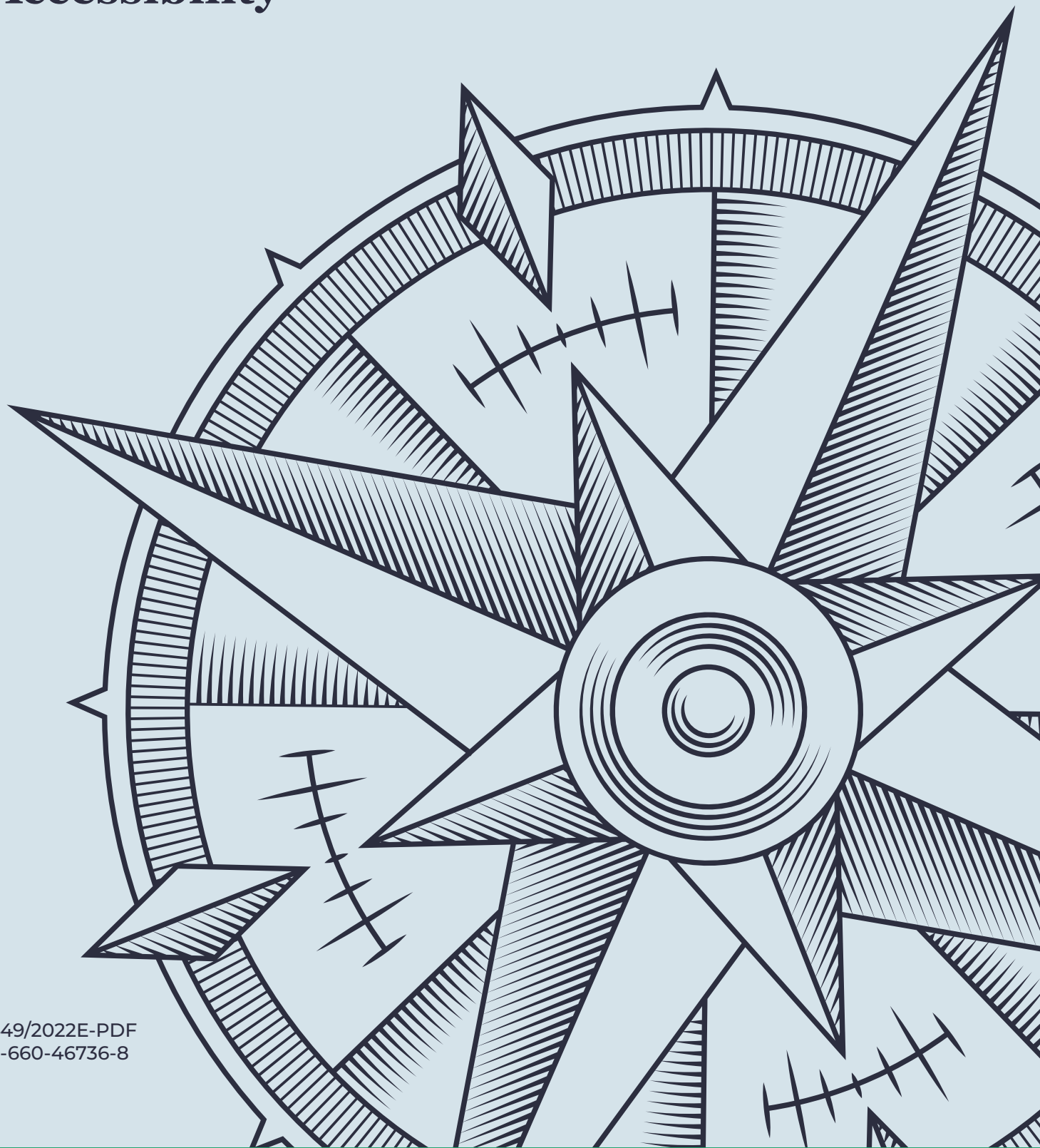


Consultation Results: Accessibility



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Consultation Results: Accessibility

Background

The [Accessible Canada Act](#) came into force in July 2019. The goal of the *Act* is to achieve a barrier-free Canada by 2040. As part of the *Act*, federally-regulated entities, including Veterans Affairs Canada¹ (VAC) and the Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB), must each develop and publish their first Accessibility Action Plan by December 2022.

The *Act*, together with the [Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada](#), upholds the “Nothing Without Us” principle. This means that persons with disabilities must be consulted when identifying barriers, and in planning for how to remove and prevent them.

This consultation was a key part of our commitment to improve accessibility at VAC and VRAB. We are identifying accessibility barriers, as well as actions to prevent and remove them, with input from the people affected by these barriers.

We asked

Between 17 November and 14 December 2021, we asked Veterans and other external stakeholders to share their thoughts on accessibility barriers at VAC and VRAB, and how these barriers might be prevented and removed. Participants were invited to respond on the [Let's Talk Veterans website](#), or else through mail or telephone.

The open-ended questions focused on:

- Physical and/or architectural barriers;
- Technological barriers;
- Information and communications barriers;
- Attitudinal barriers; and
- Systemic barriers.

The consultation was promoted through My VAC Account, email, the Salute! newsletter and social media to help us reach as many Veterans and stakeholders as possible.

You said

We are pleased to report that 209 people completed the consultation questionnaire. We received 174 submissions in English and 35 in French. All feedback received was shared with the appropriate areas of VAC and/or VRAB for consideration as part of planning to improve accessibility. With that said, please note that some of the feedback you provided goes beyond the scope of this work.

Physical and/or architectural barriers occur when buildings and facilities are not accessible or usable by all people.

¹ VAC's Accessibility Action Plan includes the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, as well as the Office of the Veterans Ombud.

145 consultation participants (69%) responded to the questions related to physical and/or architectural barriers at VAC and/or VRAB.

Respondents who visit and/or work in VAC and/or VRAB offices (whether departmental employees, Veterans, clients, or other members of the public) identified physical and/or architectural barriers including situations of, for example, uncomfortable seating, poor ramps, and inaccessible bathrooms and parking.

Additional barriers identified included office safety equipment (e.g., plexiglass in area offices) that has been installed to protect employees, but which may also have an aggravating effect on some clients or employees with disabilities, including those who have PTSD or a history of trauma.

Technological barriers occur when technology, or the way it is used, does not meet the needs of persons with disabilities.

151 consultation participants (72%) responded to the questions related to technological barriers at VAC and/or VRAB, including in regards to:

- presenting online materials and forms in larger and better contrasting typeface/font;
- making closed captioning available where possible; and
- adding voice-to-text features where possible.

Additional barriers were identified regarding client-facing forms, letters, and scanned documents which may not be fully accessible.

Information and communications barriers happen when persons with disabilities cannot easily receive and/or understand information that is accessible to others.

135 consultation participants (64%) responded to the questions related to information and communication barriers at VAC and/or VRAB.

Respondents stated that VAC's website should be made more user-friendly, using plain language, and designed for someone with no prior knowledge of VAC and medical insurance. For instance, participants noted that eligibility criteria needs to be explained in plain language for people with learning disabilities, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Some respondents indicated they have difficulty finding and understanding VAC's policies, procedures, and programs, as well as understanding and completing forms. Suggestions included:

- When referencing a policy, include a link to access the exact one needed; and
- Explaining the eligibility criteria in plain language.

Attitudinal barriers prevent persons with disabilities from achieving full integration, acceptance, and participation in society, and can include things such as the words we use, and the way we present information. These barriers can be based on stereotypes or assumptions, or simply a lack of understanding.

146 consultation participants (69%) responded to the questions related to attitudinal barriers at VAC and/or VRAB.

Respondents indicated that there is a need for employee training to have a better understanding of their clients who have suffered trauma, including those with PTSD. Participants also indicated that such training may also assist staff to better understand people who have a difficult time processing information quickly.

Systemic barriers are policies, practices or procedures that result in some people receiving unequal access or being excluded.

142 consultation participants (67%) responded to the questions related to systemic barriers at VAC and/or VRAB. The feedback received covered topics which, while important, go beyond the scope of VAC's and VRAB's work on accessibility. It has been noted and shared with other areas of responsibility within VAC and VRAB for their consideration.

We did / We will

We analyzed the feedback and experiences you shared, and developed the following recommendations for preventing and removing accessibility barriers at VAC and VRAB.

Among many other actions as part of VAC's and VRAB's respective Accessibility Action Plans, we will continue, or begin to:

- Consult persons with disabilities, and take action as appropriate, in response to physical and/or architectural barriers identified. In doing so, we will consider safety protocols, national building codes, and Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) standards. For instance, we will engage third party specialists to assess the impact of employee safety equipment on persons with disabilities and identify options that are more accessible. We will also raise any accessibility issues identified with respect to parking, seating, etc. with PSPC for their consideration.
- Perform accessibility assessments against the EN 301 549 Standard², and bring My VAC Account, as well as more VAC and VRAB forms, letters, scanned documents (e.g., PDFs), and public-facing applications into compliance with this standard, such that they are more accessible. For instance, an updated version of My VAC Account is being trialed, and offers a larger font size and more high-contrasting colours. The

² EN 301 549 is the European Union (EU) standard that pertains to digital accessibility. This standard mandates that all Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the public sector must be fully accessible.

updated version being trialed also offers a new secure messaging category to receive feedback from users to identify additional improvements in future.

- Publish videos on VAC's website and My VAC Account using a web player that automatically generates closed captioning to accompany the videos.
- Improve the accessibility of videos that explain the redress process, including through introducing closed captioning.
- Make efforts to increase accessibility at hearing locations.
- Provide support to third party groups who help Veterans going through the application process.
- Employ a Veteran-centric approach to complete assessments and interventions in an environment where the Veteran is most comfortable, including through in-person visits (when public health situation permits) or the use of various virtual platforms such as video conferencing or telephone.
- Make the application steps clear, concise, and easy to understand, including through providing better support material. VAC will achieve this through consulting stakeholders on how to improve the online application in My VAC Account, and reviewing applications and communications material to ensure they meet applicants' needs.
- Offer an e-learning module entitled "Trauma Informed Support Training." This training, launched in May 2021, is available to all employees and provides a basic overview of the principles of trauma informed service.
- Offer employee training on VAC's Style Guide, including on how to communicate using plain language.

Conclusion

VAC and VRAB will each publish their first Accessibility Action Plan by December 2022.

Furthermore, progress reports on VAC's Accessibility Action Plan, as well as VRAB's Accessibility Action Plan, will be developed every year starting in December 2023.

Keep an eye on the [VAC](#) and [VRAB](#) websites to stay informed and see how work on accessibility is unfolding!

Together, we are learning as a society and as an organization what it means to be accessibility-confident, and how we can be more accessible and inclusive by design. VAC and VRAB look forward to continuing this important work on the path to becoming barrier-free by 2040.

We wish to thank all those who participated. Your input is important to us and will help us in our work to make VAC and VRAB more accessible.