Veterans Review and Appeal Board's Accessibility Action Plan

2022-2025

VRAB-TACRA.GC.CA

Veterans Review and
Appeal Board Canada

Tribunal des anciens combattants
(révision et appel) Canada

Canada

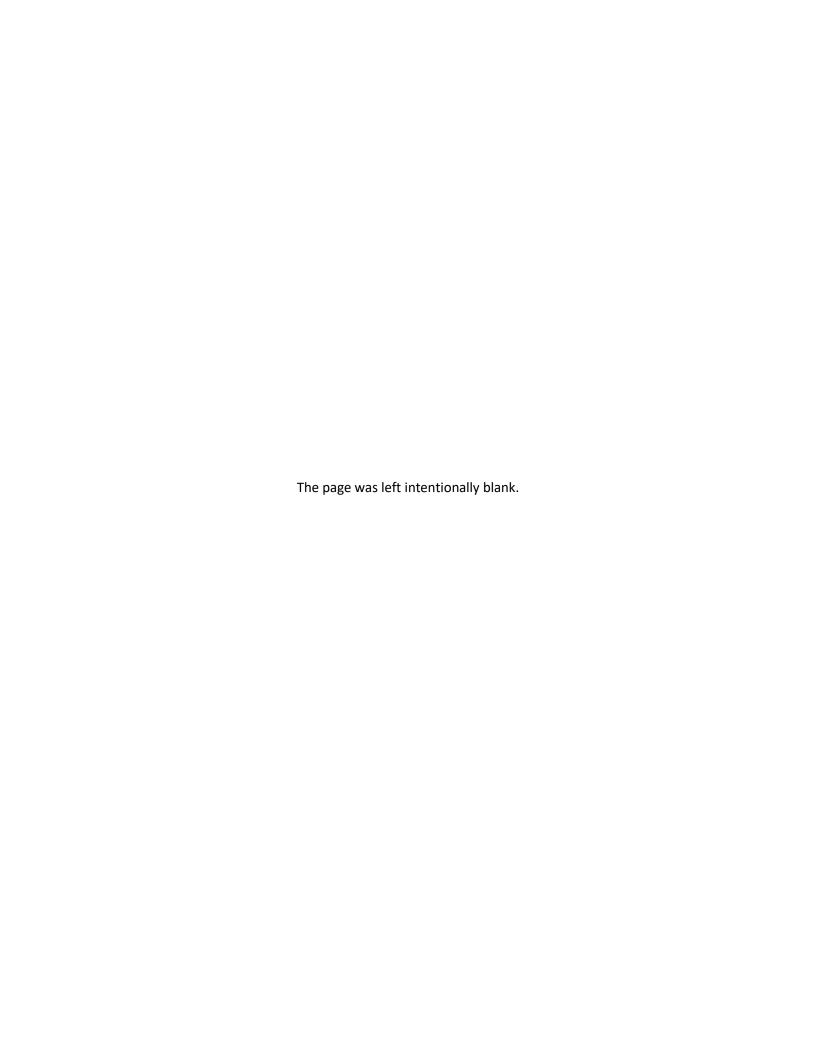Veterans Review and Appeal Board Accessibility Plan

This document is available on the Veterans Review and Appeal Board website at https://www.vrab-tacra.gc.ca

This document is available in alternative formats upon request

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1. General

1.1 Introduction message

The Veterans Review and Appeal Board (VRAB, the Board) is an independent tribunal that provides an appeal process for Veterans and their families who are dissatisfied with their disability benefit decisions they have received from Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC). As the needs of Veterans and their families evolve, the Board must continuously adapt what we do and how we do it by implementing new and improved processes that better support those we serve, and consider their diverse needs.

For too long, barriers have prevented persons with disabilities from having equal access to justice and from working and thriving in Canada's public service. When the *Accessible Canada Act* was passed in June of 2019, the government of Canada demonstrated its commitment to having a barrier-free Canada by the beginning of 2040. Achieving this goal will involve identifying, removing and preventing barriers within federal jurisdiction in the following seven areas:

1. Employment, organizational culture
2. The built environment (public buildings and spaces)
3. Information and communication technologies
4. Communication, other than information and communication technologies
5. The procurement of goods, services and facilities
6. The designs and delivery of programs and services, and
7. Transportation (airlines, as well as rail, road and marine transportation providers that cross provincial or international borders)

The *Act* requires Federal organizations, including VRAB, to develop and publish Accessibility Plans to recognize and aid accessibility barriers in their policies, programs, practices and services.

It should be noted that, while VRAB is responsible for publishing and maintaining its own Accessibility Action Plan, the Board has a long-standing service relationship with Veterans Affairs Canada for internal services under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This MOU outlines the agreement between the two connected government bodies, on shared resources. The agreement supports the Board's operations and creates efficiencies through the provision of internal services, by VAC to the Board. As a result, the Board will benefit directly from VAC's efforts to improve accessibility in many of the corporate pillars. Some of the services the Board receives from VAC under the established MOU are outlined below.

- Human Resources Management
- Information Technology
- Procurement
- Finance

VRAB is grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in consultations carried out by VAC's Accessibility Network, where employees with disabilities expressed their views and concerns. An

additional initiative, titled *Let's Talk Veterans*, allowed VAC and the Board to hear from Veterans and other stakeholders on specific accessibility barriers and potential pathways to removing these barriers.

This Accessibility Action Plan will address accessibility, both in terms of those the Board serves through its redress program for disability benefits decisions, and the Board's responsibility as a public service employer.

Through this Plan, we aim to create an environment where persons with disabilities can fully participate and contribute, whether coming to the Board for decisions, or as personnel of the Board. We will do this by identifying, preventing and removing physical, systemic and cultural obstacles, to the greatest extent possible; so that Veterans and their family members can fully participate in their hearings, and employees or Members with disabilities can be better supported in their work, resulting in enhanced service to Canadians.

Throughout this Plan, we will analyze each of the seven priority areas noted above, outline the barrier(s) identified and the specific actions to address the barrier(s), as well as the timelines, roles and responsibilities for each of the actions. Lastly, we will outline a means of determining and tracking the intended outcome(s).

1.2 Process for receiving and dealing with accessibility-related feedback

The *Accessible Canada Act* ("*AC Act*") and the *Accessible Canada Regulations* ("*Regulations*") require all Federally regulated bodies, including VRAB, to establish a process for receiving and actioning accessibility-related feedback. Feedback might comment on:
• the implementation of this Plan;
• accessibility barriers at VRAB;
• preventing or removing such barriers;
• accessibility best practices; and/or
• success stories related to accessibility at VRAB.

Accessibility barriers include: physical and/or architectural; technological; related to information and communications; attitudinal; and systemic.

VRAB can receive feedback or suggestions related to accessibility submitted in any of the following ways.

By mail to:

Director General, Veterans Review and Appeal Board
P.O. Box 9900
Charlottetown PE, C1A 8V7

By email at: VRABAccessibility-AccessibilitéTACRA@vrab-tacra.gc.ca

By phone or fax, as follows:

Toll free for Canada and the U.S.: 1-800-450-8006
From all other locations, call collect 0-902-566-8751
Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD): 1-833-998-2060
Fax: 1-855-850-4644

Please note that all feedback will be acknowledged in the same manner it was received, unless it was provided anonymously.

Alternate Formats

Please note that requests can be made, through the above contact information, for the following documents in alternative formats:

- VRAB's Accessibility Action Plan
- VRAB's description of its accessibility-related feedback process
- Annual progress reports on the implementation of VBAB's Accessibility Action Plan and how feedback will be taken into consideration.

Alternate formats include:

- Print
- Large print (increased front size and clarity)
- Braille (a system of raised dots that individuals who are blind or who have low vision can read with their fingers).
- Audio recording (a recording of someone reading the text out loud)
- Electronic (an electronic format that is compatible with adaptive technology that is intended to assist persons with disabilities).

1.3 Message from the Chair

I am proud to share with you the Veterans Review and Appeal Board's first Accessibility Action Plan.

As an organization, we are committed to serving Veterans to enable them to obtain the benefits to which they are entitled for service-related disabilities. We want to ensure that everyone coming before the Board can fully participate in the redress process and that personnel are fully supported in their work, regardless of their accessibility needs.

The 2022-2025 Accessibility Action Plan is our roadmap as we move forward in identifying barriers and determining how to remove and prevent them. It also outlines how we will ensure that VRAB is a workplace that is barrier-free and inclusive for all.

We are grateful for the unique perspectives and meaningful discussions that went into the creation of this plan, and we thank those that contributed throughout the development of the Plan.

We will continue to grow our knowledge and understanding in this area so that we can continuously advance our service to Veterans and their families and be a supportive and inclusive workplace.

The Board shares the vision of the Government of Canada concerning accessibility and is committed to taking steps towards greater inclusion for all, now and in the future.

Thank you,

Chris McNeil,
Chairperson

1.4 Accessibility Statement

The Veterans Review and Appeal Board is committed to providing inclusive and accessible service through the following fundamental principles:
- Everyone is treated with dignity.
- Everyone must be able to participate fully and equally.
- Laws, regulations, policies, programs, services, and structures must take into account the ways that different kinds of barriers and discrimination intersect, and
- Persons with disabilities must be involved in developing and designing laws, policies, programs and services.

The Board will update this Plan every three years or as specified by regulations, and will prepare and publish annual progress reports. This process will include feedback to the Board and any relevant information obtained through consultation with persons with disabilities, as is available. The Board's goal is to ensure that all Veterans can fully participate in the redress process and to provide a barrier-free, inclusive workplace for all personnel.

2. Areas described under section 5 of the *Accessible Canada Act*

2.1 Employment

Desired outcomes

- Job seekers with disabilities see the Board as a workplace of choice.
- Job seekers and public servants with disabilities have access to employment opportunities at the Board and can contribute to their full potential.

Tracking

Progress toward these outcomes, including improved recruitment, retention and promotion of persons with disabilities, will be measured by referencing data sources such as, the Public Service Employee Survey and VRAB's Workforce Statistics.

2.1.1 Barriers, inclusive hiring

- Persons with disabilities may be under-represented in VRAB's hiring, acting appointments, and promotions. This could be due to one or more of the following factors:
    - persons with disabilities having difficulties with, and higher drop-off rates in, selection processes (as compared to persons without disabilities)

- lack of skill development opportunities for persons with disabilities, including language training, to support career growth and development
- persons with disabilities not self-identifying
- VRAB not being perceived as an accessible and inclusive workplace

Actions

- Leverage VAC's expanding tools for more accessible and inclusive hiring with the goal of closing the representation gaps for people with disabilities:
  - Implement an "Attestation of Impartiality and Diversity Form", where selection board members can document that they belong to equity seeking communities.
  - Where appropriate, work with VAC to leverage the planned repository of names of qualified equity-seeking community members who are interested in participating in assessment boards.
  - Incorporate an "Articulation of Selection Decision Form" that highlights key employment equity considerations in the selection of candidates.
  - Work with VAC to access their planned Accommodation Assessment Ambassadors (among staffing advisors), to support hiring managers in offering timely and appropriate accommodation measures during staffing processes.
- Tailor initiatives to support recruitment and career development of persons with disabilities:
  - Coordinate sessions for VRAB Directors and Managers to promote diverse and inclusive staffing practices, including the demystifying of common misunderstandings associated with the recruitment of persons with disabilities.
  - Continue to consider opportunities for additional hiring through programs such as the Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities.
- Promote VRAB as an inclusive workplace for employees with disabilities:
  - Undertake a review of language used in recruitment communications to ensure it is welcoming, accessible, and inclusive.
  - Offer opportunities for VRAB personnel to participate in VAC-led learning series on "How to Apply on a Process" for all employees, including a session tailored to persons with disabilities.
  - Undertake a review of onboarding to ensure they include links to accessibility-related supports, and how to obtain them.

Completion by: December 2023

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.1.2 Barriers, obtaining accommodations, tools, and resources for persons with disabilities

- The process for employees to obtain accommodations or tools and resources needed at work is complex. This also impacts managers, who do not feel equipped to recruit, develop and support persons with disabilities.

Actions

- Work with VAC to implement a Duty to Accommodate (DTA) checklist for managers that includes links to resources, policies, practices and guidelines.
- Work with VAC to leverage their planned FAQs to demystify the Duty to Accommodate process for employees and managers, offering tips on what is necessary for efficient approvals of DTA requests, and how/where to seek support to prepare for the conversations.
- Create a process to ask employees about their accommodation and equipment needs.
- Explore the implementation of the GC Workplace Accessibility Passport, and limit accommodations-related document requests when documents may not be required (or requirements can be minimized).
- Continue to leverage resources such as Accommodation and Adaptive Computer Technology (AAACT).

Completion by: March 2024

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.1.3   Barrier, managerial considerations

- Managers may not consider operational requirements and related accessibility barriers when hiring persons with disabilities.

Actions

- Work with VAC to establish a process to ensure managers consider operational requirements and related accessibility barriers when hiring persons with disabilities, including through education and awareness.
- Provide hiring managers with a list of third-party software and indicate whether the software is accessible. Provide alternatives as available.

Completion by: March 2024

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.2 The built environment

Desired outcome

For VRAB's head office location and Hearing spaces across the country to be fully accessible.

Tracking

Progress towards this goal will be measured by referencing several data sources such as:

- the Public Service Employee Survey,
- VRAB personnel surveys,
- Personnel and client feedback mechanisms,
- collaborations with partners such as the Bureau of Pensions Advocates and the Royal Canadian Legion,
- periodic reviews of Hearing locations (VAC offices, Government of Canada boardrooms, or other sites such as hotels) via checklists identifying common barriers, and
- the review Hearing exit survey that is designed to capture direct feedback from clients, following their Hearing with the Board.

2.2.1   Barriers, maintaining and enhancing accessibility standards

- Respondents of the *Let's Talk Veterans* consultations expressed concerns regarding the built environment where Veteran hearings are held:
  - poor ramps;
  - difficulty moving in a wheelchair or scooter;
  - inaccessible parking, lack of parking nearby;
  - need for more easily visible eye-level signage
  - lack of elevators, elevators not functioning
  - no street-level entry
  - a feeling of sitting too close to the panel ("being interrogated")
  - Seating issues. These seating issues included seating arrangements where you cannot sit facing the door (important for someone with PTSD or other trauma).
- Veterans Affairs Portfolio (which includes VRAB) employees with disabilities have also identified physical and/or architectural barriers, including uncomfortable seating and inaccessible parking. Workspaces do not always include specialized ergonomic equipment.
- VRAB also reviewed the report prepared following the consultation series on Accessibility regarding the Government of Canada workplace model. This series identified several barriers in the built environment (traditional office design). These barriers included:
  - a lack of accessible washrooms;
  - meeting rooms without sufficient space for wheelchairs or walkers;
  - overly crowded kitchen areas,
  - work points that offered no relief from noise or bright light.
  - accessibility in shared spaces.

Actions

- VRAB will continue to make efforts towards maintaining and enhancing the accessibility within its head office location, via physical and technological improvements.
  - Note: VRAB's head office location has been built according to the Government of Canada Workplace model, based on inclusive design principles which resolve or mitigate many of the barriers that existed in previous, traditional office designs. The Board's location design considers a wide-range of physical accessibility and ergonomic needs, as well as neurodiversity.

- VRAB will continue to make efforts towards greater accessibility with respect to hearing locations in all other areas across Canada.

Completion by: Ongoing

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Senior Management Team

2.3 Information and Communication Technology

Desired outcome

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) used by VRAB will be easily utilized by all, including persons with disabilities.

Tracking

VRAB will track progress as laid out by the Government of Canada's current accessibility rating tools. The Board will also use available resources, such as the VAC Assistant Deputy Minister (AMD's) accessibility progress tool, which is a spreadsheet used to monitor progressions and track the Board's progress on ICT accessibility.

2.3.1   Barrier, outdated technologies

The *Let's Talk Veterans* consultations did not identify any barriers specific to VRAB; however, VAC's Client Service Delivery Network (CSDN) is a shared Client Relations Management (CRM) software with VRAB. This client data repository and processing system was built on now-outdated technology and cannot meet accessibility standards.

Action

CSDN functionality is being improved and transitioned into a more modern CRM system, called GCcase.

2.3.2   Barrier, web-based applications

Some web-based apps are not fully accessible. For example, My VAC Account (VAC's online service platform, which the Board also leverages) is not fully compliant with the European Standard (EN 301 549). The EN 301 549 Standard is the European standard of accessibility requirements in digital tools used to direct the European Union's decision-making in lifting accessibility barriers, which is quickly becoming a recognized global standard in ICT Accessibility.

Action

Newly implemented digital products get assessed against the EN 301 549 Standard. The Board will continue to ensure that all new software meet this accessibility standard before implementation. Existing digital products will get assessed against the EN 301 549 standard in the following order of priority:

1. public-facing products
2. internal products with a known and immediate need for accessibility adjustments
3. internal products of the highest use
4. remaining internal products from newest to oldest

Completion by: Ongoing. VRAB to participate on planned VAC initiatives to further modernize systems.

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.4 IT Operations and Security

Desired outcome

VRAB Information Technology (IT) and Security systems are fully accessible.

Tracking

VRAB will work with VAC and Shared Services Canada (SSC) IT professionals, toward enhanced accessibility of the Board's IT and Security Systems. Once discussions are held regarding the scope of the work, a more concrete tracking system can be identified.

2.4.1   Barriers, software

Some of VAC's (and thus the Board's) internal legacy desktop software, or software provided by third party vendors, is not fully accessible. The following software, used by VRAB employees, is not fully accessible:

- Microsoft 365
- GCDocs
- Assyst Web
- Genie Plus Library System, Master Subject Records Listing (MSRL)
- Iron Mountain Connect
- Foxit

Note: VRAB is dependent on VAC IT, Shared Services Canada (SSC) and/or third parties to make the necessary changes to improve accessibility.

Actions

- VRAB to collaborate with VAC IT Operations on any planned accessibility audits to identify fixes on internal desktop software; and take action where needed and possible, to upgrade or replace.

Completion by: Ongoing

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.4.2 Barriers, operating systems and mobile devices

- Some accessibility features of VAC's (and thus VRAB's) operating system and mobile devices are unavailable due to compatibility and security concerns.
- Although Window's operating systems and mobile devices have built-in accessibility features that can be turned on by the user, any items that require deactivation by VRAB or VAC IT administrators would require an alternate installation process or tools that meet the specific user requirements.

Action

Participate, where relevant, in any evaluation (by VAC and/or SSC) of additional accessibility features of VAC's operating system and mobile devices, that can be enabled safely.

Completion by: Ongoing

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.4.3 Barrier, purchasing processes for new software

The current purchasing process for new software and hardware does not include a standard accessibility evaluation.

Action

Develop a standard accessibility evaluation for the Board, with the assistance of VAC IT and Shared Services Canada. Incorporate this evaluation into the purchasing process for new software and hardware.

Completion by: March 2024

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.4.4 Barrier, technical training on accessibility features

There is currently no technical training provided regarding the accessibility features on VAC (and VRAB's) systems, applications, and devices.

Action

Work with VAC to leverage any planned technical training for VRAB personnel (where appropriate) on accessibility features of relevant systems, applications, and devices.

Completion by: Ongoing

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.4.5 Barrier, the promotion of accessibility enhancements

Accessibility enhancements (to systems, applications, and devices) are not communicated or promoted to VRAB personnel.

Action

Work with VAC, and VRAB's Communications team to identify, communicate, and promote accessibility enhancements to systems, applications, and devices, where appropriate.

Completion by: Ongoing

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.4.6 Barrier, in-home support

For numerous reasons, such as: capacity, location, and health and safety risks, providing in-home support for tasks such as equipment set-up has not been possible.

Action

VRAB will identify options to provide in-home setup of IT equipment for people with disabilities.

Completion by: December 2023

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.4.7   Barrier, accessibility requirements for new personnel

Hiring Managers do not have built-in accessibility requirements for personnel when joining Veterans Affairs Canada or the Veterans Review and Appeal Board.

Actions
- Work in coordination with VAC to provide VRAB hiring managers with a list of third-party software and indicate whether the software is accessible. Provide alternatives where the software is not accessible.
- Create a process to gather equipment needs prior to employee onboarding and explore the use of the government of Canada Accommodations Passport to minimize repeated requests for documentation from candidates and personnel.
- Work in coordination with VAC to ensure limitations that impact work performance from an accessibility perspective are noted and built into the hiring process.

Completion by: Completion by March 2024

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.5 Communications, other than ICT

Desired outcome

VRAB Access to Information Management procedures, requests, and internal software are accessible for all users and requestors.

Tracking

Once discussions are held with VAC IT and Shared Services Canada regarding the scope of the work, a more concrete tracking system can be identified.

2.5.1   Barrier, ATIP software

The software used by VRAB ATIP -- VAC's Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP) Request Processing Software, AccessPro Case Management (APCM) -- has accessibility issues for users. Also, the response packages provided to requestors do not meet Canadian accessibility standards.

Action

VRAB will work with VAC implement new processing software that is accessible for employees using the software, and provide accessible response packages to requestors. VRAB will be following the guidance

of VAC when it comes to the replacement and implementation of ATIP processing software, and will align with them on the software solution to ensure a consistency with application support.

Completion by: To be confirmed, based on the steps outlined below

Roles and Responsibilities:

- Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) to procure contract for new processing software
- VAC Privacy and Information Management (PIM) to secure funds to purchase software
- VAC PIM and Procurement to work with TBS to procure new processing software
- VRAB IT, IM and ATIP will work together with VAC Information Technology (IT) to test the software in collaboration with VAC PIM
- VAC will collaborate with VRAB on implementation and licensing

2.5.2   Barrier, written communications

VRAB's written communications with ATIP requestors through email and/or letters is not fully accessible.

Action

VRAB ATIP, IT and Communications Teams will work with VAC, as appropriate, to implement updates to email and letter templates, where relevant.

Completion by: to be confirmed

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.5.3   Barrier, websites hosted by TBS

The following websites used by VRAB, hosted by Treasury Board Services (TBS) are not fully accessible:

- The ATIP Online Request Service.
- The Open Government website.

Action

Participate in TBS led discussions on recommendations to improve accessibility for these websites as requested.

Completion by: Ongoing

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.6 Communication (other than information and communication technologies)

Desired outcomes

All forms and templates utilized by the Board are accessible.

All published web content and communications products are accessible.

VRAB personnel are provided with what they need to design and deliver communications and events that are accessible to all.

VRAB personnel with disabilities are satisfied with the accessibility of Board communications.

Tracking

Progress toward these outcomes will be measured by referencing data sources such as:
- evaluations and feedback from VRAB events
- relevant client and/or personnel surveys
- feedback from persons with disabilities, such as members of VAC's Accessibility Network
- participation, where possible, in any planned consultation with Veterans and other external stakeholders
- other employee feedback

2.6.1   Barriers, concerns with communications

Respondents of the *Let's Talk Veterans* consultations noted the following communications concerns:
- issues in navigating *My VAC Account* (which is leveraged by the Board)
- accessibility issues related to forms;
- issues experienced in navigating the Board's website;
- complex language; and
- difficulty finding and understanding information related to practices and procedures.

Actions:
- Work toward the goal of ensuring that all of the Board's Communication material templates pass accessibility standards checks
- Include VAC Communications Style Guide, Canada.ca Content Style Guide and Accommodation and Adaptive Computer Technology (AAACT) training when onboarding employees.
- Organize plain language and accessible communication training opportunities for personnel
- Conduct a review of VRAB web content with an Accessibility lens and make updates where needed to ensure Accessibility Standards are met.

Completion by: Ongoing

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.6.2 Barriers, accessible content

- **Training:** Accessible documents training is not mandatory, so many employees do not understand how to create accessible content.
- **Graphics and Images:** Graphics and images used do not always have alternative text. In addition, some graphics and images include essential information that is not provided in the body of the text.
- **Gathering Information:** external stakeholders and audiences are not consistently engaged on how best to create a barrier-free environment at VRAB.
- **User-Testing:** User-testing for VRAB's external website does not explicitly consult people with disabilities.
- **Web content, Communications Products and Other Material:** items sent to the Communications Unit by program area for publication on VRAB's website are not always written in plain language. It has been noted that VRAB often uses complex language.

Actions

- Continue to educate VRAB employees on the importance of creating accessible documents and provide them with the tools to do so.
- As noted in the previous section's actions, include VAC Communications Style Guide, Canada.ca Content Style Guide and Accommodation and Adaptive Computer Technology (AAACT) training when onboarding employees.
- Continue enhancements to VRAB's website, which was recently migrated to a new accessible template; and ensure plain language is used throughout.
- As noted in the previous section's actions, organize plain language and accessible communication training opportunities for personnel
- All VRAB units will be provided with guidance on leveraging tools such as readability apps and other available resources (such as the Microsoft Office accessibility check-points) within their work.
- AAACT training and guidelines links will be added to VRAB templates and documents.
- Regularly review documents in consultation with product owners, to ensure documents are updated to address the evolving accessibility landscape.

Completion by: December 2023 and ongoing

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.6.3 Barrier, client correspondence

Client-facing forms, letters, decisions, and other correspondence are not fully accessible. These include PDF versions that have known accessibility issues with Adobe products, which VRAB utilized as the

Board's standard PDF viewer. Adobe products meet a minimum accessibility standard, but do not meet higher standards required by the Board.

Actions

- Review VRAB forms, letters, and other correspondence with an Accessibility lens

- Work towards the removal of all identified barriers

Completion by: March 2024

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services and Operations Directorates

2.6.4   Barrier, events

In-person and virtual events are not always barrier-free due to the physical built-environment and available equipment.

Actions

- VRAB will implement any new TBS procedures for accessible communications and/or events once established.
- VRAB will explore enabling closed-captioning as a default for virtual events, as well as other interpretive aids, such as sign language interpretation.
- Accommodation measures will be implemented in consultation with participant(s) whenever possible.
- VRAB Communications Unit employees will be trained to consider accessibility when leading in-person or online meetings and events. The Communications team will follow the [Government of Canada's Planning Inclusive and Accessible Events and Guide to Planning Inclusive Meetings](#) standards.

Completion: Ongoing

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.7 The procurement of goods, services and facilities

Desired outcome

Ensure that the goods and services purchased by the Board are accessible by design, where possible.

Tracking

Progress toward this outcome will be measured by referencing information sources such as feedback received from internal clients and persons with disabilities, such as members of VAC's Accessibility Network.

2.7.1   Barrier, procurement and contracting

Personnel may not be familiar with appropriate and meaningful accessibility considerations, guidance, or best practice requirements for accessible procurement and contracting.

Actions

- Incorporate accessibility-related considerations into the Board's procurement processes (done in collaboration with VAC)
- Leverage VAC established accessibility standards for the procurement of equipment such as furniture and supplies.

Completion by: December 2023

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.8 The design and delivery of programs and services

Desired outcome

VRAB personnel are equipped to design and deliver programs and services that are accessible to persons with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities are satisfied with the accessibility of VRAB programs and services.

Tracking

Progress toward these outcomes will be measured through:

- data sources such as evaluations and feedback/surveys from VRAB Hearings
- feedback from persons with disabilities such as members of VAC's Accessibility Network
- any relevant consultation with Veterans and other external stakeholders

To determine existing or potential barriers, VRAB's Accessibility lead consulted with the following operational divisions regarding the design and delivery of the Board's redress program:

- Strategic and Corporate Services;
- Operations and Professional Development;
- Legal Services;
- Communications; and

- Systems.

2.8.1   Barrier, plain language and formatting

When VRAB personnel create strategic and corporate reports, the focus is on the target audience. As a result, these reports may not be in plain language for readers unfamiliar with the content, even though reports are published on VRAB's external site. Additionally, these reports may not be in a format accessible to persons with disabilities.

Action

All current and new employees involved in creating strategic and corporate reports will complete the VAC Style Guide Training and AAACT training on how to create accessible documents.

Completion by: October 2023

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.8.2   Barrier, brochures

Pre-COVID, VRAB's brochures were sent through paper format only, which creates barriers for those with visual impairments.

Action

VRAB is exploring digital format options to increase accessibility for the Board's external communications products.

Completion by: December 2023

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.8.3   Barriers, contacting the Board

- The public can contact the Board through its 1-800-140-8006 Telephone line. For persons with hearing disabilities, there is a Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) line and number on the Board's external website. However, for those with cognitive impairments or verbal communication difficulties, communication by phone may still be a barrier.
- Additional contact options for the Board include mail, and the following online options: email, *My VAC Account*, and MS Teams for online Hearings.

- Not everyone has reliable access to a computer and/or the internet, and clients do not have IT support when using online options to contact the Board.
- If individuals cannot contact us or experience barriers when trying to reach us, it could create or contribute to mental stress and/or anxiety.

Actions

Continue to maintain paper options for clients who wish to communicate by way of printed mail.

Ensure that all standard client communiqués (fact sheets and letters) meet accessibility standards.

Completion by: December 2023 and ongoing

Roles and responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services Directorate

2.8.4   Barrier, early collection of client accommodation requirements

There is no formal process between the Board and VAC, the Bureau of Pensions Advocates (BPA) or the Royal Canadian Legion (RCL) to communicate a client's accommodation requirements. By collecting this data in an established/standardized way early in the process, the Board will be able to better meet the needs of those we serve.

Action

VRAB will discuss and seek to implement a mechanism for improved data collection on Accessibility needs when the Veteran is represented by BPA or the RCL. For self- or privately-represented Veterans, VRAB will inquire on specific accommodations requirements during initial discussions.

Completion by: December 2023

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Operations Directorate

2.8.5   Barrier, videos

The Board's previously produced videos related to the redress process were not created with accessibility requirements in mind.

Action

The Board will produce new accessible video content, and ensure that videos and other similar communications products in the future meet accessibility requirements.

Completion by: March 2023 and ongoing

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services

2.8.6 Barrier, accessibility training for personnel interacting directly with Veterans

VRAB personnel who are responsible for interacting directly with Veterans may not have not been provided clear guidance on how to deal with clients with accessibility issues. These activities include:

- Personnel answering client inquiries by telephone, My VAC Account or email,
- VRAB support of the contracted Canadian Corp of Commissionaires, who are responsible for greeting, escorting and supporting Veterans during their in-person hearing,
- VRAB personnel who support hearings at the VRAB Head Office, and
- Members conducting hearings.

Actions

- Mandatory accessibility training for personnel who deal with these types of scenarios will be implemented going forward
- The Board will create a business process to provide guidance on how to identify and accommodate Veterans who experience accessibility issues.

Completion by: December 2023 and ongoing

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Operations Directorate and Member Secretariat

2.8.7 Barrier, alternate formats for forms and letters templates

Forms and letters are not easily understood by all audiences. Applications and forms do not always meet accessibility requirements for clients (larger font or Braille may not be available and materials are not written in plain language). Forms and letter templates that the Board creates or uses should be easy to understand and available in accessible formats.

Actions

- The Board will conduct a review of all forms and letters with a goal of improved accessibility and ease of use.
- Personnel involved in the creation of correspondence and forms will participate in accessibility and plain language training.

Completion by: March 2024 and ongoing

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Corporate Services and Operations Directorates

2.9 Transportation

Neither applicable nor relevant to VRAB's operations.

3. Consultations

The Board obtained the views of persons with disabilities in the development of its plan through the following:

- As part of the VAC portfolio, the Board worked with VAC to review information gathered on each of the seven areas of barriers described under the *AC Act.* The Board then determined where the barriers identified resonated with or applied concerning the Board. Notes:
    - o The Board's office was previously housed in the same built environment as VAC; however the Board now has its own, standalone space, which it manages with the support of VAC Facilities and Security teams.
    - o The Board's hearings, across the country, are primarily held in federal building spaces managed by VAC.
    - o VRAB uses the same client management database and Access to Information and Privacy (ATIP) software used by VAC personnel.
    - o The Board obtains HR services through the Department's HR division, applying the same policies and practices as VAC.
- A Board representative participated in meetings between VAC and the Accessibility Network, discussing accessibility barriers, and network members shared their own experiences or views regarding these barriers.
- The Board worked with VAC in creating questions on accessibility for a survey designed to consult with Veterans through the *Let's Talk Veterans* platform. The questions used were open-ended and focused on the following types of barriers at both VAC and VRAB:
    - o Physical and/or architectural barriers;
    - o Technological barriers;
    - o Information and communications barriers;
    - o Attitudinal barriers; and
    - o Systemic barriers

The Board also heard from the Bureau of Pensions Advocates, who represent over 95% of Veterans coming to the Board for redress, with respect to barriers and potential barriers for their clients. The information gathered through these consultations has informed the development of this plan.

4. Organizational culture

Desired outcome

The Board is a fully accessible place of work, where personnel are supported in their own accessibility needs (if any), and have the awareness, empathy, knowledge and skills to support others with accessibility needs.

Tracking

Progress toward this outcome will be measured through quantitative data sources such as feedback and surveys (for example the Public Service Employee Survey), as well as qualitative feedback from personnel.

4.1 Barrier, culture changes and adopting accessibility standards

It can often be challenging to focus on broader and more strategic organizational and cultural changes that are needed when resources are tight and focused on operational/mandate priorities on a day-to-day basis.

Actions

- VRAB will establish an Accessibility lead for the Board to ensure that this important work remains a priority and that we can maintain momentum towards these positive changes.
- The Board will explore ideas such as establishing a VRAB "Accessibility Adopters" initiative to recognize and celebrate employees taking steps to incorporate more accessibility into their day-to-day work; and launching a "Storytellers" initiative (to hear some of the lived experiences/stories of persons with disabilities.

Note: Work has already begun on a number of fronts in support of VRAB's accessibility culture shift. At the time of this Plan's publication, initiatives taken in the name of accessibility organizational culture include:

- Development of an accessible PowerPoint template;
- Promotion of accessibility learning opportunities offered by organizations such as AAACT;
- Promotion of activities to celebrate National AccessAbility Week (NAAW) and International Day of Persons with Disabilities;
- Improving accessibility of VRAB's website;
- Encouraging personnel to familiarize themselves with the Accessibility MS Teams channel for all VAC portfolio personnel;
- Participation by VRAB on VAC's Accessibility Network.

Completion by: March 2023 and ongoing

Roles and Responsibilities: Led by VRAB Senior Management Team

5. Training

Desired outcome

Accessibility training for personnel is offered regularly.

Training documents created are accessible by default.

E-learning modules are designed and created with accessibility in mind, so that all Board personnel will be able to fully and equally participate.

VRAB's training materials are available in various alternate formats, upon request.

Tracking

VRAB 's Professional Development Unit to track and record progress with respect to personnel accessibility training and tools.

5.1 Barrier, promoting awareness and training for personnel

Personnel lack awareness, and training on accessibility barriers and considerations has previously been limited.

Actions

- The Board will offer and encourage personnel to participate in accessibility training, workshops and information sessions.
- The Board will ensure that its onboarding program and any new training materials that are developed, are accessible.

Completion by: December 2023 and Ongoing

Roles and Responsibilities: VRAB Professional Development Unit

6. Budget and resource allocation

To the greatest extent possible, items identified in this Plan are specific and actionable over the Plan's three-year timeframe.

Notably, for some barriers identified in this 2022-2025 Plan, action over a longer duration may be required, to remove the barrier entirely. As such, some actions included in this Plan may carry forward into the Board's future Accessibility Action Plans.

As the Board continues its journey to become barrier-free by 2040, we will ensure that actions designed to remove and prevent accessibility barriers are included as part of the Board's financial and business planning considerations and process.

7. Glossary

For more definitions, please refer to the Glossary of the Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada and the *Accessible Canada Act*.

7.1 Definitions

- *Accessibility* – The degree to which a product, service, program or environment is available to be accessed or used by all (Source: Glossary: Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada).

- *Accommodation* – This term refers to the design and adaptation of a work environment to meet the needs of a diverse workforce, and do what is required in the circumstances of each individual, to avoid discrimination up to the point of undue hardship.

- *Barrier* means anything — including anything physical, architectural, technological or attitudinal, anything that is based on information or communications or anything that is the result of a policy or a practice — that hinders the full and equal participation in society of persons with an impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment or a functional limitation.

- *Disability* – means any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment — or a functional limitation — whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society.

- *Duty to accommodate (DTA)* – Employers have a duty to accommodate employees to avoid discrimination based on the eleven grounds identified in section 2 of the *Canadian Human Rights Act* (CHRA). Employers must accommodate employees who fall into the groups protected by the CHRA up to the point of undue hardship (Source: VAC's internal Employment Equity and Diversity Action Plan 2017-2022).

- *GC Workplace Accessibility Passport* – The Accessibility Passport is a tool that promotes collaboration between public service employees and managers. It will allow them to promptly identify and implement the devices, tools, and support measures that will enable employees to succeed in their job. The Passport is owned by the employee and will document adjustment needs, possible solutions, devices or supports received in the past, and adaptive tools that the employee would like to bring with them, should they change jobs or organizations.

- *Plain language* – This refers to clear, straight-forward writing. It avoids obscure vocabulary and complex sentences. Writing in plain language does not mean over-simplifying or leaving out critical information. Using plain language makes critical information accessible and readable for everyone.

7.2 VRAB Terminology and other references

For more information on VRAB, please refer to Quick Facts on VRAB's webpage.

- **Accessibility Network –** The Network provides the opportunity for employees with a disability, as well as their allies, to help identify accessibility barriers within the Department, and to provide feedback on the plans under development for a more accessibility-confident VAC. This group provides feedback and input based on their lived experiences and help guide VAC towards being a more accessibility-confident Department.

- **Accessibility progress tool** – This tool, used by the Application Management Directorate, refers to automated and manual methods to track applications in scope; accessibility assessments completed on those; and EN 301 549 compliance status of each application as improvements are made over time.

- **Assyst Web** – An online tool used to submit IT requests/report IT issues.

- **Client Service Delivery Network (CSDN) –** This is an aging integrated system that supports VAC employees in delivering Departmental benefits and services.

- **Corporate Services Directorate –** This is the unit in VRAB that consists of the corporate support functions, such as: Information Technology/Systems, Access to Information and Privacy and Information Management (ATIP and IM), Communications, Strategic Planning and Administrative Services.

- *European Standard (EN 301 549)* – EN 301 549 is the European Standard for Digital Accessibility that the Government of Canada is adopting for ICT. The industry standard for web accessibility is W3C WCAG (World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). EN 301 549

includes WCAG plus accessibility standards for all other digital products, including mobile phones, electronic documents, software, and hardware.

- **GCcase –** This is an integrated system that supports VAC employees in delivering Departmental benefits and services.

- **_GCworkplace_ model –** A Government of Canada workplace design that is based on providing a modern and flexible work environment that is adaptable to various employees' needs and situations.

- **_Let's Talk Veterans_ (LTV)** – LTV is an online accessible consultation and engagement platform launched in 2021 to give Canadians, Veterans and their families the opportunity to provide direct feedback to VAC.

- **_My VAC Account_ –** This tool is a public-facing client portal that enables Veterans to apply for benefits, send secure messages, and track applications online with VAC.

- **VRAB Hearing Exit Survey –** A survey tool designed to capture feedback from VRAB clients, following a Hearing with the Board.

- **VRAB's Workforce Statistics –** Reports on VRAB personnel

Annex 1: Areas Consulted for the Design and Delivery of VRAB's Redress Program

VRAB's Accessibility lead consulted with several areas within the Board to ensure that all aspects of the design and delivery of VRAB's redress program were covered. The following is a list of these areas, along with a paragraph about their key responsibilities.

- **Strategic and Corporate Services –** Provides strategic analysis/planning and corporate services to ensure efficient and high-quality program delivery.
- **ATIP and Information Management:** Assists applicants and the public with any questions or requests they may have through enquiries lines, correspondence and email. Manages the Board's electronic and paper records.
- **Administrative Services:** Provides administrative support services to the Board, including the coordination of travel, and finance/human resource planning and reporting.
- **Communications –** Promotes awareness and understanding of the Board's program to internal and external audiences.
- **Legal Services –** Provides independent legal advice, support and services to the Board on matters of law and policy. Legal Services also provides training to newly-appointed Board Members and to all personnel on an ongoing, as-needed basis.
- **Systems –** Supports all computer and systems-related activities within the Board. Develops the Board's website and new web-based products and technologies to make hearing processes more efficient.
- **Operations and Professional Development** –
  - The Operations team is responsible for the preparation of cases, scheduling of hearings, the responses to client inquiries, and the processing of decisions for Veterans.
  - The Professional Development unit supports personnel with required research activities, as well as the training and support of personnel.
- **VRAB Members Secretariat** – The collection of Board Members who conduct Hearings across the country and issue decisions for Veterans and others served by the Board

Bureau of Pensions Advocates **(BPA)** – BPA provides free advice, assistance and representation for individuals dissatisfied with decisions rendered by VAC with respect to their claims for entitlement to disability benefits, or any assessment awarded for their claimed conditions. The Bureau's advocates are dedicated exclusively to assisting clients in the redress process.

Annex 2: Other Government departments and services

For more information, please refer to the Government of Canada list of departments and agencies.

Government of Canada ICT Maturity Model and Scorecard - The Government of Canada (GC) Accessible ICT Maturity Model and Scorecard identifies eight dimensions that are considered necessary to making

[ICT accessible to all](#). There are five maturity levels for each dimension. Level 1 is the initial level and level 5 is the optimizing level. There are key building blocks for each of these maturity levels.

[Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC)](#) – This Department plays an important role in the daily operations of the Government of Canada as a key provider of services for federal departments and agencies. PSPC supports them in the achievement of their mandated objectives as central purchasing agent, linguistic authority, real property manager, treasurer, accountant, integrity adviser, and pay and pension administrator.

[Shared Services Canada (SSC)](#) – This Department was created in 2011 to transform how the government manages and secures its information technology (IT) infrastructure. They deliver digital services to Government of Canada organizations, providing modern, secure, and reliable IT services so federal organizations can deliver digital programs and services that meet Canadians' needs.

[Accessibility, Accommodation and Adaptive Computer Technology program (AAACT)](#) – AAACT is a Shared Services Canada program that provides services and solutions to help the public service serve all Canadians, including those with disabilities. AAACT provides expertise in accessible digital content ensuring GC products and services are available to everyone. They offer training, tools, and testing services to help Departments create accessible digital content (e.g., documents, presentations, and web content) that is inclusive by design.

[Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS)](#) – This Secretariat is the administrative branch of the committee of ministers responsible for the financial management of the federal government (Treasury Board). It is a central agency of the Government of Canada. The role of the Secretariat is to support the Treasury Board and to provide advice to Treasury Board members in the management and administration of the Government.

[Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC)](#) – VAC is a federal government organization responsible for the provision of pensions, benefits, and services to Canadian current and former members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and their families.