inclusive Spaces** (addressing barriers to public spaces), and,
- **Modernizing Approaches to Defining Disability** (ensuring a modern definition for disability and simpler process for accessing programs).

Canada's first Disability Inclusion Action Plan is a landmark approach aimed at promoting inclusion and accessibility for all Canadians with disabilities. The DIAP is a blueprint for a change: a comprehensive strategy developed to encourage disability inclusion through a set of interconnected and complementary actions. Essentially, the DIAP provides a framework for a holistic transformation towards greater disability inclusion. This plan ensures that disability considerations are taken into account in all of programs and services, while also providing targeted investments in key areas that aim to bring about positive change. The plan also builds upon previous measures that have been implemented to improve the inclusion of people with disabilities, while also introducing new and significant actions to further advance this cause. Community partners and persons with disabilities have been engaged in developing this plan. However, in line with the principle **“Nothing Without Us,”** the lived experiences of persons with disabilities and the valuable contributions, input and recommendations that persons with disabilities have on every part of the Action Plan are thoroughly explored through this community-based project: **“Shaping Canada’s Disability Inclusion Action Plan: Bridging the gap between lived experiences and policy through a community-led, capacity building and knowledge-exchange approach.”**

This report aims to provide insights into how persons with disabilities can be socially and economically included, highlight the obstacles they encounter when accessing federal programs and benefits, and articulate the perspectives and requirements of persons with disabilities to ensure that the Government's policies and programs are inclusive and attend to their experiences. The data and insights provided in the report are intended to facilitate the implementation of the DIAP by enabling the development of novel and impactful measures and actions.

The project and its findings were guided by several principles: Firstly, there isn't a singular disability community, but instead, there are many communities that can be brought together

through this process. Secondly, feedback from Canadians with a broad range of abilities was used to inform the DIAP, which supports its successful implementation. Thirdly, people with disabilities have the best understanding of the barriers and solutions to improve social inclusion, financial security, employment, inclusive spaces, access, and experiences related to disability programs and services. They are in the best position to speak about these areas. Fourthly, increased inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of society improves the quality of life for everyone by contributing to social and economic benefits. Lastly, increased collaboration and partnerships among organizations representing people with disabilities in Canada will significantly contribute to removing barriers to participation and advancing inclusion for all people.

The main driving force behind this work was to ensure that the diverse voices of people with disabilities who are **“on the margins of the margins”** of society are heard. Direct efforts were made to engage with individuals who are hard to reach or infrequently heard. Those “on the margins of the margins” include the stories and lived experiences that often go unrecognized and unseen. The project focuses on shaping, informing, and maximizing the impact of the plan through an inclusive approach that emphasizes participation and incorporates input from a diverse range of Canadians with disabilities, including those who are visible and non-visible, those from different regions and geographies, socioeconomic class, cultural backgrounds, ages, genders, those residing in institutions (e.g., incarcerated, in long-term care centers), and those without a residential address (e.g., homeless).

In this project, disability was defined based on the rights-based approaches outlined in national and international legal frameworks. These approaches recognize that disability is not solely caused by physical, mental, cognitive, intellectual, sensory, or developmental impairments. Instead, disability results from a combination of these impairments and societal barriers such as negative attitudes and inaccessible environments that limit the full and equal participation of people with disabilities in society. Disability also intersects with other aspects of identity, including race, immigrant status, ethnicity, Indigeneity, age, sexuality, gender, gender expression, financial status and class, creating unique experiences of disability and ableism.

Methodology

Through a series of consultations, surveys, and engagement activities, feedback and input on the barriers and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities, as well as potential solutions and strategies to promote inclusion and accessibility have been collected with **over 4000+ responses/interactions**.

The four pillar organizations connected with persons with disabilities and organizations who participated in critical discussions to inform the DIAP. Respondents represented persons with lived experiences, community members and other accessibility stakeholders. The initial consultation process included public sessions, focus groups, individual interviews, written submissions, email and phone/TTY calls. A consultation guide was developed in advance of the consultations to spark discussion. The opportunities and environments for collecting information were unique, online and offline, strategic/intentional (e.g., meeting with persons with disabilities from the 2SLGBTIQ community during Toronto Pride, seeking input from the unhoused/homeless in Vancouver’s East side, consulting with Deafblind participants from Quebec.) The vast majority of respondents consulted have disabilities and considered themselves somewhat “on the margins” of the disability community. People from all provinces

and territories were consulted and included in the different types of engagement on the DIAP. While the majority of consultations were held in the English language, interviews and consultations were conducted in French, American Sign Language (ASL), and Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ).

In addition to consultations that took shape in the form of short- and long-format interviews, 'kitchen-side' chats, focus groups, etc., an accessible and comprehensive 35-questions survey and four "What We Heard" Town Hall sessions were held to further gather input, perspectives and thoughts on solutions for the different aspects of implementing DIAP.

Learnings and Recommendations

Some of the views that emerged from the consultations and surveys indicate the following themes:

Pillar 1: Financial Security

- Living with a disability in Canada can be financially challenging, leading to poverty and compromising one's dignity, choice, and freedom. Many individuals with disabilities in Canada are struggling to meet their basic needs, faced with tough choices. These challenges are further compounded by the intersections of their identity, such as race, gender, Indigeneity, class, immigration status, family status, and language. This affects their access to government income programs and benefits, employment opportunities, housing, medical services, and support. For instance, some respondents who identified as racialized or queer and/or transgender, in addition to having a disability, experienced interpersonal, institutional, and systemic discrimination.
- Living in poverty with a disability can cause individuals to feel isolated and removed from society, both socially and physically. Access to accessible transportation is a significant challenge, which limits their opportunities for social connection, attending medical appointments, going to the food bank, and work. Family support and status can also impact how individuals with disabilities experience poverty. For some, their family support is essential in keeping them out of poverty, while for others, they lack such support due to historical trauma, such as those experienced by Indigenous peoples due to residential schools and colonialism.

Pillar 2: Employment

- Skills gaps became evident during the early onset of the pandemic. The current labour shortages experienced in multiple sectors across Canada are negatively impacting the amount of training provided by employers.
- Due to changing guidelines and travel restrictions, forging new professional or organizational relationships, especially interprovincial ones, has been particularly challenging during the pandemic.
- Persons with disabilities have perceived a lack of fairness in the income supports they receive compared to the financial supports (such as CERB) provided to Canadians who were laid off at the start of the pandemic. The low threshold to establish eligibility and the absence of a lengthy application process or wait-time before benefits were received in contrast with the "claw-backs" imposed on workers with disabilities who earn income while working.

- 🔗 The pandemic accelerated trends towards precarious work, the gig economy, and the growth of delivery services, as well as discrete work driven by remote or isolated living requirements.
- 🔗 While remote work has been hyped as a benefit for people with disabilities, it has also ignored deeper challenges. Even when work was on-site during the pandemic, accommodation specialists could not visit workplaces for in-person assessments or build relationships.

Pillar 3: Inclusive Spaces

- 🔗 Persons who have disabilities encounter various challenges when it comes to engaging in their communities. These challenges can be categorized as architectural or physical, informational or communicational, organizational, virtual or technological, systemic, policy, and attitudinal.
- 🔗 These barriers are mainly caused by the failure of systems, services, and spaces to consider disability in their design. They do not fully understand the needs of individuals with disabilities or operate under false assumptions about disability, which leads to exclusion and difficulties for individuals with disabilities to participate fully in their communities.
- 🔗 There needs to be a shift from only ensuring physical spaces are accessible and inclusive, but to also consider that experiences, accessing the right supports, and policies are in-reach, inclusive and accessible in its design and implementation.

Pillar 4: Modernizing Approaches to Defining Disability

- 🔗 The inherent dignity of people with disabilities is important when redefining disability. There is desire and expectation that people with disabilities be treated with respect and as equals during any processes that determine the nature of their disability and their eligibility for programs and services.
- 🔗 The principle of equality was a key concern when discussing the definition and scope of disability. Any definition of disability should not favour people with certain conditions, impairments, or functional limitations, while denying recognition of disability to others who experience different forms of difficulty.
- 🔗 Despite their limitations, people with disabilities are capable of many things. The process of assessing disability should take into account what people can do, or what they could do with the right supports. The system should be designed to encourage this approach rather than the current approach, which tends to “pathologize” individuals based on what they cannot do.
- 🔗 While some medical information may be necessary to assess the presence of disability, the information gathered should be limited to what is essential. The disability determination process should not be highly medicalized, as it often is at present.

Emerging Views

Some of the views that emerged from the consultations and surveys indicate the following set of recommendations:

Pillar 1: Financial Security

- Eligibility and enrollment for the Canada Disability Benefit should be automatic for people already receiving government disability support, with a separate application process for those who are not. The definition of disability should be broad and inclusive,

based on how it affects people's daily lives rather than just medical diagnosis. Non-medical professionals should be allowed to assess disability. The benefit should not have an employment or asset test, and recipients should be legal residents. Income assistance programs should cover the cost of disability diagnosis.

- Access to the benefit should be easy and flexible, with specially trained government representatives who are compassionate and inclusive. Independent "navigators" can help people navigate complex government systems and ensure the benefit reaches those who need it most. There should be a fair and independent appeals process.
- There should be no reduction in existing government supports for people who receive the Canada Disability Benefit. There should be a generous earnings exemption, and the benefit should not be tied to the Disability Tax Credit or subject to income tax. Opinions are divided on whether the benefit should be income tested.
- The Canada Disability Benefit should lift people with disabilities above the poverty line and acknowledge the extra costs they face. The minimum benefit should be between \$2,200 and \$2,400 per month, indexed to inflation, with potential for individualization based on needs and location.
- Address other important factors include personal support, accessible housing, adaptive/assistive equipment, affordable and accessible communication, transportation, healthcare, education, food security, and employment.
- There is a need for a specific strategy to address the unique challenges of financial insecurity in Canada's Northern regions.
- Develop a publicly funded national disability insurance plan that would provide essential supports for persons with disabilities throughout their lifetime as an entitlement.

Pillar 2: Employment

- To improve the exchange of information and best practices, it's necessary to establish structured mechanisms. Most employment programs are managed at the provincial level, which makes it challenging to learn about innovative developments happening across Canada.
- There should be increased supports for both employers and jobseekers/employees with disabilities. Specifically, employer-focused practical resources and tailored assistance will be essential.
- There is a need for a National Accommodation Fund, particularly for small to medium-sized employers. It should eliminate claw-backs when people with disabilities find employment and provide financial support that accounts for inflation.
- It's crucial to adopt grassroots efforts that share ways of supporting jobseekers, especially during COVID-19 when onsite job coaches weren't available. Creating a forum to promote this knowledge exchange at multiple levels will be instrumental in ensuring future success. The process should be user-friendly and eliminate the need for lengthy reports or forms.

Pillar 3: Inclusive Spaces

- The Canadian government needs to be more proactive and diligent in removing barriers within areas that fall under federal jurisdiction.
- The Canadian government should increase efforts to redesign buildings, public spaces, and benefit programs so that they are more accessible.
- To make all areas more inclusive, professional, and accessible for every stakeholder group, we need to prioritize sensitivity, respect, and cultural agility.

- Retrofit buildings to make them accessible to everyone.
- The built environment, emergency services, government offices, and virtual services should provide more support for the Deaf community.
- To improve accessibility for the Deaf community, the government should provide more ASL/LSQ materials to help them use government services.
- Emergency services and service-related messages should be available in many formats to ensure accessibility for everyone.
- Government services should be accessible through many means, not just by phone or computer, to ensure inclusivity.
- Virtual and digital spaces should be designed to be accessible by default, to improve accessibility for everyone.
- Establishing a single Video Remote Interpreting Service for the public and federal employees would improve accessibility.
- Policy-wide changes and education are necessary to remove barriers to accessibility.

Pillar 4: Modernizing Approaches to Defining Disability

- There is a need for a new system that would:
 - Be based on an inclusive and evolving definition of disability that also recognizes people's diverse other characteristics.
 - Be much better-harmonized, where individual programs may have their criteria but where the threshold of having a disability would be established more clearly, coherently, and fairly.
 - Establish the presence of disability through a variety of methods that do not rely so heavily as at present on medical doctors.
 - Ask most individuals that their disability be established once rather than repeatedly.
 - Be designed and managed to treat people fairly, with respect, as equals.
 - Have thorough and fully independent review and appeal processes.
 - Provide information and services in plain language in a variety of ways, including in person and online, and through straightforward print, audio, and video resources.
- To measure the impacts of disability, it is important to consider the difficulties a person faces both with and without the support they require in various social contexts. This includes situations at home, school, work, during shopping or recreation, public events, while traveling, and in the healthcare system.
- There is a need for new approaches to assess the impacts of socially imposed restrictions that result from the barriers individuals face in different contexts. These approaches should consider how these barriers affect a person's ability to participate fully in society and access services.
- A measure of disability should take into account both episodic and continuous expressions for individuals who experience one or both. This means that the assessment should consider how a person's disability affects them over time, whether it is a temporary or ongoing condition.
- The new approach should be designed to enable and support diverse people with disabilities to participate fully as equals in *all* the rights, benefits, responsibilities, and privileges that society makes available to its citizens.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Disability Inclusion Action Plan project is a critical initiative that will help promote inclusion and accessibility for all Canadians with disabilities. This project's commitment to participation, collaboration, and co-creation has ensured that the voices of individuals with disabilities “on the margins of the margins” were heard and taken into account in the analyses. The project partners and pillar lead organizations are immensely thankful for the valued feedback and suggestions provided by persons with disabilities. The success of this project has largely depended on the active/trusted participation and constructive/transparent feedback from persons with disabilities, which has created a positive, valuable and insightful set of learnings and proposed solutions.

Although 98% of those that attended the “*Did We Get It Right?*” town hall sessions reported that the findings and recommendations align and ‘ring true’ to their own personal experiences and 92% reported information was not missing from the report, we encourage further consultation should happen with certain individuals such as those multiple chemical sensitivities and those with lived experiences of mental health issues.

The implementation of the Disability Inclusion Action Plan represents a critical step towards building a more inclusive and accessible society for all Canadians, but in order to be successful, the DIAP must be designed from an intersectional lens and the perspectives of a person with a disability should be factored through an iterative, meaningful and constant connection with persons with disabilities and community partners must follow.

The Executive Summary can be provided in any accessible format (plain language, French, ASL, and LSQ) upon request or can be accessed by visiting www.muscle.ca/diap.