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Progress Report on Implementation of "Nothing Without Us": Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada (2019–20)

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Message from the Deputy Minister of Public Service Accessibility

Hello,

My name is Yazmine Laroche, and I am the Deputy Minister of Public Service Accessibility. I am pleased to share with you this progress report highlighting the important work underway across the federal public service to implement "Nothing Without Us": *Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada.*

Yazmine Laroche
Deputy Minister of Public
Service Accessibility

Releasing this progress report feels exceptionally important in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has touched all spheres of our lives as citizens, our workplaces, our service delivery models, and our experiences as employees. This health crisis has shown that persons with disabilities can be more vulnerable in public health emergencies, making the accessibility of the Government's communications, programs and services more urgent. It has also shown that persons with disabilities can lead the way in innovative approaches to solution design, whether in the built environment, information and communications technology, or effective culture change strategies, due to their lived experience of overcoming barriers in many domains of daily life. The pandemic has shown that even the most entrenched processes, policies and approaches can be changed and adapted rapidly, to meet the changing needs of Canadians and public service employees.

I have seen a sense of unity grow across the federal public service as we have worked to build the most accessible and inclusive public service in the world. I have also seen the shift in perceptions about persons with disabilities in the public service. No longer are we thinking of any equity-seeking group as homogenous. We are recognizing the full diversity of our workforce, and are working to understand how multiple intersecting identities can further marginalize equity-seeking groups like persons with disabilities, Indigenous communities, Black and racialized communities, as well as LGBTQ2 communities. What is most encouraging, in the

short time I have been in this role, is our senior leaders' movement from discussing accessibility to action on accessibility.

Over the past year and a half, the public service has done important groundwork and has identified ways to remove many systemic barriers. I encourage you to take a moment to read this report.

Thank you.

Introduction

The *Accessible Canada Act* came into force in 2019, and aims to identify, remove, and prevent barriers for persons with disabilities in Canada. To respond to the act, the Government of Canada launched the *[Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada](#)*, also referred to as "Nothing Without Us," in 2019 as a roadmap to prepare the public service to lead by example and become a model of accessibility for others, in Canada and abroad. The Accessibility Strategy focuses on five goals, and each goal identifies the priority actions to be taken by each department and agency:

- **Goal 1:** Improve recruitment, retention and promotion of persons with disabilities
- **Goal 2:** Enhance the accessibility of the built environment
- **Goal 3:** Make information and communications technology usable by all
- **Goal 4:** Equip public servants to design and deliver accessible programs and services
- **Goal 5:** Build an accessibility-confident public service

The guiding principles in co-developing and implementing the Accessibility Strategy are:

- **Nothing without us**: Persons with disabilities will be involved in the development and implementation of the Accessibility Strategy.
- **Collaboration**: Policy and operational leads across the federal public service will be partners in developing and implementing the Accessibility Strategy, with

input from accessibility and disability inclusion stakeholders in the not-for-profit sector and the private sector.

- **Sustainability**: Policies in the areas of people management, real property, service, digital, and contracting require public servants to build accessibility into their daily work.
- **Transparency**: Progress and areas where further work is required will be reported on throughout the implementation of the Accessibility Strategy.

This report provides a summary of the progress made in implementing the Accessibility Strategy from its launch in 2019 to November 2020.

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic

Despite the challenges of the past several months, progress has been made in advancing accessibility and disability inclusion in the public service. While the pandemic has delayed some actions, it has also demonstrated the importance of equipping employees with the technological tools required to communicate and collaborate without barriers to advance their work. The impact of the pandemic reaffirms that accessibility is, and must be, an integral part of how we do all aspects of our business as public servants.

Goal 1: Improve recruitment, retention and promotion of persons with disabilities

The Accessibility Strategy aims to close gaps in the recruitment, retention and promotion of persons with disabilities. As of 2019, 5.2% of public servants self-identify as a person with a disability, and this number has declined since 2017 (5.5%). The hiring rate of new employees with disabilities was 3.7%; however, the rate of separation (those employees who left the public service) during the same period was 6.6%. The workforce availability of persons with disabilities in 2019, meaning the share of the Canadian workforce that is eligible for federal public service work, rose to 9%. Clearly, more work needs to be done to close this gap.

Since the launch of the Accessibility Strategy in 2019, initial progress has been made in identifying barriers to recruitment, retention, and promotion of persons with disabilities and the root causes of these barriers. To help improve representation, analysis and modelling are being conducted to better understand and determine the number of people with disabilities that need to be hired to meet the government's target of 5,000 net new employees with disabilities by 2025. At the same time, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat is conducting a self-identification modernization project to understand why employees with disabilities and other employment equity groups choose not to self-identify.

In support of our collective recruitment goal, the Public Service Commission launched a Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities, which commits to hiring 125 interns for two-year placements over five years. The program supports employees who have little previous work experience to develop skills for future employment. The first year (2019–20) of the program resulted in nine organizations hiring 20 interns across the country. To better understand and address the hiring and retention gap, employees were surveyed; the findings illustrated that many hiring managers did not feel prepared or equipped to recruit persons with disabilities, and that many human resources professionals were not confident in providing advice and guidance on the hiring of persons with disabilities. In response to the findings, new resources for managers are being developed to build and nurture accessible and inclusive teams. For example, a suite of learning events designed for specific communities, such as managers and human resources professionals, are being offered to support a culture change toward more inclusive and accessible employment practices. Further, a series of videos was created for National AccessAbility week in June 2020 featuring employees with disabilities from across the public service working in a wide range of roles.

The Government of Canada also launched a 5-year, $10 million Centralized Enabling Workplace Fund (2019–24). The fund helps departments and agencies develop new tools and guidance, improve existing processes, and experiment with innovative solutions that equip employees to contribute to their full potential. Some examples of recently completed or active projects include:

- conducting a comprehensive [benchmarking study](#) in 2019, comprising two government-wide online surveys through which existing challenges and opportunities to improve the current federal workplace accommodation process were documented based on feedback from federal employees with disabilities and managers
- substantiating the results of the benchmarking study through an in-depth literature review and comparative analysis of similar accommodation-related studies in Canada and abroad, summarized in a [validation of key findings report](#) in 2020
- piloting a new Workplace Accessibility Passport that will streamline the process for both employees and managers and will follow employees as they change jobs
- providing funding to support the creation of the Lending Library Service Pilot Project, a central point for commonly requested adaptive devices and technologies that can be loaned to students or term employees with temporary or short-term accommodation requirements

These initial steps create the foundation to help remove barriers in the recruitment, retention and promotion of persons with disabilities.

## Goal 2: Enhance the accessibility of the built environment

As identified in the Accessibility Strategy, employees with disabilities have reported challenges related to their workplaces, such as a lack of automatic door openers and poor signage and wayfinding. They have also indicated that the built environment is not designed in a way that accommodates invisible disabilities, such as environmental sensitivities, chronic pain, anxiety, and autism.

To enhance the accessibility of the built environment, technical accessibility assessments of federal buildings were undertaken, criteria were developed to complement current building codes, and a universal accessibility review and action

plan were developed for the Parliamentary Precinct (the buildings and grounds in and around Parliament Hill).

To support this work, Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) held a series of workshops with persons with a wide variety of disabilities to discuss and understand barriers in the workplace. Several pilot projects, consultations and initiatives with persons with disabilities have also taken place to ensure that the "nothing without us" principle is embedded in the assessment of the built environment. For example, a pilot to help individuals with visual impairments navigate indoors with autonomy, safety and security, as well as an assessment of federal buildings that recommended specific measures for increasing accessibility for individuals with visual, mobility and hearing impairments. A project to map buildings, which brought together persons with disabilities to rate building accessibility in real time, was also conducted in the National Capital Region. Finally, an initiative is currently underway to identify and address many short-term building accessibility improvements (for example, building entrances, circulation and navigation, elevators and escalators, parking and washrooms).

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions put in place, PSPC has seized the opportunity of reduced occupancy in workplaces to identify and implement new ways to improve the accessibility of the built environment, such as the use of touchless technologies, that not only remove barriers but also minimize the spread of viruses.

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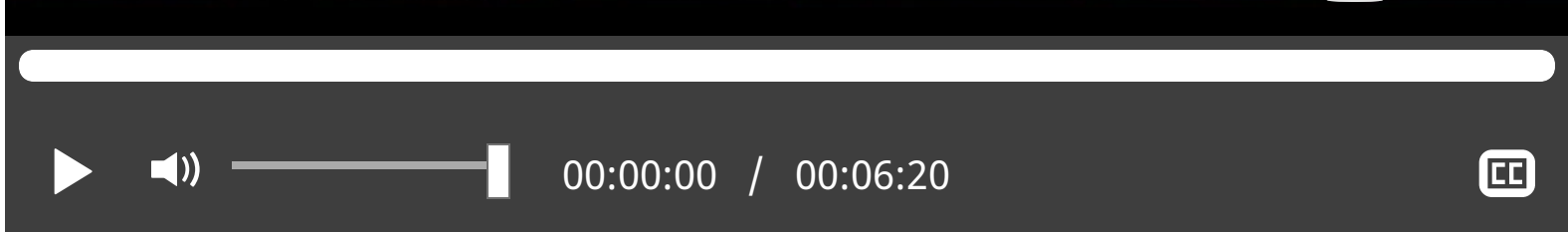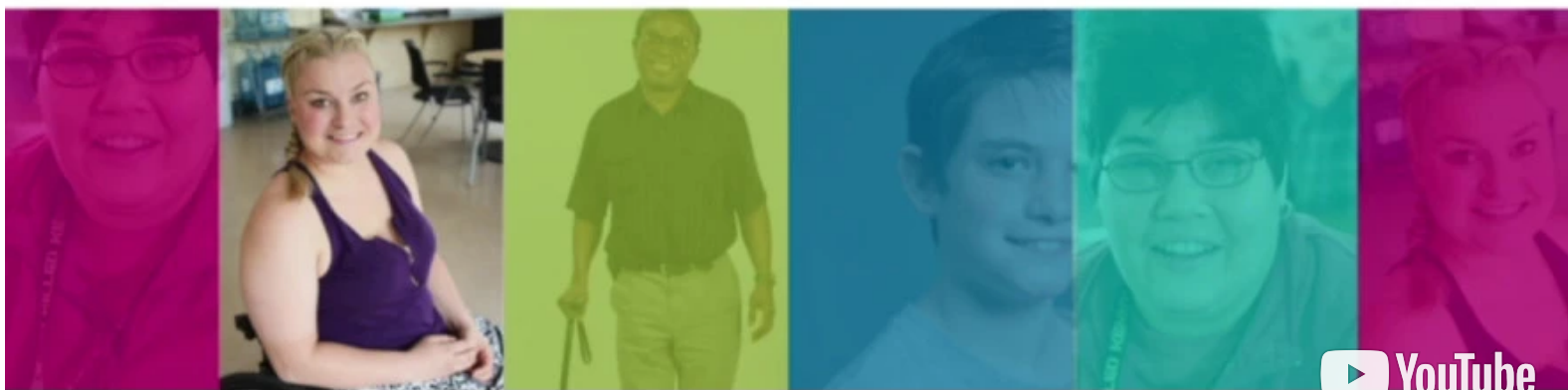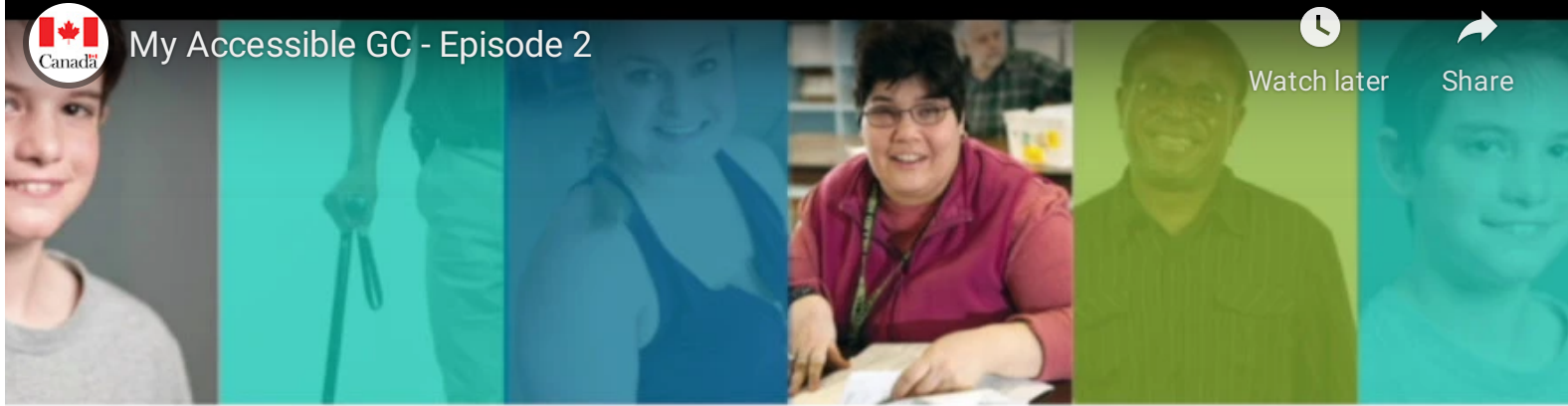
▶ My Accessible GC - Episode 2 - Descriptive transcript

Goal 3: Make information and communications technology usable by all

Technology is an important enabler of accessibility, but it can also act as a barrier if it is not implemented properly and if accessibility is not considered carefully. Even when accessibility features are available, they are often not enabled in software and hardware.

Technology was crucial in assuring that employees were able to work from home and have access to secure software for collaboration following building closures due to COVID-19. For example, Shared Services Canada accelerated the deployment of Microsoft Office 365, with its many accessibility features, to ensure that all departments and agencies had the tools they needed to work collaboratively. Shared Services Canada also hosts the flagship Accessibility, Accommodations and Adaptive Computer Technology Program, which received an additional investment of $13.7 million in Budget 2019 to provide information technology hardware and software and modifications for public servants with disabilities.

Policies and guidelines have also been updated to reflect a new reality. The new government-wide *Policy on Service and Digital* (2020) emphasizes the need to build accessibility in from the start and sets the stage for the adoption of a standard for the accessibility of information and communications technology. The *Guideline on Making Information Technology Usable by All* was launched in 2019 to encourage departments to apply the European standard when they are acquiring or developing information technology solutions and equipment to ensure that information technology is usable by all. The Government of Canada also established accessible procurement guidelines to integrate accessibility across the procurement process, which is supported by an Accessible Procurement Resource Centre to assist buyers to integrate accessibility criteria. The accessible procurement guidelines also support continuous learning opportunities for employees (for example, technical and contracting leads) to identify accessibility requirements, and work with suppliers to support the development of knowledge on accessibility.

Goal 4: Equip public servants to design and deliver accessible programs and services

As outlined in the Accessibility Strategy, in order to integrate accessibility and disability inclusion into their work, public servants need access to tools and training to better serve Canadians with disabilities.

The public service adapted rapidly to the barriers created by COVID-19, through flexible work arrangements and workplace accommodations to continue to serve in the best interest of Canadians. For example, Service Canada's network of 318 Service Canada Centres and 25 Passport Services centres were closed to clients in March 2020 out of concern for the health and safety of both clients and staff. Service Canada recognized the importance of in-person services for many vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities. As a result, Service Canada mobilized to create an innovative e-services model using online tools, a virtual toll-free call centre, engagement of community partners and, where necessary, socially distanced in-person appointments to provide service to those in need. What started as an emergency response has evolved into new service models that will shape Service Canada's operations into the future. Service Canada used this new model to collaborate with Canadian Hearing Services to host an information session in American Sign Language and in langue des signes québécoise to inform sign language interpreters and others working with the deaf community about the government's COVID-19 Economic Response Plan and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit.

Investments have been made to improve the accessibility of services for Canadians. For example, beacons to support clients with vision loss are now installed in seven large Service Canada Centres in sites across the country. Additional installations were postponed due to offices closing in March but will be completed as pandemic measures permit. Video Remote Interpretation is being rolled out in 145 Service Canada Centres to provide on-demand sign language interpretation. Those offices have also been outfitted with counter induction loops for those with hearing loss. When conditions permit, Service Canada's 2,800 Client Access Workstations will be reopened to the public with additional accessibility features (for example, accessible keyboards, text-to-speech narrator function).

Work also continues to improve the accessibility of online services for Canadians. At Employment and Social Development Canada, all new online content conforms to the new Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 (WCAG 2.1), reflecting industry standards.

Many departments and agencies have begun to look inward to assess and update their practices to improve the accessibility of service delivery for their own employees. Efforts include designing internal assessments, sharing best practices, and developing accessibility plans. In addition, guidance has been developed on [making communications accessible in the Government of Canada](#) , including information on the principles of design to create accessible web and social media content. As public servants are meeting virtually, guidance on planning inclusive and accessible events, and best practices for hosting accessible virtual meetings have also been developed.

Goal 5: Build an accessibility-confident public service

The Accessibility Strategy highlighted a need for greater awareness of accessibility and disability inclusion, as well as knowledge and competence on how to integrate such awareness into the work of the public service. To build this capacity among public service leaders and employees at all levels, there have been many new learning events, activities and products developed to build accessibility confidence among federal public servants.

For example, the Canada School of Public Service organized the [Spotlight on ACCESSibility Series](#) in 2020, which focused on improving accessibility in procurement, the built environment, communications, and services. Outreach and engagement events, including regional town halls in Montréal, Toronto, Halifax, Edmonton, Whitehorse, Regina, Moncton and Vancouver, have opened conversations on accessibility with federal employees. With the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person learning has transitioned to virtual events, and this new format has allowed a much larger reach across Canada. Three [virtual town halls on accessibility](#) were held in 2020, and they focused on the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, the accessibility of the built environment, and the implementation of the Accessibility Strategy. These interactive virtual discussions engaged over 4,000 public servants across Canada. Learning and culture change across the federal public service are also supported by [the Accessibility Hub](#) (accessible only on the Government of Canada network), which was launched in winter 2020, to serve as a one-stop shop

for accessibility information. The Accessibility Hub is a resource for federal public servants to find guidance, tools, tips, and best practices on accessibility and disability inclusion in the federal public service.

To track and measure progress in improving accessibility and disability inclusion, a new organizational self-assessment tool is currently under development, and is being tested with five departments and agencies. This tool will help departments and agencies understand the extent to which their organizational practices are accessible, and guide them to identify, remove and prevent barriers for persons with disabilities with respect to each of the five goals of the Accessibility Strategy.

Next steps

Progress on accessibility and disability inclusion is not just a matter of respecting fundamental human rights or of meeting the requirements of the *Accessible Canada Act*. There is compelling evidence that inclusive organizations are more efficient and productive. Building a federal public service that reflects the diversity of the Canadian population will allow us to meet the dynamic and changing needs of Canadians. As the public service moves in a more deliberate way to eliminate bias and systemic discrimination faced by equity-seeking groups, it is important to recognize that people with disabilities must contend not only with attitudinal barriers, but also with the very real physical and technological barriers that prevent their full participation.

In this first year of implementing the Accessibility Strategy, the public service has done important groundwork and has identified ways to remove many barriers, for example, by involving persons with disabilities in the design, development and testing of new programs, services and workspaces. There is considerable capacity and momentum across the federal public service to continue this work. Both the capacity and momentum need to keep growing. As the largest employer in Canada, and as the largest entity subject to the *Accessible Canada Act*, the federal public service can continue to lead by example. Each employee, whether they are an executive, a manager or a functional specialist, has a role in identifying, preventing and removing barriers.

Increasing diversity and inclusion across the public service is a top priority. Although a lot of work has been done, there is more work ahead to remove barriers encountered by employees with disabilities and by members of other equity-seeking groups. In the next year, we will continue to work toward removing barriers through

strengthening accessible communications, streamlining the workplace accommodations process, offering training for managers and functional communities to include disability and accessibility in their daily work, and supporting senior leaders in the recruitment, development and promotion of persons with disabilities. As the majority of public service employees are working remotely, the federal public service will also factor accessibility into discussions on the built environment when rethinking the post-COVID workplace, and will continue to develop tools and guidance to support employees.

Theconversation on accessibility has been changing over the last year. We are moving from the question of what has to be done to how to get it done. As this report shows, individuals and organizations across the federal public service are getting important work done. We are building a stronger instinct for accessibility, breaking down barriers and moving along a path to accessibility by default.

Through these actions, and as reflected in the [Deputy Minister's Commitments on Diversity and Inclusion](#), the federal public service will indeed lead by example and make measurable change on diversity, inclusion and accessibility in the year ahead.

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