

# Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency

Accessibility Action Plan 2022



Atlantic Canada  
Opportunities  
Agency

Agence de  
promotion économique  
du Canada atlantique

Canada 



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## General

### Vision

To be the most accessible and inclusive public service in the world.

### Guiding principles

- Nothing without us: persons with disabilities are involved in the design and implementation of the strategy
- Collaboration: departments and agencies work in collaboration with each other, with bargaining agents, and with other public, private and not-for-profit organizations
- Sustainability: the strategy prioritizes actions that will have an enduring impact
- Transparency: the strategy is developed and implemented transparently, and departments and agencies will report openly and transparently on their efforts to remove barriers

### Goals

Six goals are key to realizing the vision:

1. employment
2. infrastructure
3. communication, other than ICT
4. the design and delivery of programs and services
5. the procurement of goods, services and facilities
6. transportation

## Summary

For too long, there have been barriers that block persons with disabilities from working and thriving in Canada's public service. The time is right for a culture change. We could build a better Canada by including the knowledge and expertise of persons with disabilities in all aspects of our work.

**The Government's Accessibility Strategy** sets out how we can identify, prevent and remove obstacles – physical, systemic and cultural – to the participation of persons with disabilities. This strategy aims to create an environment where persons with disabilities can flourish. When persons with disabilities can focus on their work and their service to Canadians, everyone benefits.

The goal from the outset has been simple but monumental: to make Canada's public service the most inclusive public service in the world.

During federal consultations, public servants with disabilities said that:

- they often do not feel a sense of belonging in their workplace;
- their essential accommodations are too often ignored, overlooked or dismissed;
- they face extensive barriers to securing a public service job;
- they experience harassment and discrimination at higher rates than other public servants;
- they have significantly lower chances for promotion; and
- they frequently feel disrespected or marginalized where their voices would be critically helpful.

The public service should mirror the people it serves. Canadians with disabilities should see themselves in the public service, as policy-makers, researchers, analysts, providers of services, spokespeople and leaders.

The *Accessible Canada Act*,<sup>1</sup> which received Royal Assent in July 2019, seeks to:

- *enforce the identification, removal and prevention of accessibility barriers for organizations under federal jurisdiction...*; and
- *ensure the full participation in society of persons with physical, mental, intellectual, learning, communication or sensory impairments.*

Roughly 6.2 million Canadians have a disability, and this number is expected to grow.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the need to identify, remove and prevent accessibility barriers in Canada has never been greater. These barriers include physical obstacles, such as buildings without access ramps, as well as non-physical barriers, such as employment practices and hiring processes that can hinder the full participation of Canadians with disabilities in their communities.

The *Accessible Canada Act* requires that each federal department prepare an action plan outlining how it will make itself more accessible to people with disabilities, to create the most accessible and inclusive public service in the world. At ACOA, the development of the Agency's *Accessibility Action Plan* was accomplished through a series of internal consultations to gather thoughts on the design and implementation of the plan. The resulting plan focuses on key deliverables to make the Agency more accessible in five broad areas: Employment; Infrastructure (i.e. built environment and technology); Client Services; and Communications. Each area (or objective) presents where the Government of Canada is currently at, where ACOA expects to be and how it will get there. As the Agency moves ahead with this plan, it will also develop a system to receive and respond to feedback from employees and clients, and will ensure that reporting on the action items in the plan is undertaken on a regular basis.

The Agency's goal, with this plan, is to create an accessible workplace where:

- employees with disabilities are representative of the workforce;
- all employees – those with disabilities and those without – can have fulfilling and thriving careers;

- accommodations are addressed in days, not weeks; and
- all employees are the focus of retention and promotion initiatives.

## **ACOA's duties under the act**

Under the *Act*, all regulated entities, such as ACOA, have the following duties:

**Accessibility plans** – An accessibility plan needs to be created in consultation with people with disabilities. The plan must outline the strategies for improving and meeting legal accessibility duties. These plans have to be published and updated every three years.

**Feedback tools** – There would need to be a system in place to receive and respond to feedback from employees or clients.

**Progress reports** – Reports outlining how accessibility plans are being fulfilled must be drafted in consultation with people with disabilities, and describe how they will address the main concerns of any feedback received.

## **Contact**

The person designated to receive feedback on behalf of ACOA is:

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## **Format**

[Contact us](#) to request alternate formats of this Plan such as large print, Braille, or audio.

## **Disability – what is it?**

### **Current status**

In Canada, roughly one in five adults lives with a disability<sup>3</sup> and faces one or more physical, social or economic barriers. These barriers can often keep them from being and/or feeling like equal members of society.

Many disabilities are not visible to the naked eye. We cannot see cognitive or learning disabilities, carpal tunnel syndrome, long-term effects from a concussion, or mental health issues.

Changing attitudes and removing barriers gives people with disabilities more job opportunities and the chance to thrive in the workplace.

## Glossary

**Disability** is a complex, evolving matter. The term covers a broad range and degree of conditions. A disability may have been present at birth, caused by an accident, or developed over time. It may be physical, mental, psychiatric, social or economic. Here are some disability sub-categorizations:

1. Any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness.
2. A short-term physical impairment caused by an accident, such as a broken arm or a concussion.
3. A condition of mental impairment or a developmental or learning disability (e.g. ADHD, autism)
4. A mental health condition, whether short-term, episodic or chronic, such as depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder.

**Accessibility** means that people with and without disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate and interact with information, services and applications. The adoption of accessibility standards, guidelines and best practices ensures that systemic barriers are eliminated prior to individual accommodations.

**Accommodation** is a necessary measure taken to allow an employee to work to the best of their ability.

**Barriers** may be attitudinal, environmental or institutional. They may even be internalized.

## ACOA's action plan

The section that follows provides an overview of how ACOA plans to address the Government of Canada's Accessibility Strategy and its goals, and where the Agency expects to be vis-à-vis these goals in 2023.

The goals mentioned in the Government of Canada's Accessibility Strategy are presented as six key objectives for ACOA – as built environment and technology have been combined into its second objective, Infrastructure.

### Objective 1 – Employment

## **Where government is as a whole**

Statistics Canada's 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability found that 15.6% of the Canadian workforce (aged 25 to 64) consists of persons with a disability. However, in the 2017-2018 fiscal year, only 5.3% of public servants self-identified as a person with a disability.

## **Where ACOA expects to be in 2023**

- Employees with disabilities should notice an improvement to the adjustment process.
- Promotion rates for persons with disabilities will be increased, and separation rates will be decreased.
- Existing recruitment and development programs will have fully integrated accessibility.
- Employees with disabilities will report greater satisfaction at work.

## **How ACOA will get there**

1. Advertise employment opportunities in an accessible format, particularly important on private sites (versus jobs.gc.ca). Look at our application process online (i.e. have community stakeholders look at it) and ensure it is not a barrier to people with disabilities.
2. Stakeholder organizations should be consulted as a resource when hiring.
3. Review existing development programs to ensure that persons with disabilities are represented and supported at each stage, from entry to exit.
4. Close the representation gaps for people with disabilities.
5. People who can't physically work in an office should be able to work from home.
6. Develop tools and training for supervisors to enable them to create inclusive teams.

## **Objective 2 – Infrastructure**

### **2.1 The built environment**

#### **Where government is as a whole**

Persons with disabilities report challenges in the workplace such as a lack of automatic door openers and poor signage and wayfinding. In the first survey on the development of the federal strategy, respondents noted that physical workspaces do not account for invisible disabilities such as environmental sensitivities, chronic pain, anxiety and autism.

#### **Where ACOA expects to be in 2023**

- Employees with disabilities are engaged in making their workplace more accessible (code is often insufficient to meet needs).



- Starting in 2023, all new building designs are accessible and incorporate the feedback of persons with disabilities. Starting in 2023, all new builds or retrofits are accessible and incorporate the feedback of persons with disabilities.

### **How ACOA will get there**

1. Develop a Disabilities Considerations Checklist of 5-10 items to make the physical workspace more accessible for all: signage (incl. pictograms); create calm workspace; recirculate air through proper filters, esp. in 2.0 office space; automatic push buttons for all access doors.
2. Ensure events and meetings are accessible to all employees, and where applicable, the public
3. Evacuation plans should include how to evacuate an employee/visitor with a disability. Regular practices, with person with disability in different locations.
4. Create “calm” space to work – low traffic, low-level lights, little sound, soothing paint colours. There is a need calm and consistency.
5. Universal design for new buildings – create accessible spaces.

## **2.2 Information and communication technology (ICT)**

### **Where government is as a whole**

The current Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat *Standard on Web Accessibility* does not ensure that all ICT products and services are accessible: it only covers public-facing websites. It does not cover other aspects, including digital content. It is not intended as a complete accessible information and communications technology standard.

### **Where ACOA expects to be in 2023**

- Develop an information technology accessibility strategy that focuses on:
  - education, outreach and communications
  - accessibility governance and accountability
  - accessible procurement
  - compliance and assessment
  - accessibility standards and guidelines
  - enhancing service delivery to employees with disabilities.
- All major new systems, both internal and external, launched as of 2022 are accessible.

### **How ACOA will get there**

1. Need dedicated person in Agency who is familiar with the Accessibility, Accommodation and Adaptive Computer Technology (AAACT). Educate managers and employees about Shared Services Canada’s AACT services and availability.
2. Make sure all platforms are accessible to users.
3. Adopt the GC Workplace Accessibility Passport.

4. Measure and reduce wait times for workplace accommodations.
5. ACCESSIBILITY:
  - a. Provide resources (e.g. training) for employees so they can generate accessible documents with common tools (e.g. Word, PowerPoint);
  - b. enable accessibility features on all devices/software;
  - c. ensure contracts with suppliers require that documents meet accessibility requirements.

### **Objective 3 – Client services**

#### **Where government is as a whole**

The consultations that led to the proposed *Accessible Canada Act* found that:

- many persons with disabilities report that they do not receive equal quality of service;
- there are numerous barriers to communication, such as documents in formats that are not accessible; and
- persons with disabilities would like more opportunities to report service issues and suggest improvements.

#### **Where ACOA expects to be in 2023**

- Establish consultation and feedback processes for clients with disabilities as well as transparent mechanisms to address concerns raised by clients with disabilities.
- Proposals for new programs will document that they have integrated accessibility into their design.
- Website and intranet meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 (2018) (e.g. contrast between colours in bar graphs; no split/merged cells in tables)

#### **How ACOA will get there**

1. Ensure documents are accessible to all clients. Ensure all concerned are aware of this.
2. Videos – should have sign language, cc, sub-titles and/or descriptive video.
3. Develop data on client satisfaction from the perspective of persons with disabilities.
4. Pilot engagement and feedback processes from clients with disabilities.

### **Objective 4 – Communications, other than ICT**

#### **Where ACOA expects to be in 2023**

- All web pages and documents will be fully accessible.

- The AACT workshops on accessible documents will be promoted through the events calendar and on Rendezvous.
- Both the website and intranet meet current Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and plain language standards.
- Promote National AccessAbility Week, which starts on the last Sunday in May each year, organizing relevant activities for employees.

### **How ACOA will get there**

1. Implement a communications strategy, including an online presence, to raise awareness and promote a culture change around accessibility in the department. This includes promoting AACT workshops on creating accessible documents.
2. Following the launch of the 2021 redesign of the website, ensure content uses plain language and is easy to read and understand.
3. Redesign Rendezvous so that the format and new content, including photos, are accessible. Redesign will respect WCAG guidelines.
4. Make all templates accessible by the end of fiscal 2022-2023.
5. Promote communications around “International Day of Persons With Disabilities” (December 3), in conjunction with HR.

### **Objective 5 – Procurement of goods, services and facilities**

ACOA has nothing to report on this objective at this time.

### **Objective 6 – Transportation**

ACOA has nothing to report on this objective.

## **Other considerations**

### **ACOA’s culture**

Accessibility is not generally integrated into the everyday business of the public service. It is often treated as an afterthought. Although there are some accessibility initiatives across departments and across functions, these are often siloed. There is no governance to link initiatives together strategically, and there are few mechanisms for departments and employees to share best practices. In consultation for developing the federal strategy, respondents noted a need for a centre of expertise on accessibility.

### **Consultations**

The accessibility lead and accessibility coordinator put together an Accessibility Advisory Committee consisting of employees who were disabled, who had a family member who was disabled, or who had a particular interest in making the workplace

more accessible. The committee came together following a callout sent via email by the Champion of Inclusion, Diversity and Anti-Racism.

The final Working Group on Accessibility consisted of 13 employees, along with the accessibility lead and coordinator.

The working group was consulted on a regular basis, through virtual meetings, between June and November 2020, throughout the development of the action plan. Members' input was essential in developing the goals listed under "How ACOA will get there" for each objective. Brainstorming sessions were held to come up with tasks that could be included in the plan. These were then voted on to determine which should be prioritized and included in this first action plan.

Certain people on the Working Group are responsible for managing the tasks under each objective, ensuring that they are progressing toward completion.

Moving forward, it is the Agency's plan to hold consultations with organizations representing persons with disabilities as well as with clients with disabilities.

## **Collaboration**

Many of the issues identified here regarding accessibility – such as developing and maintaining a vibrant network of employees with disabilities – are also issues for the Employment Equity (EE) and Diversity Committee. It is suggested that the Accessibility Working Group and the EE and Diversity Committee join forces to work together to identify and address those issues that they have in common, rather than duplicating efforts.

## **Training**

AAACT workshops will be promoted regularly through ACOA's events calendar and via articles on the Rendezvous site – the Agency's intranet.

The accessibility lead and coordinator are working closely with the Office of Inclusion, Equity, and Anti-Racism to develop a learning series with outside consultants, with an emphasis on people with disabilities. This series will focus on increasing awareness regarding people with disabilities at every level of the Agency with a primary focus on hiring, retaining and promoting those who have self-identified as having a disability while ensuring a more inclusive work environment.

## **Feedback**

The [Accessible Canada Act](#) clearly indicates that the Agency has a duty to develop and implement a system to receive, and respond to, feedback from employees and clients on any issues relating to accessibility, or a lack thereof. As such, the Agency has developed a [secure online tool](#) that any ACOA employee or client can use to report any

barrier(s) to accessibility and/or suggestions for improvement. All information reported will be kept confidential.

### **National AccessAbility Week**

National AccessAbility Week is an annual event to celebrate the contributions of people with disabilities. It also promotes inclusion and accessibility in communities and workplaces across Canada. The Act states that National AccessAbility Week will be celebrated each year starting on the last Sunday in May.

### **Footnotes**

- 1**     <https://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/A-0.6/page-1.html>
  
- 2**     Morris et al. (2018). *A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017*. Report prepared on the Canadian Survey on Disability. Statistics Canada. p.4.
  
- 3**     <https://www.canada.ca/en/shared-services/corpoate/publications/accessible-workspace.html>