

National Action Plan 2007

From Vision to Action – Building an Inclusive and Accessible Canada a National Action Plan on Disability

Background

Exclusion, poverty and isolation are a shared reality for the majority of the more than 12% of Canadians who have a disability and the 33% of Aboriginal/First Nations Canadians who have a disability. The outcomes are predicable. We know that:

- Canadians with disabilities are almost twice as likely to live in poverty compared to other Canadians.
- Over two million Canadian adults with disabilities lack one or more of the educational, workplace, aids, home modification or other supports they need to participate fully in their communities.
- Over 55% of working-age adults with disabilities are currently unemployed or out of the labour market. For women with disabilities the rate is almost 75%.
- According to the International Labour Organization, the annual loss of global GDP due to the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the labour market is between US\$1.37 trillion and US\$1.94 trillion.
- More than 10,000 persons with intellectual disabilities remain warehoused in institutions across this country.
- Slightly more than half of Canadian children with disabilities do not have access to needed aids and devices.
- Rates of violence and abuse against people with disabilities, in particular women with disabilities, are among the highest for any group in Canadian society.
- We know that for Aboriginal Canadians with disabilities these rates are even higher.

While progress has been made over the past 25 years, many Canadians with disabilities and their families continue to experience daily barriers to their full and equal participation in Canadian society. The personal, social and economic costs of exclusion are too high to be ignored. Immediate action is needed to address the high rates of poverty facing Canadians with disabilities and its causes and the lack of access to disability supports that perpetuate barriers and exclusion and keep people with disabilities and their families invisible and marginalized.

VISION is not enough: ACTION IS REQUIRED

A turning point has been reached. New ways of thinking must be adopted by employers, governments and providers of public services. A comprehensive national disability strategy is needed. Solutions are known and innovative policies and programs do exist. It is time to take ACTION and implement SOLUTIONS. Solutions are complex and multi-jurisdictional, however, this **CANNOT** be an excuse for inaction.

There are many opportunities to improve the status of Canadians with disabilities. Domestically, the current Government has made a number of commitments to addressing issues facing people with disabilities and their families. A national strategy is needed to ensure these commitments work in concert and contribute to building an Inclusive and Accessible Canada.

Internationally, with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the issue of disability is receiving significant profile. Canada demonstrated leadership by signing the CRPD on the first day it was open to signature. Ratification and implementation of the CRPD in Canada is an opportunity to take concrete steps to demonstrate the depth of commitment to people with disabilities and their families. The CRPD creates a new opportunity to demonstrate Canada's leadership in the world and confront the poverty, unemployment, lack of support, social exclusion and denial of basic rights of self-determination faced by so many people with disabilities.

On November 2, 2006, 300 Canadians with disabilities, family members and allies gathered in Ottawa at End Exclusion 2006 to support a Vision for Building An Inclusive and Accessible Canada. Over 80 organizations and 5000 individuals committed to this vision and to working together to make it a reality.

On November 22, 2007, at End Exclusion 2007, more than 300 supporters of an inclusive and accessible Canada will gather again to discuss what is needed to make our vision a reality. Canadians with disabilities and their families have developed the following **policy framework and National Action Plan on Disability** to guide the End Exclusion 2007 discussion and to provide a road map to help policy makers, politicians and interested Canadians in advancing a national disability strategy and in moving from Vision to Action.

Shared Vision for an Inclusive and Accessible Canada

There is a shared vision for an inclusive and accessible Canada and unprecedented consensus exists among the Canadian public, governments, the disability community and experts about the need for national action on disability issues. An Inclusive and Accessible Canada is a Canada where:

- Canadians with disabilities – children, youth, working-age adults, and seniors – have the necessary support to fully access and benefit from all that Canada has to offer.
- Independent Living principles of choice, consumer control and autonomy are made real.
- Canadians with disabilities have safe, adequate, accessible housing in their community and live free from residential institutions and confinement.
- Canadians with disabilities and their families have the income, aids and devices, personal supports, medications and environmental accommodations that make social, economic, cultural, and political citizenship accessible and inclusive of all.
- Women with disabilities, Aboriginal People with disabilities, persons with disabilities from visible minority communities, and those from other marginalized communities are equally able to access all aspects of and benefit from Canadian society.

- Canadians with invisible disabilities, chronic illness, episodic disabilities or environmental sensitivities, or living in rural or remote areas are equally able to access and benefit from Canadian society.

The result is that people with disabilities are able to contribute to, and benefit from, Canadian society in the same way as other Canadians. This is our Canada.

A Framework for Action

The Government of Canada can make An Inclusive and Accessible Canada a reality by initiating concerted efforts to develop a joint strategy with provincial/territorial governments and First Nations to meet the needs of Canadians with disabilities. Significant overlap exists between the federal and provincial/territorial roles for disability. As the Government explores strengthening the Federation and the economic union there must be discussion on how we, as a country, ensure that supports and services needed for the full inclusion and active citizenship of people with disabilities and their family are being provided.

To be effective, a National Action Plan on Disability must transcend our traditional fragmented, reactive approach to disability. It must involve comprehensive short and long range plans and decisive action to create a national environment in which people with disabilities can and do achieve their full potential.

The Government of Canada has committed to bringing forward a Federal Disability Act. Canadians with disabilities will support a Federal Disability Act that moves forward quickly, encompasses the issues identified below, allocates significant resources for improving access and inclusion and ensures a mechanism for strong enforcement of access and inclusion.

The development of a Federal Disability Act cannot preclude action in other areas nor can Canadians with disabilities and their families wait for a Federal Disability Act to implement reforms that are desperately needed now.

For an Inclusive and Accessible Canada to be a reality, the Government of Canada must show leadership by enhancing their role in four key areas:

- Enhanced disability supports to enable Independent Living, active citizenship and full participation;
- An enhanced Federal role in alleviating poverty of persons with disabilities and their families thus freeing up dollars at provincial/territorial levels for new investments in disability supports;
- Labour force inclusion measures;
- A national social development role to promote accessibility and community inclusion.

A Framework for a National Action Plan on Disability

1. New Investments in Disability Related Supports

Properly executed new investments can bring change to the lives of people with disabilities. An appropriately targeted investment in disability-related supports would assist Canadians with disabilities to participate in early learning and childcare, become educated and employed, live more independently, and look after their families.

Such an investment is the priority of the disability community and is the foundation upon which a comprehensive National Action Plan on Disability must be built. Central to this initiative is a commitment to deinstitutionalization and removing the stigma attached to disability.

The Government of Canada must:

- Create the national social, economic and political conditions for people with disabilities to empower themselves and to achieve their full potential.
- Work with provinces and territories to explore ways of increasing access to and improving the range of available disability supports.
- Work with provinces and territories to provide support for the building of safe, affordable, accessible and supportive housing.
- Acknowledge that residential institutions have no place in the lives of people with disabilities and support provinces and territories to finish the process of closure.
- Work with Band Councils to ensure equal access to disability-related supports for First Nations people with disabilities living on reserve.

2. New initiatives to alleviate poverty

The poverty of Canadians with disabilities is a national disgrace. Canadians with disabilities and their families are twice as likely to live in poverty as other Canadians and the incidence of poverty among Aboriginal People with disabilities is even higher. Existing systems of income support are failing Canadians with disabilities. **The Government of Canada must commit to addressing poverty and reforming Canada's income support programs for Canadians with disabilities.**

First steps could include:

- Making the Disability Tax Credit Refundable.
- Making those eligible for Canada Pension Plan Disability Benefits automatically eligible for the Disability Tax Credit.
- Making Canada Pension Plan Disability Benefits non-taxable.
- Expanding Employment Insurance Sick Benefits to 52 weeks.
- Ensuring new federal benefits such as the Registered Disability Savings Plan are not clawed back by provinces and territories from those on social assistance.

Long-term reforms could include:

- An expanded federal role in income support for Canadians with disabilities thus freeing up resources at provincial and territorial levels for re-investment in supports and services.

3. New supports to increase access to labour force participation

Through Advantage Canada and the recent budget, the Government of Canada committed to increasing access to training, education, accommodation and labour market attachment for people with disabilities. We believe this would be done most effectively by establishing a two-track strategy:

1. Establish specific targets for Canadians with disabilities in Labour Market Development Agreements (LMDA) negotiated with the provinces. Having a specific target for Canadians with disabilities should be a requirement of transfer of both EI and Consolidated Revenue Funds to the provinces/territories.
2. Transforming provincial/territorial labour market systems to address barriers to people with disabilities will take some time. In the meantime both the Multilateral Framework Agreement on Labour Force Participation of People with Disabilities and the Opportunities Fund should be expanded to ensure greater capacity at the provincial/territorial level to address barriers, and through the Opportunities Fund to demonstrate innovation in labour force inclusion. These funds must not be rolled into the LMDAs or new labour market transfers to the provinces and territories until it is demonstrated that LMDA's are capable of addressing disability in a substantive way; and that the lessons, incentives and strategies are being incorporated into these generic systems from those developed through the Multi-Lateral and Opportunities Fund programming.

4. New initiatives to promote access, inclusion and full citizenship

To achieve positive outcomes within the building blocks of employment, income and disability supports, investments are also needed in other related and complementary areas. To this end, the Government of Canada must commit to addressing the following:

- **Transportation:** Develop accessibility regulations for all federally regulated modes of transportation and restructure the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Accessible Transportation to be consumer controlled and representative of disability organizations.
- **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD):** Initiate a transparent process of work with the provinces/territories and the disability community to ensure ratification of the CRPD within the next two years.
- **Accessible Technology:** Establish a Procurement Policy for the Government of Canada that would ensure purchase only of accessible technology, thus increasing employment opportunities within the public service and accessible service to the Canadian public.
- **Support Disability Community Knowledge Mobilization and Knowledge Transfer:** Renew for 5 years and expand the Social Development Partnerships Disability Program, including the enhancement of the Community Inclusion Fund, to ensure that the wisdom gained from living with disability is accessible to public policy developers. Support the establishment of a disability community controlled and directed national research institute, which would develop new knowledge about disability based upon a social/cultural theory of disability rather than a bio-medical model.

- **An Accessibility Design Centre:** Create a Universal Design Centre that would act as a cross-departmental focal point of responsibility to harmonize, track and deliver results in the area of barrier removal. It would become a centre of excellence in universal design and become a resource to governments, community and the private sector.
- **Access Principle:** Update the National Building Code to ensure Universal Design principles are respected. Ensure that universal design principles guide all Infrastructure program initiatives.
- **Accessible Elections:** Reform the federal electoral process to ensure that persons with disabilities can participate in all aspects of election campaigns and vote in an independent and secret manner.
- **Amend the Official Languages Act:** Recognize ASL/QSL as official languages.
- **Re-establish a specific Parliamentary Committee on the Status of Canadians with disabilities** to address the ongoing concerns of Canadians with disabilities and submit to Parliament an annual report on the status of Canadians with disabilities.

Towards a Long-Term Comprehensive Strategy

Steps outlined above provide the foundation for a longer-term comprehensive National Action Plan on Disability by the Government of Canada to address the issues of Canadians with disabilities and their families. Budget 2007 signaled that the federal government would be re-examining the roles, responsibilities and arrangements between the two levels of government on social policy issues. This presents an excellent opportunity to consider the most effective means of addressing disability issues today. The longer-term strategy should be about striking a new balance in federal and provincial/territorial government roles, in particular in the inter-relationship between income/disability supports programming. Striking a new balance will require leadership, allocation of new resources and ongoing dialogue with Canadians with disabilities about their needs and aspirations. We share a common Vision. We now must make that vision real through a National Action Plan on Disability.