



# Centralized Enabling Workplace Fund: Final Report

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# Centralized Enabling Workplace Fund: Final Report

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Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, Office of Public Service Accessibility

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## Executive summary

In April 2019, the Office of Public Service Accessibility (OPSA) received \$10 million in funding for a five-year mandate to create the Centralized Enabling Workplace Fund (CEWF).

The CEWF invested in experimental and innovative departmental projects to improve workplace accessibility and remove barriers to accommodation and inclusion for employees with disabilities. Drawing from progress reports, project proposals and feedback from project leads, the CEWF final report provides an overview of the major successes, implementation challenges and lessons learned over the CEWF's operation.

The report summarizes the CEWF's projects. It also outlines the funding rationale that guided project selection across five broad project categories:

1. workplace accommodation
2. recruitment

3. centralized models
4. research on lived experience
5. communications and policy

The CEWF prioritized projects that had the potential to improve processes, tools and service standards across the federal public service.

These include, among others:

- Government of Canada (GC) Workplace Accessibility Passport
- Lending Library Service Pilot
- Neurodiversity Recruitment Pilot
- Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat's Workplace Accommodation Centre

The report also highlights the project outcomes that have improved accessibility for employees with disabilities. From the over 55 organizations that have adopted the GC Workplace Accessibility Passport to the recruitment of 16 neurodiverse employees through the Neurodiversity Recruitment Pilot, CEWF projects have helped recruit, retain and remove barriers for employees with disabilities.

This report also explores the fund's initial challenges getting established during the government slowdown early in the COVID-19 pandemic. The CEWF also faced challenges equipping organizations with accessibility confidence and navigating what, at the time, was a relatively new accessibility ecosystem in the Government of Canada.

Finally, the report outlines five recommendations that need to be implemented to enhance culture change around accessibility and disability inclusion in the federal public service:

1. Systematically target the recruitment of persons with disabilities and measure progress
2. Streamline the workplace accommodation process; centralize it where possible

3. Develop client-centric accommodation centres of expertise
4. Document experiences, gather knowledge, mobilize
5. Conduct continued education and awareness campaigns on the *Accessible Canada Act* and the duty to accommodate policy instruments

These areas aim to ensure that the progress produced by the CEWF is maintained, reproduced and replicated by functional communities across the federal public service to ensure long-term project success.

## **Introduction: the CEWF story**

In April 2019, the Office of Public Service Accessibility (OPSA) received \$10 million in funding over five years (2019–20 to 2023–24) to create the Centralized Enabling Workplace Fund (CEWF). The CEWF was created to make the Government of Canada more accessible. It explored improving the employment of persons with disabilities in the federal public service by removing common and systemic barriers that hinder an individual’s full participation in their public service career.

To support the full participation of persons with disabilities in the public service of Canada, the CEWF invested in innovative and experimental projects to improve workplace accessibility and to remove barriers to accommodation and inclusion. The CEWF focused on initiatives that optimized sustainability and successful outcomes for employees with disabilities.

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to a hybrid workplace, Government of Canada organizations used this opportunity to build awareness of workplace accommodation to accelerate change and shift culture. The pandemic also broadened understanding of what accommodation means (that is, equipping employees for success) with a renewed emphasis on timely accommodation to maximize productivity and efficiency in an expanded hybrid workplace.

In this new work environment, organizations increasingly recognized the importance of making tools, systems, meetings, learning platforms and communications accessible by design. Awareness of the need to appropriately equip all Government of Canada employees to achieve their full potential also increased.

To this end, over five years the CEWF funded pilot programs, research projects and hiring initiatives to better recruit, train and promote employees with disabilities. Grounded in the principle of “Nothing Without Us,” a cornerstone of the Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada, CEWF projects consistently benefited from direct collaboration with and insights from employees with disabilities.

This report highlights the accomplishments, challenges and lessons learned over the past five years of initiating change. The report focuses on the scalability and future direction of the CEWF’s most successful projects.

Project outcomes include:

- new and innovative tools and knowledge
- centres of expertise
- best available practices
- co-developed research methodologies
- lessons learned

These projects can help inform future investments in the Government of Canada’s vision to become the world’s most accessible and inclusive public service by 2040.

## The projects

The CEWF selected projects for funding based on three criteria:

1. the guiding principles outlined in the Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service of Canada
2. the project’s degree of collaboration, sustainability and transparency

3. the accessibility confidence and capacity of departmental leads to execute projects

The CEWF dedicated significant resources to engaging in partnerships that focused on experimenting with smaller-scale, innovative solutions and alternative approaches to accommodation management.

The CEWF also ensured that projects honoured the disability community's "Nothing Without Us" principle. Projects were organized into five broad categories:

1. workplace accommodation processes
2. recruitment and retention
3. centralized models
4. research and lived experience
5. communications and policy

## **1) Workplace accommodation processes**

The CEWF prioritized projects that offered the potential to develop or improve processes, tools and services that could be implemented across the Government of Canada.

For example, the two projects identified in the Accessibility Strategy for the Public Service, the Government of Canada Workplace Accessibility Passport (the Passport) and the Lending Library Service Pilot, promised benefits to many employees with disabilities across the federal public service.

These two projects, which were led by OPSA directly or in partnership with departmental change agents, worked to address structural processes and culture challenges in the public service that create consistent, persistent and well-documented barriers for persons with disabilities and their managers (see the 2019 Benchmarking Study of Workplace Accommodations and the 2023 Public Opinion Research Study of Causes and Impacts of Harassment and Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service).

## **Project 1**

The Passport, the CEWF's flagship project, played a central role in the development of the CEWF itself. The Passport was created for and by persons with disabilities and continues to engage regularly with the Government of Canada-wide Persons with Disabilities Champions and Chairs Committee, federal organizations, as well as with diversity, inclusion and accessibility subject matter experts.

The Passport's goal is to simplify and streamline the workplace accommodation process. It helps current and future employees communicate with their managers about the barriers that they encounter in the workplace and the potential solutions to address these barriers.

## **Project 2**

The Lending Library Service Pilot Project led by Shared Services Canada provides hardware and software solutions to employees across the Government of Canada with short-term accommodation needs. By offering an innovative and efficient service delivery model not yet widely available, the Lending Library Service cuts through lengthy accommodation processes and equips employees quickly.

## **2) Recruitment and retention**

### **Project 1**

To improve the recruitment of persons with disabilities, the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Centre of Canada, Shared Services Canada and the Public Service Commission of Canada partnered with the non-profit organization Specialisterne on a Neurodiversity Recruitment Pilot.

Together, these organizations recruited 16 individuals into entry-level federal public service positions and spearheaded awareness building and culture change around neurodiverse hiring.

### **Project 2**



At the same time, the Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities offered career coaching services through Public Services and Procurement Canada to more than 250 employees and their managers inclusively. Participating interns benefited from increased competency in navigating the federal public service employment system and improved career confidence. These career services also coached managers to better support employees with disabilities, facilitate their integration into the public service and provide workplace accommodation.

### **Project 3**

Another unique project funded by the CEWF is the LED Office Lighting Project. Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) and National Research Council Canada tested a new and innovative office lighting solution to mitigate the negative effects of harsh lighting for employees with light sensitivities.

The test lighting reduced visual irritation, headaches and migraines for light-sensitive participants during the workday and evening. Both the light-sensitive participants and those from the general population evaluated the test lighting to be higher quality than the lighting typically found in office buildings.

These results show that this innovative lighting could be a solution to reduce barriers and provide a safer, more accessible and more inclusive work environment, not only for employees with light sensitivities, but all federal public servants.

### **3) Centralized models**

Centralized accommodation structures streamline processes, reduce administrative and financial burdens on employees and managers, and facilitate neutral case management approaches to streamline the accommodation process (based on one of the recommendations of the May

2019 Survey on Workplace Accommodations in the Federal Public Service).

They also support the Clerk's Call to Action on Anti-Racism, Equity, and Inclusion in the Federal Public Service.

The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS) and the Department of Finance Canada piloted a joint Workplace Accommodation Centre (Centre). Due to shortened time frames and lack of human resources, this pilot operated solely at TBS for one year instead of two years.

During this time, the Centre managed approximately 240 accommodation requests from managers and employees, underscoring the Centre's demand and relevance, and its ability to respond to a high caseload in a timely and efficient manner. The Centre's user-centric approaches removed the red tape associated with processing requests to address workplace barriers and streamlined the approach to supporting employees with disabilities.

#### **4) Research on lived experience**

Expanding knowledge about the lived experiences of employees with disabilities to drive culture change was a paramount CEWF goal. The CEWF supported several innovative research projects focused on employees with disabilities, including:

- Benchmarking Study of Workplace Accommodations
- Engaging (Dis)Ability Innovation (a mixed methods interdepartmental research project from Canadian Heritage and Statistics Canada)
- Public Opinion Research Study of Causes and Impacts of Harassment and Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service (a qualitative research study on the perspectives and experiences of persons with disabilities in relation to harassment and discrimination at work)

This research validated and emphasized the high degree of dissatisfaction that employees have with existing, decades-old workplace accommodation processes, which are often the root cause of harassment, discrimination and poor performance results.

The CEWF also invested in an engagement and research project led by the Knowledge Circle for Indigenous Inclusion (KCII). KCII developed the Indigenous Federal Employees with disAbilities Survey. Survey development was Indigenous-led and guided by distinctions-based, ethical research principles to highlight Indigenous voices and perspectives.

Survey results indicated a desire to improve cultural competencies to achieve equity in the workplace and to correct conditions of disadvantage. The survey found that Indigenous employees encounter many systemic barriers, such as:

- trauma
- language
- lack of barrier-free environments
- communications
- stigma
- discrimination

The survey results highlighted the need for culturally appropriate workplace accommodations, such as Elders and knowledge holders, as well as access to accommodations such as flexible workplace arrangements, modified or ergonomic workstations, human supports and technology.

Co-developing research through the “Nothing Without Us” principle is challenging, particularly in institutional structures that tend to resist culture change. For example, the Public Opinion Research Study of Causes and Impacts of Harassment and Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service employed an advisory group to provide feedback on research instruments and communications materials. An advisory group is not common practice in public opinion research, and was an innovative

approach pioneered by this project. Establishing this group and engaging project partners on work outside of the status quo took considerable time and effort that helped ensure that the project delivered on its results.

## **5) Communication and policy**

Finally, communications materials and Government of Canada policies work together with pilots and projects that address workplace accommodation barriers. Therefore, the CEWF launched several communications and policy projects, including a policy and legal review of TBS policy instruments in collaboration with colleagues at the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer. Collaboration across human resources, disability management and accessibility functional communities can lead to improved services for employees with disabilities in the workplace.

To ensure that the CEWF's learnings, challenges and successes will continue to inform federal government practices, long-term investments in accessibility and capacity building, particularly in culturally appropriate workplace adjustment processes and practices, are required.

## **Results, challenges and lessons learned**

During its early years, the CEWF encountered challenges in identifying and establishing its projects. Specifically, the accessibility ecosystem was in its early stages of development. After the enactment of the *Accessible Canada Act*, regulations came into force in 2021, followed by the appointment of a Chief Accessibility Officer and an Accessibility Commissioner in 2022. As this ecosystem evolved, federal organizations attained a higher level of maturity through the development and implementation of their accessibility plans, which were first published in December 2022.

Over five years, CEWF projects have started to improve accessibility outcomes for employees with disabilities in several ways.

- The Passport has been adopted by more than 55 public service organizations (as of February 2024), with more slated to integrate it into their workplace adjustment processes. The Microsoft Word version of the Passport is available for download on Canada.ca and an application is being developed to provide a centralized, accessible and secure location for employees across organizations to manage and share their Passport information throughout their federal public service careers.
- The Lending Library Service at the Accessibility, Accommodation and Adaptive Computer Technology (AAACT) program of Shared Services Canada has served over 430 clients since launching in 2020, loaning over 1,300 pieces of adaptive technology, hardware and software. Clients who use the Lending Library Service typically receive their equipment in an average of one to four weeks after contacting the program, a new leading service standard that is up to 10 times faster than the worst standards found in the 2019 Benchmarking Study of Workplace Accommodations.
- The Public Opinion Research Study of Causes and Impacts of Harassment and Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service provides insight into the root causes of the harassment and discrimination that employees with disabilities encounter in the federal public service. OPSA has shared the report's findings with principal partner organizations to ensure ongoing monitoring and evaluation. The study comes at an important time as the Government of Canada seeks to create an inclusive and barrier-free workplace by improving workplace accommodation processes. The report will contribute to the culture changes needed in the public service and defined in the Clerk's Call to Action to make the public service welcoming and inclusive for all equity-deserving groups, including persons with disabilities.
- From a recruitment perspective, the CEWF's investment in the following two projects demonstrated the importance of collaborative and partnered approaches:

## 1. Coaching Services for Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities Interns and their Managers

## 2. Neurodiversity Recruitment Pilot

Under these two projects, managers had access to supports and services to improve their knowledge and awareness of onboarding and employing employees with disabilities. These two projects resulted in employees with disabilities finding employment opportunities in the federal public service.

For example, the Federal Internship Program for Canadians with Disabilities hired 60 employees into indeterminate and term positions, with another 41 interns still in the program. An additional 16 employees were recruited as part of the Neurodiversity Recruitment Pilot, with another five employees receiving employment opportunities. Results show that when managers are adequately supported to hire and retain employees with disabilities, all parties benefit, including managers, new employees and the organization.

- The LED Office Lighting Project has the potential to inform PSPC office lighting standards, which apply to all PSPC office environments. The project reduced barriers and accessibility issues related to light sensitivity. PSPC and National Research Council Canada are implementing a second phase of this project that will further expand the installation of the lighting solution, and results may lead to changes in lighting standards.
- Finally, two research initiatives funded under the CEWF implemented innovative methodologies that were grounded in the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. The methodologies of the following projects were influenced by culturally innovative approaches that organizations looking to conduct similar methods can learn from:
  - The Engaging (Dis)Ability Innovation research project co-led by Statistics Canada and Canadian Heritage produced a methodological report detailing the project's steps, lessons learned

and recommendations for future research. The research's participatory action approach incorporated the "Nothing Without Us" principle through an employee-led disability committee that reviewed project development through a disability lens.

- The KCII survey gave a unified voice to Indigenous employees with disabilities. This was accomplished through the establishment of the National Indigenous Employees with Acquired and Intermittent Disability Network. The network's co-chairs also participated as members of the Indigenous Interdepartmental Collaborators Circle.

Lessons learned from procedural, structural and cultural challenges can help guide investments to scale successful projects that have the potential for the greatest impact in the short and medium term.

- Setting up a new fund required significant effort on multiple fronts. The operational specifications of the CEWF in its Treasury Board submission were detailed at the highest level. As a result, when the administration of the CEWF shifted from individual workplace accommodations to departmental projects, it took time to switch operational gears.
- Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the burdensome reporting structure of the CEWF also took their toll. Many projects experienced delays in requests for funding because of the ensuing federal government slowdown, and the timing of the allocation of funds led to some delays in the phased rollouts of projects (for example, the Lending Library Service Pilot). In the last fiscal year of the CEWF, the CEWF adjusted its reporting structure to reduce the administrative burden on project leads.
- Consistency in having management and staff with a solid understanding of accessibility and the ability to facilitate workplace accommodations proved challenging in establishing organizational cultural change. Adequate time to develop project plans and a delivery structure to scale projects is key to the successful launch of large-scale centralized accommodation centres. This was the challenge for the Workplace

Accommodation Centre (Centre), which was meant to create a one-stop shop for employees from TBS and the Department of Finance Canada seeking support in the accommodation process. Ultimately, the implementation of the project did not include the Department of Finance Canada. Tight project timelines prevented the Centre from developing a clear structure to launch services, get buy-in or gradually scale its services.

- One of the key conclusions from the experiences of the CEWF is that project leads must have the maturity and readiness to pursue and invest in accessibility projects. This is a significant assessment criterion for funding. Challenges that inevitably arise during project development become nearly impossible to overcome without a clear and strong drive to culture change around accessibility and disability inclusion from project partners. This includes ensuring an accessible by design approach to project design, development and implementation.
- One of the lessons learned from the Public Opinion Research Study of Causes and Impacts of Harassment and Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service was to ensure that web accessibility requirements are met by third-party vendors. With these requirements in place, delays can be avoided during the project's implementation.

## Next steps towards 2040

The work undertaken by the CEWF since 2019 has been an opportunity to:

- highlight the systemic, procedural, material and cultural barriers faced by employees with disabilities in the public service
- invest funds and time in innovative projects that enable employees to contribute to their full potential by removing and addressing workplace barriers and to better understand their lived experiences



- discover where future investments can scale projects that would make the most impact for the greatest number of employees going forward

Significant investment and work are required to ensure that the Government of Canada achieves its goal of being the world's most inclusive public service by 2040. It takes considerable effort to generate momentum towards cultural change, and that change does not take place overnight. The CEWF recognizes that this momentum has begun and is proud of the part it has played. To ensure that this momentum continues to grow, the CEWF recommends that the following five foundational actions be implemented, from which future increments and adjustments can be applied.

## **1. Systematically target the recruitment of persons with disabilities and measure progress**

Persons with disabilities are the only employment equity group in the federal public service that has a representation level lower than its workforce availability. According to the annual report *Employment Equity in the Public Service of Canada for Fiscal Year 2022 to 2023*, only 6.9% of public servants self-identify as a person with a disability. By contrast, 9.2% of Canada's overall workforce self-identify as persons with disabilities.

Data from previous federal Public Service Employee Surveys indicates that employees with disabilities disproportionately experience higher rates of harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Additional research from *Building a Diverse and Inclusive Public Service: Final Report of the Joint/Union Management Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion* and the *Benchmarking Study of Workplace Accommodations* corroborates these findings.

Addressing this recommendation will require investment and attention to several aspects of the recruitment process:

- develop standardized contracting and communities of practice, such as Infinity – The Network for Neurodivergent Public Servants, to share

resources and information to support organizations in their recruitment efforts

- collaborate with third-party providers to encourage experimentation with non-traditional, accessible and inclusive assessment and recruitment methods
- support managers through targeted management training to promote a culture shift in the assessment and onboarding processes

## **2. Streamline the workplace accommodation process; centralize it where possible**

Centralized and integrated approaches to workplace accommodation, such as through a departmental centre of expertise, are often key to expediting and simplifying accommodation processes for managers and employees with disabilities.

However, leading practices and existing research underscore that there is no single model for centralized delivery of accommodation services, and a centralized model does not guarantee improved accommodation outcomes. Factors for success include having an accommodation process that:

- is grounded in the social model of disability
- is neutral and client-centric
- draws on integrated expert advice
- is appropriately resourced

The expansion of and closer collaboration between the Passport and AACT's Lending Library Service could support a self-serve model for employees that will more effectively leverage AACT's single point-of-entry accommodation services. This will require permanent funding for the Lending Library Service delivery model to support and scale a robust and diverse team.

To achieve this, the AACT program intends to leverage its CEWF pilot with the Inclusive Design for Employment Access (IDEA) project. IDEA is a multi-year knowledge-to-practice initiative between the Government of Canada and McMaster University's IDEA laboratory with the goal to improve the recruitment, retention and advancement of employees with disabilities in the federal public service. This way, AACT can scale to offer Lending Library-styled services to all Government of Canada employees.

Organizations can also do their part to proactively remove barriers by purchasing common adaptive tools such as e-ink monitors and sit-stand desks. For the Passport, scalability includes continued organizational adoption across the federal public service and integration into workplace accommodation processes. Continued program support and evolution of the Passport is vital to its success as a catalyst for culture change and as a responsive tool that addresses the accommodation needs of persons with disabilities.

### **3. Develop client-centric accommodation centres of expertise**

Workplace accommodation centres of expertise operate best when they are created, funded, staffed and trained to provide culturally appropriate, people-centred expertise, advice and guidance to support employees with disabilities. This could include guidance on:

- the Government of Canada Workplace Accessibility Passport
- removing barriers to accessibility
- duty to accommodate requests on a case-by-case basis
- ergonomics
- telework
- return to work

These centres of expertise play an important role in bringing key partners and service enablers together to support employees, and, as a result, reducing the administrative burden for managers, employees and the

organization as a whole.

These centres also improve organizational service standards so that employees with accommodation needs are equipped within two weeks, often equivalent to the amount of time between an employee receiving their letter of offer and their start date.

More training and awareness about what diversity, inclusion and culturally appropriate accommodation can bring to the workplace can encourage innovation on how public service staffing is conducted. For example, the public service can experiment with opportunities for flexible work arrangements such as job sharing.

With these improvements to the support structures for employees with disabilities, human resources and operational savings can be realized, and barriers to the recruitment, retention and advancement of employees with disabilities can be considerably reduced.

#### **4. Document experiences, gather knowledge, mobilize**

The research undertaken has proven that the Government of Canada's accessibility challenges are systemic and require changes to the federal public service culture. Following the Engaging (Dis)Ability Innovation research project, it is recommended that future research be undertaken. This research should include greater space for employees with disabilities to talk about the biases they have experienced, in addition to workplace culture in general.

The lessons learned from the Public Opinion Research Study of Causes and Impacts of Harassment and Discrimination of Persons with Disabilities in the Federal Public Service provide an opportunity to strengthen accessibility requirements throughout the public opinion research process. This includes requirements for third-party vendors, training and resources for research practitioners, and review of procurement instruments.

Areas requiring future research could include:

- the experiences of employees with disabilities across employment status type
- the impact of the *Official Languages Act* on employees with disabilities
- the concept of time as an accommodation
- an exploration of barriers that executives with disabilities encounter in the workplace (and solutions to address these barriers)

## **5. Continued education and awareness campaigns on the *Accessible Canada Act* and the duty to accommodate policy instruments**

Results from the policy review determined that the *Policy on People Management* appropriately reflects Treasury Board responsibilities related to the *Directive on the Duty to Accommodate* under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*.

This review has identified a need for the following work, which has been started and will continue:

- The Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer will continue to engage with deputy heads, heads of human resources, managers and functional specialists to generate awareness of the duty to accommodate (DTA) framework. The DTA directive is supported by the DTA process manual for managers, which presents an informal and collaborative approach to accommodation.
- The Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer will continue to engage with functional communities, managers, the executive community and employment equity networks to help equip these groups to be capable of identifying and addressing employee accessibility and accommodation needs in the workplace from both a systemic and individual perspective, particularly in a hybrid environment.

# Conclusion

Maintenance of and investment in funding models like the CEWF allow for experimentation and innovation to help create a culture where employees with disabilities are supported throughout their careers. The CEWF has contributed to the Government of Canada's accessibility agenda by making progress on knowledge mobilization, accommodation practices and accessibility considerations. More significantly, the CEWF helped mobilize the start of cultural change in the federal public service around accommodation and disability inclusion.

As of December 2022, all organizations have submitted and made public their first accessibility plans, and in December 2023, they have reported on their progress. These plans align with the *Accessible Canada Act* to structure and implement actions to remove barriers. They also provide an accountability mechanism to track progress and ensure a feedback mechanism for employees with disabilities.

Internationally, the CEWF stands apart as a funding model dedicated to addressing workplace accessibility. It represents a proof of concept, both in Canada and internationally, for centralized innovation models focused on persons with disabilities.

With sufficient financial and operational support, successful CEWF projects can be scaled and reproduced across the public service to improve outcomes for employees with disabilities. By focusing on partnerships with departmental change agents, OPSA, and by extension the CEWF, has influenced projects offering the greatest benefit across the Government of Canada, and has supported federal organizations in effectively fulfilling their accountabilities and becoming leaders in accessibility and workplace accommodation.

Long-term success will ultimately depend on the continued commitment of senior leaders in the public service to prioritize accessibility in their business operations and departmental cultures and the engagement, support and

upskilling of key functional communities. These communities can provide critical input, drive and operationalize policy, and lead the cultural shifts that are necessary for implementation and long-lasting improvements.