

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with disabilities

Canada and the world face the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has deeply affected the lives and health of Canadians with disabilities. From the onset, Canada has been committed to taking a disability inclusive approach to the pandemic response and signed a statement supporting the Secretary General of the United Nations on a Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19.

As Canada begins its recovery phase from COVID-19, the short and longer-term human rights implications of the measures being put in place to address the pandemic are essential considerations to ensure no one is left behind. Governments across Canada have implemented various specific measures to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities during this health crisis. Below are some examples of such measures.

Impact of the pandemic on persons with disabilities

Approximately 13,000 persons with long-term conditions or disabilities responded to a 2020 online crowdsourcing survey by Statistics Canada. Of the respondents between 15 and 64 years of age:

- 36% of respondents with disabilities reported a temporary or permanent job loss because of the pandemic
- 31% reported a decline in monthly income because of the pandemic
- 61% of respondents with disabilities indicated that they were having difficulties meeting their financial obligations or essential needs as a result of the pandemic.

Civil society, Indigenous organizations, as well as certain human rights commissions have shared their views in the media, with government officials and Ministers, such as the Forum of Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers Responsible for Human Rights, on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with disabilities.

At the early stages of the pandemic, many organizations and human rights commissions called on governments to consider the accessibility needs of persons with disabilities. Challenges identified that needed to be addressed included, access to services and supplies, and the provision of services in accessible formats, such as sign language interpretation. Concerns were raised regarding persons with disabilities or with pre-existing conditions being denied life-saving health care in a pandemic triage situation, given what they called the prevalent stigma that a disabled life is less worthy than one without disabilities.

To better understand the impact of the pandemic on persons with disabilities in Canada, it is helpful to have context on the pre-pandemic situation. According to the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD) by Statistics Canada¹:

- One in five Canadians (or 6.2 million) aged 15 years and over had one or more disabilities that limited them in their daily activities.
- The prevalence of disabilities among Canadians tends to increase with age, with 13% of youths (15 to 24 years) had one or more disabilities, compared with 20% or 3.7 million of working age adults (25 to 64 years), and 38% or 2 million of seniors aged 65 and over.
- More than 4 in 10 Canadians (43%) with disabilities had a more severe disability (classified as having a severe or very severe disability), with 57% of Canadians with disabilities having a "milder" disability (classified as having a mild or moderate disability).
- Women (24%) were more likely to have a disability than men (20%) across all age groups.
- Those with more severe disabilities often have lower rates of employment, lower income even when employed full-year and full-time, and a greater likelihood of living in poverty regardless of age.

¹ The sampling frame for the 2017 CSD was derived from the 2016 Census long form questionnaire. It is a household survey and, as such, excludes the institutionalized population and those living in other collective dwellings, as well as Canadian Armed Forces bases, and First Nation living on reserves.

- Among prime working age adults (aged 25 to 64), nearly 14% had a pain-related disability. Flexibility and mobility disabilities were found in 8% and 7% respectively. However, the third most prevalent disability type among prime working age adults was mental health-related disabilities (impacting nearly 8%) Among youth (aged 15 to 24), mental health-related (8%) was the most common type of disability, followed by learning (6%), and pain-related disabilities (4%).
- Most Canadians with a disability have more than one type of disability with 29% having one type of disability; 38% two or three disabilities; and 33% four or more
- Youth with disabilities are at a higher risk of not being in school or employed, and this increased with the severity of the disability.
- Among youth with disabilities who were neither in school nor employed, 87% had a mental health-related disability, a learning disability, or both.
- Persons with very severe disabilities are two-and a-half times less likely to be employed than those with mild disabilities.
- About 59% of prime working-age adults with disabilities were employed compared with around 80% of those without disabilities. However, as severity of disability increased, the percentage of those employed fell from 76% among those with mild disabilities to 31% among those with very severe disabilities.
- Among prime working age adults, personal income was strongly related to the severity of disability. Those with no disabilities had a higher median after-tax personal income (\$39,000) than those with milder disabilities (\$34,300) and those with more severe disabilities (\$19,200).
- Nearly three in ten (28%) of prime working age adults with more severe disabilities were below Canada's official poverty line (based on the Market Basket Measure), compared with 14% of those with milder disabilities and 10% of those without disabilities.

Centering the voices of persons with disabilities in pandemic response and decision-making

To ensure an inclusive approach to its pandemic response and overall decision-making, the Government of Canada established the COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group (CDAG) in April 2020 to put a disability lens on the Government's emergency response and actively involve persons with disabilities. Its creation was highlighted as a promising practice by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The CDAG consisted of experts in disability inclusion to provide advice on lived experiences of persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis; disability-specific issues, challenges, and systemic gaps; and strategies, measures, and steps to be taken in response. In December 2020, the CDAG presented the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion with its final report. Subsequent to that report, the Minister renewed and broadened its mandate to provide expert advice on disability inclusion within Government priorities and on implementation of government programs and policies. The Minister also commissioned the University of Guelph to identify lessons learned from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada regarding persons with disabilities, and good or best practises within and outside of Canada on disability inclusion during the pandemic. Data gathered for the report included interviews and focus groups with 24 disability leaders and 30 individuals with disabilities.

The Government of British Columbia also established a COVID-19 Disability Working Group to provide advice and guidance to the government about how persons with disabilities were being impacted by the pandemic.

The Government of Quebec has created a coordinating committee on Adapted Citizen Information to identify needs, address issues and implement actions to take into account the realities of people with disabilities and adapt the content of information on COVID-19 for people with visual, hearing, intellectual or autism spectrum disorders

Measures to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic

The following is an overview of some of the impacts COVID-19 has had on persons with disabilities in Canada and examples of federal, provincial, and territorial measures undertaken to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities throughout the pandemic.

General

The Safe Restart Agreement, which represents an investment of over \$19 billion, addressed key priorities agreed upon by Canada's Federal-Provincial and Territorial governments, including supporting persons with disabilities, in particular in some priority areas such as, health care, support for vulnerable populations in long-term care, home care and palliative care.

Indigenous persons with disabilities

COVID-19 has further highlighted many existing challenges already facing Indigenous peoples, particularly those who live in remote areas and those living with disabilities. In keeping with articles 16 (freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse), 17 (protecting the integrity of the person), 25 (health), and 28 (adequate standard of living and social protection) of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), the Government of Canada has been working with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities to support their immediate public health response, with the flexibility to address their specific needs through community-led solutions, while also identifying opportunities to provide longer-term support.

Measures

- The Government of Canada committed \$760.8 million in 2021-22 for the Indigenous Community Support Fund to help First Nations, Inuit, Métis Nation communities, and urban and off-reserve Indigenous organizations serving Indigenous peoples meet the unique needs of their populations during the COVID-19 pandemic. This provided funding to: prevent the spread of COVID-19; support elders and vulnerable community members; provide mental health assistance and emergency response services; address food insecurity; and support children.
- The Government of Canada announced additional funding to provide critical support to Indigenous families and communities during the pandemic crisis specifically earmarked for many services that directly benefit Indigenous persons with disabilities, such as mental health, food security, and transportation. This funding included: \$916.7 million over two years to support the ongoing public health response to COVID-19 in Indigenous communities; \$270 million to supplement the On-Reserve Income Assistance Program to address increased demand on the program, which will help individuals and families meet their essential living expenses; and \$44.8 million over five years to build 12 new shelters, which will help protect and support Indigenous women and girls experiencing and fleeing violence.

Income Support

Persons with disabilities experienced more financial hardships than other sectors of the populations during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly due to costs incurred from medical expenses, reliance on expensive alternative options following the loss of support networks, private transportation, and the increased cost of cleaning, personal protective equipment and delivery of medication and groceries.

In keeping with article 28 of the CRPD, Canada implemented a number of measures to safeguard and promote the realization of the right of persons with disabilities to an adequate standard of living and to social protection in the context of these new challenges.

Measures

- The Government of Canada enabled a special one-time, non-taxable payment of up to \$600 that was automatically provided to individuals who were in receipt of the Canada Pension Plan Disability, Quebec Pension Plan Disability, one of the disability support programs administered by Veterans Affairs Canada or who had applied for the Disability Tax Credit (DTC) by December 31, 2020 and been deemed eligible as of July 1, 2020. In addition, seniors who were eligible for both the Seniors One-time payment, and the One-time payment to persons with disabilities, were eligible to receive a cumulative amount of \$600. In order to ensure that as many eligible persons were paid as quickly as possible, confirmed eligibility for existing

programs was leveraged to target persons with severe and prolonged disabilities in an effective, and efficient manner without the need for application, attestation or notification. A total of \$815M was provided to just over 1.75M persons with disabilities.

- In addition, the Government of Canada introduced a one-time tax-free payment of \$300 for seniors eligible for the Old Age Security (OAS) pension, with an additional tax-free payment of \$200 for seniors eligible for the Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS). This measure provided a total of \$500 to low-income seniors who receive both the OAS pension and the GIS. Allowance recipients also received \$500. This \$2.5 billion investment in financial support was provided to help Canadian seniors cover increased costs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This payment was issued to 6.7 million seniors during the week of July 6, 2020.
- The Government of Canada provided additional assistance to individuals and families with low and modest incomes with a one-time additional Goods and Services Tax/harmonized sales tax credit payment, delivering \$5.5 billion in support. Because persons with disabilities tend to have lower incomes than other Canadians, a significant number of persons with disabilities were expected to benefit from this measure.
- In addition, Canadians with disabilities benefitted from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), from the Government of Canada, which provided a weekly amount of \$500 for up to 28 weeks to support workers who lost income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government also allowed people to earn up to \$1,000 per month through employment while collecting the CERB. The program was in effect from March 15 to October 3, 2020. Effective September 27, 2020, the Government introduced a suite of three new benefits to provide income support to Canadians, from which persons with disabilities can benefit until May 7, 2022: the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit (CRSB) and the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit (CRCB). The Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) was previously available from September 27, 2020, until October 23, 2021.
- Using data from the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability and the 2020 CERB program, among the 2.6 million Canadian workers with disabilities who had earnings of at least \$5,000 in 2019 (one of the eligibility requirements for CERB), 35% received CERB payments during the period from March 15 to September 26, 2020. Similarly, 33% of workers without disabilities who had earnings of \$5,000 or more in 2019 received CERB payments during the same period. The percentage of workers with disabilities who received CERB payments varied by disability type. Approximately two-fifths of workers with cognitive (41%), physical (40%) or mental health-related (38%) disability received CERB payments. Additionally, 36% of workers with a pain-related disability and 33% of workers with a sensory disability received CERB payments. Workers with more severe disabilities were more likely to receive CERB payments (40%) than those with less severe disabilities (33%). Furthermore, workers with multiple disability types were more likely to receive CERB payments than those with only one disability type.
- The CRB, which was available until October 23, 2021, provided income support for up to 54 weeks for persons who were not eligible for Employment Insurance benefits and who either had stopped working or had their employment/self-employment income reduced by at least 50% due to COVID-19.
- The CRSB and CRCB remain available to Canadians until May 7, 2022. The CRSB provides up to 6 weeks of temporary income support to persons unable to work because they are sick, must self-isolate, or are more susceptible to COVID-19. The CRCB provides up to 44 weeks of temporary income support to persons unable to work because they need to provide care to a child under 12 or a family member that requires supervised care due to COVID-19 closures of schools and other care settings.
- The Government of Canada provided \$627,795 to approximately 300 Para-sport athletes (athletes with a disability) in 2020-2021 as part of the Emergency Support Fund for Cultural, Heritage and Sport Organizations. These funds were provided to relieve some of the financial pressures associated with preparing for and participating in international sport and assists high-performance Canadian athletes to combine their sport and academic or working careers while training intensively in pursuit of world-class performances

- The Government of British Columbia provided a temporary \$300 COVID-19 Crisis Supplement from April to December 2020 for clients on Disability Assistance or Income Assistance who were not eligible for federal emergency support programs. This supplement was initiated to help address the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on low-income individuals and families in receipt of Disability or Income Assistance. From January to March 2021, this temporary supplement was replaced by the \$150 British Columbia Recovery Supplement.
- The Government of Manitoba announced \$4.6 million to support low-income Manitobans with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the new Disability Economic Support Program, all Manitobans who received benefits under the disability category of employment and income assistance were eligible to receive a one-time not-taxable payment of \$200 that would not affect any other benefits received. In addition, Manitoba provided \$45 million in direct financial support to Manitoba seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic through the new Seniors Economic Recovery Credit. The Seniors Economic Recovery Credit will provide every Manitoban aged 65 and older with a one-time, refundable tax credit of \$200.
- To assist service delivery agencies and their employees who support vulnerable Manitobans, including people with disabilities, the province introduced the \$35M Caregiver Wage Support Program which provided a \$5 per hour wage top up to front line workers.
- Additionally, the Manitoba Government introduced the \$10M Pandemic Staffing Support Benefit for direct service workers in the adult disability, child care and child welfare sectors. To further support the adult disability sector's labour force, the Manitoba Government launched the Rapid Recruitment and Training initiative, providing streamlined orientation training to potential sector workers.
- The Manitoba Government also prioritized the vaccination of vulnerable adults, children and direct service workers as well as ensured that children with disabilities could attend classes in-person during periods of remote learning
- The Government of Prince Edward Island established a \$1 million COVID-19 Special Situations Fund to provide up to \$1,000 to residents who experienced urgent income loss because of COVID-19 and were not eligible for other federal and provincial funding support. This funding was meant to support unique needs that may not be covered in the previously announced programs.
- In the Yukon, families who receive disability services were eligible for additional funding from the territorial government. Eligible families who receive disability services will receive \$250 to \$400 per month to pay for supports during the pandemic to pay for respite care, childcare, housekeeping, specialized equipment, or other supplies.
- The Government of Ontario announced significant funding in early 2021 in support of the Ontario COVID-19 Child Benefit. Payments for children with special needs increased to help offset additional learning costs.

Health Care and Services

COVID-19 created a public health crisis that has affected persons with disabilities in a disproportionate way. For some persons with disabilities, underlying medical conditions put them at greater risk of serious complications related to COVID-19. For others, the lockdown measures presented a challenge to accessing regular health care services not related to COVID-19 such as occupational therapy, mental health services, and maintenance/repairs of disability aids. Of great concern was the development of triage protocols without taking into consideration a disability inclusion lens that could put at risk the life of persons with disabilities entering the health care system due to COVID-19.

The Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, and the Minister of Health shared with Provincial and Territorial Disability and Health Ministers concerns raised by the disability organizations about triage of health care services and other health care issues. The CDAG played a key role in providing advice on

guidance issued by the Public Health Agency of Canada on COVID-19 and persons with disabilities as well as the Public Health Ethics Framework, entitled *A guide for use in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada*. The section on ethical values and principles recognizes the human rights of all people regardless of condition, including persons with disabilities.

From the onset of the pandemic, the Government worked hard to ensure that the interests and needs of persons with a disability were taken into consideration in its decisions and measures adopted in response to COVID-19. This included taking disability issues into consideration when making decisions and consulting national disability organizations and other stakeholders. In keeping with the recommendations of the CDAG, an intersectional, cross-disability lens was also applied to decisions that would impact persons with disabilities.

Governments across Canada have worked throughout the pandemic to address some of these concerns and challenges and promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities, including under article 25 (health).

Measures

- The Government of British Columbia invested \$16 million to support new treatment and recovery beds and to support existing services that were challenged by COVID-19. Funding will be directed through the Canadian Mental Health Association to deliver community grants – in consultation with the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions and health authorities – and will prioritize underserved communities.
- The Government of Alberta announced funding of more than \$261 million to operators to help support residents and staff in contracted continuing care settings (long-term care and designated supportive living) and seniors' lodges. This was in addition to funding provided to public sector continuing care operators through Alberta Health Services and Covenant Health. This funding helped these facilities pay for increased costs during the pandemic. It also helped support increased healthcare aide staffing through a \$2 per hour wage top-up and up to 1,000 paid healthcare aide student practicum positions. Additional funding of \$68.5 million was provided to protect vulnerable Albertans and staff from COVID-19 in non-contracted licensed supportive living, residential community hospice, residential addiction and mental health treatment facilities, and home care.
- The Government of Alberta allocated a one-time \$53.4 million investment in 2020 to expand virtual and in-person addiction and mental health recovery supports. A key component of this investment was a \$25 million Mental Health and Addiction COVID-19 Community Funding grant. Grant recipients include projects that provide support and services for people living with disability and Albertans over the age of 65, who often live with disability.
- The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador announced a COVID-19 assessment service for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community and for those who cannot communicate verbally. The new cell phone text line and video service is exclusively for people who are deaf and hard-of-hearing or those with communication disabilities that prevent them from speaking to a nurse.
- The Government of Quebec has announced an investment of \$750 million over the next five years to intensify the supply of home support services. This funding will allow for greater coverage of home support services needs, notably by intensifying services for all clientele: seniors, people with a physical disability, an intellectual disability or an autism spectrum disorder, people with chronic illnesses and people requiring palliative and end-of-life care at home. This amount will also be used to meet short-term home support services needs, such as post-hospitalization. This investment of \$150M per year is in addition to the \$380M already invested in recent years, for a total recurrent investment of \$530M.

Social & Community Services

Persons with disabilities, and seniors were more likely to lose access to vital support services due to self-isolation and quarantine and this created a greater need for support through community-based organizations. In this context,

Canada implemented a number of measures to enable persons with disabilities to live independently (article 9), and to promote and protect the right of persons with disabilities to live in the community (article 19)

Measures

- The Government of Canada provided additional funding to charities and non-profit organizations through the Emergency Community Support Fund. This funding responded directly to needs identified by the disability community and worked to ensure that community-based organizations support persons with disabilities and other vulnerable populations through services including: volunteer-based home deliveries of groceries and medications; transportation services, like accompanying or driving seniors or persons with disabilities to appointments; help lines that provide information and support, support accessing government benefits; training, supplies, and other required supports to volunteers so they can continue to support the COVID-19 response; and replacing in-person, one-on-one contact and social gatherings with virtual contact through phone calls, texts, teleconferences, or web-based platforms.
- The Government of Canada's Emergency Support Fund for Cultural, Heritage and Sport Organizations provided an additional \$3.8 million to Canadian National Sport Organizations and Multisport Service Organizations to ensure continued delivery of programs and services for athletes with a disability during the pandemic.
- Veterans Affairs Canada's Veteran and Family Well-being Fund is providing \$15 million over three years starting in 2021-2022 to community-based projects across Canada that support Veterans during the post COVID-19 recovery. This includes addressing homelessness, employment, retraining, health challenges, women and LGBTQ2 Veterans. To date, 36 projects have been announced with total funding of \$11.3 million.
- As part of a cost-shared program with the federal government, the Government of British Columbia established the Temporary Pandemic Pay program to support people working on the frontlines of B.C.'s health care system, social services, and corrections. Employers in eligible sectors and workplaces were encouraged to submit claims on behalf of employees who continued to provide critical, in-person services to vulnerable populations and victims of violence during a 16-week period starting March 15, 2020.
- The Government of British Columbia established and administered the COVID-19 Victim Service and Violence Against Women Support Fund to contribute towards contracted service providers' incremental costs (e.g. additional staffing, technology to support remote service delivery, personal protective equipment, and engineering controls like plexiglass barriers) directly related to continued delivery of essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional funding was also provided to VictimLinkBC (a toll-free multilingual, confidential phone, email and text service available across British Columbia and the Yukon 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, providing information and referral services to all victims of crime and immediate crisis support to victims of family and sexual violence) to enable text message services and support its functionality to improve accessibility for all victims of crime, and in particular, for victims of family and sexual violence.
- The COVID-19 pandemic magnified risk to persons experiencing mental illness and addictions, including problem gambling, due to social isolation and stress as well as disruption to prevention and treatment services. Casino closures meant people increasingly gambled online at home where there was elevated risk of problem gambling because of isolation, lack of oversight, and lack of prevention supports normally available in casinos. As well, people gamble more problematically when under financial duress, which increased for many during the pandemic. In British Columbia, Gambling Support BC adapted its program delivery by increasing telephone and virtual counselling capacity, expanding social media presence and advertising by contracted service providers including BC211, which is a non-profit society that connects people to services. This promoted the availability of Gambling Support BC services, ensured inquiries were converted to support contacts, and helped people experiencing gambling harms access services remotely.

- In Alberta, the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society is providing advice on the Alberta government's response to COVID-19, how to support civil society organizations to recover from the impacts of COVID-19 and build future capacity to support vulnerable Albertans.
- The Government of Alberta also launched a charitable donation matching program that allocated \$2 million to be used to match donations to Alberta-based designated charities and non-profits with COVID-19 fundraising campaigns. The program ran from April 15 to May 31, 2020 and included several partner organizations that support the delivery of services to vulnerable Albertans.
- The Government of Saskatchewan created the Social Services Pandemic Response to support vulnerable citizens and the organizations that serve them. It aims to provide additional funding to emergency shelters and modify service delivery models to accommodate capacity pressures due to physical distancing and the need for clients to self-isolate.
- The Government of Manitoba launched an online tool to connect volunteers with people needing assistance. This initiative safely matches volunteer and community support to Manitobans in greatest need, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities and people at high risk of contracting COVID-19. Supports include needs for goods and services such as groceries, medication, and various other necessities.
- The Government of Ontario developed its COVID-19 Action Plan: Protecting Vulnerable Ontarians to help persons that lived or worked in residential areas to stay safe and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Changes were also made to the Passport program to help persons with developmental disabilities, the program was expanded to aid adults with developmental disabilities participate in their communities by allowing funding of hobby, exercise and delivery fees to be part of the program during these times. In addition, persons with disabilities in need, such as those in supportive housing environments or community-based independent living programs, could get paid or subsidized delivery of meals, delivery of medicine and other necessities
- The Government of Prince Edward Island supported the United Way Atlantic Compassion Fund to provide funding to community organizations to support COVID-19-related initiatives and to registered charities serving marginalized community members. The Fund supports emergency preparedness and support for vulnerable populations and can serve to address needs such as food, transportation, medication, or social and mental health supports.
- The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador provided \$300,000 in funding to launch a new Students Supporting Communities Program. The program provides grants for organizations to hire students to help seniors and other vulnerable groups facing social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Housing

Persons with disabilities and chronic health conditions, especially mental health-related, are generally reported to be over-represented in the homeless population, although limited data is available. Some research suggests that persons with disabilities are more at risk of hidden homelessness, which could be a particular at-risk group during the COVID-19 health crisis. Taking this into account, governments in Canada implemented a number of measures to promote and protect the right of persons with disabilities to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, including housing (article 28).

Measures

- The Government of Canada through the National Housing Strategy continued to support people experiencing homelessness or precarious housing during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Through *Reaching Home: Canada's Homelessness Strategy*, The Government of Canada has invested close to \$700 million in additional funding to support the sector's response to COVID-19, as well as efforts in preventing inflows into homelessness. In addition, program flexibilities were temporarily introduced to allow communities to use *Reaching Home* funding for health and medical expenses. Further, the

Government of Canada has announced an additional \$567.2 million for Reaching Home over two years in order to help communities to extend their COVID-19 response, reduce inflows into homelessness through prevention efforts and increase outflow from homelessness to housing, including finding permanent options for those temporarily housed. *Reaching Home* investments strengthen communities' work to develop coordinated, data-driven approaches to address homelessness at the local level.

- In addition, in 2020 the Rapid Housing Initiative launched, providing \$1 billion to rapidly address the urgent housing needs of vulnerable Canadians, including persons with disabilities, in response to the COVID 19 pandemic. The initiative was expanded in 2021 with an additional \$1.5 billion and the Rapid Housing Initiative is expected to create over 10,000 new housing units within 2 years.
- The Government of British Columbia established the Vulnerable Population Working Group to identify and address the immediate challenges faced by people living on the street, people experiencing homelessness living in encampments, shelter residents, tenants of private single room occupancy and tenants in social and supportive housing.
- The Government of Manitoba announced it will be investing \$468,000 to support vulnerable Manitobans who have had to rely on social services since the pandemic started. The funding will go towards COVID-19 isolation units used by Manitobans who are experiencing homelessness. This funding builds on the more than \$1.6 million the Manitoba government had already provided to operate this project.
- The Government of Northwest Territories implemented changes that will make repayment plans accessible for renters who missed payments due to COVID-19. The program will allow renters, including those with disabilities, to pay back rental arrears accumulated from March 18, 2020, to January 31, 2021 on a steady, scheduled plan, as long as they experienced job loss or a significant drop in income because of the pandemic. In addition, the government announced that over 130 units previously identified for self-isolation of homeless people during COVID-19 will be turned into public housing units after the pandemic.
- The Government of Ontario has 47 Service Managers responsible for delivering housing assistance and supports for people in need, including those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Local Service Managers help people experiencing or at risk of homelessness through the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI). The CHPI provides flexible funding that allows service managers to address a wide range of housing needs, including emergency services for individuals and families who are homeless and help to access and maintain housing. CHPI funding increased from \$323.7 million in 2019-20, to \$338.7 million in 2020-21. As part of the government's response to the pandemic, the rent increase guideline for 2021 was set at 0% to freeze and stabilize rents for majority of rental households. The rent increase guideline for 2022 is 1.2%.

Education

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the shortcomings, fragilities, risks, and inequalities of education systems in the education of learners with disabilities across Canada. Students with disabilities are facing barriers related to the absence of required equipment, access to internet, accessible materials and support necessary to permit them to access online school programs that have been implemented to control the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many students with disabilities have had interruptions their education, particularly students with intellectual disabilities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has also made education more accessible for some students with mobility disabilities in some cases.

Canada has therefore implemented a number of measures to promote and protect the right of persons with disabilities to education (article 24):

Measures

- The Government of Canada provided emergency financial support from May to August 2020 to post-secondary students, including students with disabilities and recent graduates who were unable to work, or unable to find work, due to reasons related to COVID-19. Eligible students received \$1,250 per month, plus an additional \$750 per month if they had dependents or a disability, for a maximum of \$2,000 per month. As of March 18, 2021, over 122,000 unique applicants have received the enhanced Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) for those with dependants or a disability, which is 17% of the 709,000 students who received CESB.
- The Government of British Columbia partnered with an inclusive education teacher/researcher to develop a twice weekly video series to support students with disabilities and diverse abilities and their families to access learning. Ministry staff met weekly with inclusive education organizations to discuss challenges families were facing accessing learning and to develop solutions. In addition, the provincial government provided new supports for post-secondary students, including expanded online resources and funding to help students with disabilities, including \$1.5 million to be distributed equally between 20 public post-secondary schools to strengthen supports for students with cognitive, mental health or physical disabilities.
- The Alberta Human Rights Commission supported the *Re-Entry Strategy for Persons with Disabilities*, a collaborative initiative of Alberta Ability Network, which included community and government stakeholders to address COVID-19 re-entry challenges for the disability community.
- The Government of Quebec has provided schools with more than \$38 million to better support students in their learning and school engagement in the COVID context. In addition, the \$20 million increase in the Minimum Service Level for Schools measure has allowed for the addition of support workers and increased hours of complementary educational services for all students, including students with disabilities. This funding also allowed for the hiring of special educators and teachers to help provide students with appropriate learning.

Employment

Workers across the country have been facing new challenges since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular those living with disabilities. In keeping with article 27 of the CRPD (work and employment), governments in Canada have been working together to support workers with disabilities and helped them tackle the additional challenges they faced.

Measures

- In 2020, the Government of Canada announced its first ever Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP) to improve the economic inclusion and quality of life for persons with disabilities. As part of the DIAP the Government of Canada is bringing forward an Employment Strategy for Canadians with Disabilities. The Employment Strategy will take a holistic and intersectional look at the long-standing barriers that persons with disabilities face in the labour market and in the workplace and will develop a range of supports for both persons with disabilities and employers.
- In 2020-2021, Canada invested an additional \$15M in the Opportunities Fund to address the immediate challenges of COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the activities supported included expanding online training opportunities, connecting persons with disabilities and employers, training for in-demand jobs, and wage subsidies. In 2020, the Government of Canada announced a further \$65 million in new funding to bolster training supports for those hardest hit by the pandemic, and as part of its broader commitment to develop an Employment Strategy for Canadians with Disabilities.
- In 2021, the Government of Canada invested an additional \$1.5 billion in training and employment supports for Canadians those further removed from the labour market through the Workforce Development Agreements (WDAs) to help provinces and territories with their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within this additional funds, \$410 million of which was dedicated to programming for persons with disabilities. This investment helped Canadians, including those from underrepresented groups and those in sectors that have been hardest hit by the pandemic quickly access supports to re-enter the workforce and maintain employment. This funding was provided in addition to the approximately \$3.4 billion already allocated to supporting individuals and employers under the Labour Market Development Agreements (LMDAs) and WDAs, collectively referred to as the labour market transfer agreements with provinces and territories in 2020-21.

- The Government of British Columbia's Work Experience Opportunities Grant focused on helping vulnerable British Columbians impacted by COVID-19. With \$10 million from StrongerBC: BC's Economic Recovery Plan, the grant helps eligible, provincial non-profit organizations and federally registered charities provide 12-week work experience opportunities for persons with disabilities and multiple barriers who are eligible for disability benefits from British Columbia and the Government of Canada. The grants include a stipend for participants and will help British Columbians gain the work experience needed for long-term employment opportunities.
- The Government of Prince Edward Island launched the COVID-19 Workforce Integration Fund to support innovative projects from organizations that help Islanders gain skills and knowledge so they can find long-lasting jobs, advance their careers and access entrepreneurship opportunities. Proposals under the fund are intended to support people and groups most highly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including persons with disabilities. Each approved project will receive up to 100 per cent funding for eligible costs to a maximum of \$500,000.

Public Communications & Accessibility

Persons with disabilities could face additional challenges to access the information that governments put forward to inform the population about the COVID-19 pandemic due to the lack of accessible formats. Accessible formats can make health information easier to understand. Some examples include Easy Read format, close captioning and sign language interpretation, tactile letters or braille on signage, etc. While technology can help in some cases, it may not work in all situations. Persons with cognitive disabilities, for instance, may require support from others to access information, and some may not have access to internet at home, including persons with disabilities in remote locations or be able to use a computer or a smart phone easily.

This need for accessible communications and engagement with the disability community was emphasized by the CDAG as critical for a disability-inclusive response to the pandemic.

In this context, FPT governments implemented a variety of measures in recognition of their obligations under article 9 of the CRPD, to take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to information and communication on an equal basis with others.

Measures

- For the 2021 general election, Elections Canada offered its regular suite of accessibility and voting assistance tools and services. It also supplied polling stations with clear face masks to help poll workers communicate with electors who rely on reading facial expressions and lips. Significant improvements were made to vote-by-mail services to make requesting and returning a mail-in ballot more convenient. Support was provided for electors requiring assistance to complete the mail-in ballot. Despite the challenges brought about by COVID-19, e.g., the need for new and larger locations to accommodate physical distancing, over 97% of polling places met Elections Canada's mandatory accessibility criteria or had level access, similar to the 2019 federal election. Full information about the accessibility of polling places, and of alternative polling locations, was made available through local Elections Canada offices.
- The Government of Canada provided funding to ensure the sustainable production and distribution of alternate format materials by assisting the Canadian independent publishing industry in creating digital books that are accessible at source and by supporting the not-for-profit in enabling access to alternate

format materials. In addition, the Government of Canada committed to increasing its funding for support services that ensure equitable access to reading and other published works for Canadians with print disabilities.

- Governments across Canada provided sign language interpretation during press conferences and daily briefings relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Government of Canada provided funding to support pan-Canadian disability organizations, through the Social Development Partnership Program – Disability Component, to enhance communications and engagement activities to better address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with disabilities. Providing funding to organizations allows resources to reach across the disability community and tailor communications and engagement to the varying needs of persons with disabilities.
- The Government of Canada developed “Accessible communication during COVID-19 and other emergencies: A guideline for organizations” and “Accessible communication during COVID-19 and other emergencies: A guideline for persons with disabilities”. These are practical guidelines for persons with disabilities during public health crises and other emergencies. They aim to address communication barriers that may exist during public health crisis and emergencies, and they were developed with advice from national disability organizations and other stakeholders.
- The Government of Canada also developed similar accessible communication guidelines for federal organizations, and guidelines for accessible practices for returning to the workplace, for creating an accessible emergency response plan, and for accessible service delivery during emergencies, including COVID-19
- The Government of Alberta updated Alberta Biz Connect, a website for workplace guidance and supports to help business and non-profits affected by COVID-19 operate safely and support their recovery. Alberta Biz Connect provides information and guidance on public health measures impacting businesses, supports for businesses, and additional resources.
- The Government of the Northwest Territories launched a new Service NWT COVID Support Line. The 8-1-1 line connects callers to operators who answer questions about COVID-19 and provide contact information to other services relating to physical distancing and self-isolation.
- The Government of Quebec has ensured that information related to COVID-19 is available to people with physical, intellectual or autism spectrum disabilities, including through the use of accessible formats such as captioning, sign language, interpreters, plain language information, visual content adaptations, etc.

Transportation

COVID-19 created several challenges in transportation for persons with disabilities, some of the measures that were put in place to reduce the propagation of COVID-19 unintentionally created new barriers for some travelers with disabilities.

In this context, governments in Canada implemented a variety of measures in recognition of their obligations under article 9 of the CRPD to take appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to transportation on an equal basis with others.

Measures

- The Government of Canada developed “Best Practices for Accessible Travel in the Context of COVID-19” which included guidance for transportation service providers in four areas: physical distancing and navigation; non-medical mask or face covering; sanitization and hand washing; and communicating information. This guide also includes some tips for persons with disabilities during COVID-19.