# Alternate Format Reading Materials: What We Heard Report

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# Introduction

In the Spring and Summer of 2023, Employment and Social Development Canada met with the disability community to gather firsthand accounts of their experiences accessing reading materials in alternate format. The purpose of this report is to share key findings from the sessions.

The results of the sessions, along with results from the 2023 Statistics Canada Survey on Accessible Print Materials (SAPM), were used to develop the Equitable Access to Reading Program (EARP). The EARP was announced in Budget 2022 to support the Government's commitment to permanently fund support services that improve access to reading materials for Canadians with print disabilities. The EARP aims to make it easier for persons with print disabilities to get and use alternate format reading materials. The program will launch in 2024-2025.

## Background

According to the 2023 Statistics Canada Survey on Accessible Print Materials, about 5.2 million Canadians had a difficulty with print material in 2023.

Examples of print materials are:

- books and e-books

- newspapers and online articles, and

- restaurant menus

A print disability is defined as mobility, cognitive and visual impairments that prevent people from reading print.

Persons with a print disability include people who have learning, reading, perceptual, physical or visual impairments that make it difficult to read standard print materials.

Persons with disabilities are a part of the social, economic, and cultural fabric of Canada. Yet, despite all they can offer, Canadians with print disabilities face barriers to participation. Alternate format materials help persons with print disabilities fully take part in society by making sure that they can get reading materials for educational, work, and personal purposes.

Alternate format materials are print materials that are adjusted so that persons with print disabilities can read them. Examples include:

- braille and e-braille

- large print

- accessible digital and e-books, and

- audiobooks and more

Disability community stakeholders state that less than 10% of reading materials in Canada are available in alternate formats (2017 Working Group on Alternate Formats). According to the 2023 SAPM:

- over two-thirds (69.5%) of persons who needed alternate formats faced at least one barrier when trying to access them

- the most common barriers faced when accessing alternate formats were:

  o cost (29.7%)
  o unavailability of format of choice (28.3%)
  o difficulty finding information (22.9%)
  o lack of skills (19.9%), and
  o not having the technology required to use alternate formats (17.3%)

## Government of Canada support for alternate format reading materials

Historically, persons with print disabilities have not had fair and equal access to reading materials. Alternate format reading materials have become more available over the past decade. But there are still challenges with the production of alternate format materials. Support is needed to remove barriers so that persons with print disabilities can get the alternate format reading materials they need to learn, advance their careers, and take part in their communities.

In support of this objective, Budget 2022 announced:

- $5 million over 2 years, beginning in 2022-2023, to the Centre for Equitable Library Access (CELA) and the National Network for Equitable Library Service (NNELS) to produce alternate formats

- $500,000 over 2 years, beginning in 2022-2023, to conduct a Statistics Canada Survey on Accessible Print Materials to gather data on the needs of persons with print disabilities

- $32.5 million over 5 years to set up an Equitable Access to Reading Program

In October 2022, the Government of Canada introduced the [Disability Inclusion Action Plan](#) (the Action Plan). The Action Plan is a blueprint for change to make Canada more inclusive of persons with disabilities. The Action Plan has 5 key objectives, including:

1. improve the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities
2. reduce poverty among persons with disabilities
3. achieve the *Accessible Canada Act* goal of a barrier-free Canada by 2040
4. develop a consistent approach to disability inclusion across the Government of Canada and make it easier for persons with disabilities to access federal programs and services, and
5. foster a culture of disability inclusion

The Action Plan is organized around 4 pillars. Pillar 3, accessible and inclusive communities, aims to remove barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from fully participating in communities and the economy. The EARP is a key action item under Pillar 3 because it will make it easier to access

alternate format reading materials. The EARP will also help to achieve the Action Plan objective of a barrier-free Canada by 2040.

## Survey and engagement

With money from Budget 2022, Statistics Canada set up a Survey on Accessible Print Materials. The survey gathered information from Canadians who need printed works in alternate formats. The survey aimed to understand:

- the different needs for alternate format materials

- the use of these materials, and

- the barriers faced when obtaining them

The results of the survey were released on October 3, 2023 and are available on the [Statistics Canada website](#).

From April to August 2023, Employment and Social Development Canada met with the disability community. The purpose of each session was to collect firsthand accounts from persons with print disabilities on their experiences getting reading materials in alternate formats. Interviews were conducted with:

- persons with print disabilities

- organizations representing persons with disabilities; and

- industry experts in alternate formats and accessible aids, devices and technologies

Each session was a 1-hour interview with prepared questions. The questions are listed below[1] :

1. based on your experiences, what are some of the challenges that persons with print disabilities face when trying to get reading materials in alternate formats? Are there particular barriers that affect certain groups more than others that lead to some being under-served? For example:

   o linguistic minorities
   o persons residing in rural or remote communities
   o certain age groups such as small children or seniors, and
   o racialized persons with print disabilities

2. thinking of how to improve the availability of alternate formats, how well does the current system of programming work or not work for persons with print disabilities?

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[1] Please note, questions were sometimes adjusted to be more relevant for the specific organization participating in the session.

3. which activities could a new Equitable Access to Reading Program undertake to support the production and access to reading materials in alternate formats, particularly for under-served groups (for example, persons living in rural areas, Indigenous persons, linguistic minorities)?

# What we heard

We heard a lot of rich and consistent feedback from disability stakeholder groups about their experiences related to alternate format materials. This report describes what we heard and the key themes that came out of the sessions.

Comments are combined to share what we heard in general; no specific stakeholders are identified in this report.

## Theme 1 - Availability of alternate format materials

According to the 2023 Survey on Accessible Print Materials:

- among those who had difficulties with print material, about half (about 2.5 million people) required at least one alternate format. Persons who required alternate formats include those who use and those who would use alternate formats if they were available to them

- 35.8% of those with difficulties with print materials (about 1.7 million people) used at least one alternate format

- when asked how often they received alternate formats when needed:
  - 21.7% of users said always
  - 20.3% of users said often
  - 36.7% of users said sometimes
  - 21.3% of users said never

Throughout the sessions, we heard a major barrier for persons with print disabilities is there aren't enough reading materials available in alternate formats. Disability stakeholders expressed more alternate format materials should be produced. They also said more materials should be made in a variety of hard copy and digital alternate formats. Some examples of different formats are:

- embossed Braille, electronic Braille file (eBrf), print Braille

- audio

- DAISY text or audio

- EPUB3 or accessible PDF

- large print, etc.

There are different types of print disabilities (for example, vision, physical, learning, perceptual). We heard that creating more materials in a variety of alternate formats would better meet the different needs of persons with different types of print disabilities.

We heard that due to the low supply of alternate format materials on the market, users often need to send a request to convert a printed material into an alternate format. Stakeholders shared that users often wait a long time before receiving these copies. This delay in receiving needed materials is especially hard for students because they often don't receive the material until their course is almost over. Electronic alternate formats have a quicker turnaround time, but they need a screen reader or an assistive device. These devices can be costly and not affordable for many persons with print disabilities.

**Key takeaways:**

- there aren't enough reading materials available in alternate format

- more alternate format materials need to be available in different formats to meet the needs for different types of print disabilities

- when users request to convert a printed material into an alternate format, there are often long delays until they receive the material

## Theme 2 - Awareness of alternate format materials

According to the 2023 Survey on Accessible Print Materials: one-fifth (20.1%) of those who need alternate formats reported that in the past two years there was a time they needed an alternate format but were unable to access it.

Throughout the sessions, we heard that even when the printed material is available in alternate formats, there are many barriers to accessing the materials.

One barrier faced by alternate format users is poor quality metadata. Metadata are like ID tags or keywords that allow:

- users to search for available alternate format materials, and

- assistive devices to read and navigate within the material

Poor quality or missing metadata is a major barrier to finding and using alternate format materials. Users also shared that search systems aren't all the same which makes it difficult to find needed materials.

We heard that even when material is available in an alternate format, the lack of training and awareness on how to find and obtain these reading materials is a barrier to getting them. Many persons with print disabilities, and their caregivers, aren't aware of the new and different types of alternate format materials available for different disability types, where to find them and how to get them. Disability stakeholders said more activities are needed to raise awareness of:

- the different types of alternate format materials that are available; and

- the technology, applications or platforms, devices, and aids that can help users find and get the alternate formats they need

We heard that more services and training are needed for persons with print disabilities and their caregivers. This training should meet the needs for a variety of print disabilities including vision, physical, learning and perceptual disabilities.

**Key takeaways:**

- poor quality or missing metadata and different search systems make it difficult for users to find and use the alternate format materials they need

- more activities, services, and training are needed to raise awareness so users can find and get available alternate format materials

## Theme 3 - Technology

According to the 2023 Survey on Accessible Print Materials:

- the majority (85.2%) of those with difficulties with print material used at least one assistive aid, device or technology because of their condition

- over one-in-ten (11.2%) Canadians who had difficulties with print materials needed an assistive aid, device or technology that they did not have access to. The top three cited reasons for having these unmet needs were:

  o cost (61.7%)
  o being unsure how or where to get assistive aids, devices or technology (40.9%)
  o not knowing how to use assistive aids, devices or technology (28.6%)

- almost half (47.4%) of alternate formats users would take training or participate in learning activities to improve their skills related to the use of computers, devices, software or applications

Throughout the sessions, we heard many persons with disabilities don't have access to the technology needed for alternate format materials. Stakeholders said alternate format materials are shifting to digital products and services. We heard that using many modern alternate format types requires access to devices, applications, platforms, or aids. Some examples of the technology needed to read digital alternate formats include:

- smartphones

- computers

- e readers

- screen readers, and

- refreshable braille displays

We heard users need to buy multiple types of devices and software because a single device cannot read all alternate formats. Print disability community members indicated that these technologies are costly and need to be upgraded often to keep up with changes in technology.

We heard that many modern alternate formats require users to have access to the internet because a shift is taking place away from hard-copy materials and CD-ROMs to digital alternate formats. We heard users need to buy monthly internet packages or data plans for smartphones to borrow, buy, or use digital alternate formats online. But, some persons with print disabilities can't get the internet for reasons such as:

- cost, or

- the unavailability of high-speed internet in rural and remote areas

So, some persons with print disabilities who don't have access to the internet, or to high-speed internet, can't get the alternate format print materials they may need. For example, users may not be able to download a book because the internet service that is available is very slow (such as, dial-up) so it can't download standard-size alternate format files.

On top of the barriers for getting the technology, we heard many persons with print disabilities may not have the technical skills to know how to use the technology needed to use alternate formats. Like the challenges with finding alternate format materials, many persons with disabilities and their caregivers don't have the training to use modern alternate format materials. Disability stakeholders expressed that more services, workshops and training need to be available and accessible:

- to teach persons with print disabilities and their caregivers how to use devices, applications/platforms, or aids so they can use digital alternate formats; and

- in different forms to meet the needs of the different types of print disability so all users can learn how to use alternate format materials

**Key takeaways:**

- the cost of the technologies needed to use alternate formats is a major barrier to accessing alternate format materials

- more training on how to use the technology for modern alternate format materials is needed, and more should be available to meet the needs of the different types of print disabilities

## Theme 4 - Diversity within the disability community

According to the 2023 Survey on Accessible Print Materials:

- over three quarters of racialized persons (78.6%) faced a barrier with alternate formats

- racialized persons are more likely to face a barrier compared to their non-racialized peers (67.5%)

- over 104,300 individuals who identified as Indigenous required alternate formats

- those with income under $20,000 (23.3%) were more likely to report having an unmet need related to alternate formats compared to persons with income over $60,000 (13.9%)

Throughout the sessions there were discussions about diversity in the disability community. We heard not everyone within the print disability community is the same, and not everyone shares the same needs. Print disability can overlap with other identity factors, such as:

- gender

- income

- having multiple disabilities

- language

- area of residence

- immigration status; and

- being Indigenous, Black, or racialized

Stakeholders identified that the issues within the print disability community in general often exist in under-served communities as well, but to an even greater degree. We heard rural or remote areas, including northern communities and territories; low-income communities; as well as Black, racialized and Indigenous communities have less access to alternate format materials. We heard identity factors are important and should be included in all areas involving access to alternate format materials.

We heard too few alternate format print materials reflect the experiences of:

- women

- Black and racialized Canadians

- Indigenous people

- immigrants

- persons with disabilities

- the 2SLGBTQI+ community, and

- other equity seeking groups

Furthermore, disability community members voiced concerns that there aren't enough alternate formats in both Official languages, Indigenous languages, and other languages. Fewer materials available in different languages excludes non-English speakers with a print disability from full social, professional, and community participation.

We heard that while persons with print disabilities may not have the awareness and training to find available alternate format materials, this challenge is especially difficult for:

- newcomers

- Black, Indigenous, and racialized groups

- persons living in rural and remote communities; and

- seniors

We heard that there is little support at the local level for persons with print disabilities. Participants said it needs to be easier to get alternate format materials in local communities. Stakeholders are concerned about the low number of services or training on how to find and get alternate format materials in racialized, rural or remote and low-income communities. These group members don't have equal and fair access to the necessary resources that would increase their awareness of, and ability to get, alternate format materials. As such, members of these communities aren't aware of the different types of alternate format materials available or where to find them.

Disability community members expressed it is important to raise awareness and offer training about the different types of alternate formats available through local community organizations such as:

- seniors' organizations

- community centres, and

- organizations supporting recent immigrants or low-income persons

We heard a major barrier to accessing alternate format materials is the high cost of the technology. Due to many reasons, such as barriers to employment and higher living costs, persons with disabilities may have lower incomes. It may be difficult for many lower income persons with print disabilities to:

- buy the devices, applications/platforms, or aids needed to read digital alternate formats

- afford monthly internet packages or data plans for smartphones that are needed to access, borrow or buy digital alternate formats online; and

- buy e-books and audiobooks or subscription services

In addition to getting the technology needed to access alternate formats, many persons with print disabilities may not have the technical skills or training to know how to use it. This may be especially true for members of equity-seeking groups. We heard that there is little or no training to develop skills in technology available for some members of these groups.

We heard that even when training is available, it may not meet the different needs of the members of these groups. For example, seniors with print disabilities may use more hard-copy or CD-ROMs than other groups. As the industry is moving away from these products, seniors might need special training to help them move through this change. So, more support for training that adjusts to the needs of different groups is needed to make it easier for everyone to get alternate format reading materials.

**Key takeaways:**

- there aren't enough alternate format materials that reflect the different experiences of the diverse disability community

- there aren't enough alternate format materials available in different formats and languages to meet the different needs of persons with print disabilities

- the high cost of technology is a significant barrier for persons with print disabilities with low incomes

- equity seeking groups identified that there is little or no training services to improve technical skills that would allow them to use the technology needed to get and use alternate format reading materials

# Conclusion

Through our meetings, we had rich discussions with the disability community about their experiences related to reading materials in alternate formats. While some topics were brought up in many different sessions, other topics were unique but still important to consider. The Equitable Access to Reading Program was developed based on what was heard in these sessions. The EARP is unable to address every concern raised. But, the program's overall goal is to make it easier for persons with print disabilities to find, get, and use alternate format reading materials in Canada.

In the spirit of "Nothing Without Us", the Government of Canada will continue to partner with the disability community to build an inclusive and accessible Canada.