



Moving Forward Together: **Disability and Work in Canada (DWC) Initiative**

What We have Accomplished in Canada

Historical Background

The development of programs and policies regarding disability and work in Canada goes back more than a century, with significant development beginning in response to the influx of First World War soldiers with serious disabilities and continuing after the Second World War for the same reason. These developments were not just government-led; private-sector and charitable organizations were also involved. Very broadly speaking, we can look at the period after 1945 as a time when various public- and private-sector organizations developed specific disability support programs, often aimed at just one type of disability—for example, visual impairment, paraplegia or loss of limbs.

New organizations supporting people with disabilities were started during this period. They contributed to growing public and government awareness of the needs of people with disabilities. Employment was always a major focus of these organizations, along with disability and income supports more generally. Labour unions and disability organizations lobbied for changes. Some programs, such as Employment Insurance and the Canada Pension Plan, added disability-related features, sometimes decades after being established for narrower social security reasons.

Since the 1960s, an important historical trend has been the development of human rights case law and its related impact on employment of people with disabilities, strengthened by the protections included in the provincial human rights legislation and in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, enacted in 1982. More recently, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by Canada in 2010, has influenced thinking and policy in Canada.

Patchwork of Canadian Work Disability Programs

A complex array of programs and policies that relate directly or indirectly to the employment of people with disabilities has developed over time in Canada. Some of these are at the national level, with most at the provincial/territorial level; some public, others private; some contributory, others financed from general tax revenues; some means-tested, some based on the cause of the disability; some available for a limited period of time, others for the longer term; and some, such as workers' compensation, allowing for partial disability financial support, with others financially supporting only total disability.



Provincial/territorial programs include social assistance for people with disabilities, workers' compensation and compensation for victims of crime. Federal programs include Canada Pension Plan-Disability (CPP-D), with a Quebec counterpart (QPP-D), Employment Insurance Sickness Benefits, Disability Tax Credits, Registered Disability Savings Plans and veterans' benefits for disability. Private programs include employment-based, short- and long-term disability plans, and other programs (e.g., car insurance).

Programs for people with disabilities have largely operated independently of each other, though efforts have been made to promote coordination. For example, the Federal Task Force on Disability Issues (1995–1996) produced the *Equal Citizenship for Canadians with Disabilities* report that outlined 52 recommendations, the key ones being moving toward a comprehensive disability insurance program covering all Canadians, giving programs better mechanisms to improve workforce participation, and reconfiguring programs with consideration of tax systems and costs of disability. Another initiative called Listening to Canadians (2002–2003) produced a report containing 53 recommendations, six pertaining to better coordination between CPP-D and other disability support programs. An environmental scan of past policy initiatives to address issues related to the coordination/navigability of the different disability income support programs in Canada can be found on the CRWDP website: <https://www.crwdp.ca/en/archive-documents>.

The importance of improving the coordination and coherence of the system has also been identified by think tanks (notably, the Caledon Institute) and policy research initiatives such as the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) Project (2008-2014) and the Centre for Research on Work Disability Policy (CRWDP) (2013-present).

Federal Initiatives

At the federal level, the Office of Disability Issues within Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) has become the focal point for key partners working to promote the inclusion and participation of Canadians with disabilities in all aspects of society and community life.

Federal programs and initiatives affecting people with disabilities include CPP-D benefits, employment insurance sickness benefits, veterans' benefits for disability, tax measures (e.g., Disability Tax Credit), and the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities (focused on employment-related supports). Through Labour Market Agreements and, now, through new



Workforce Development Agreements (WDA), the federal government provides transfers to provinces and territories for skills training and other employment programs.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) was established in 2007. It leads the development and dissemination of innovative programs and tools to support the mental health and wellness of Canadians. In collaboration with the CSA Group (Canadian Standards Association), the MHCC developed the Canadian National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (launched in 2013), a set of voluntary guidelines, tools and resources intended to guide organizations in promoting mental health and preventing psychological harm at work. The CSA is currently working with stakeholders and government representatives on a national standard for disability management and disability prevention.

Since ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the federal government tabled accessibility legislation (Bill C81, the *Accessible Canada Act: An Act to Ensure a Barrier-free Canada*) in June 2018, to apply within the area of federal jurisdiction. Subsequently approved by Parliament, this Act has added to the existing legislation protecting the rights of people with disabilities.

Provincial Initiatives and Other Developments

Several provinces have legislation governing the accessibility of workplaces, buildings and services. Many provinces/territories have developed strategies to improve the prospects of people with disabilities, some broad in scope and others more focused (summarized in an appendix to this document [Provincial Strategies PDF](#), [Stratégies Provinciales PDF](#)). Numerous not-for profit, community organizations provide services to people with disabilities and/or act as advocates to advance their employment rights and opportunities. A sample list of these organization is available on the [CCRW website](#). For these initiatives, most funding is received at the provincial level.

Other Promising Trends and Developments

At the Disability and Work in Canada (DWC) 2017 conference, keynote speaker Michael Prince identified several promising trends, including the following:

- the poverty rate for people with disabilities in Canada falling from 21.7 percent in 1993 to 12.7 percent in 2010 (Fang and Gunderson 2014),¹
- the publication of a federal report making a business case for employing people with disabilities, titled *Rethinking disAbility in the Private Sector* (2013),

¹ Fang, T., and M. Gunderson. 2014. "Poverty Dynamics among Vulnerable Groups in Canada: Longitudinal Analysis based on SLID 1993-2010." Paper presented at Inequality in Canada: Driving Forces, Outcomes and Policy." Institute for Research on Public Policy, February 24-25, 2014, Ottawa.



- the holding of a national employer forum (2014/15) to advance employment of people with disabilities by the private sector,
- certain provinces adopting “employment first” policies for disabled clients,
- work by the Canadian Human Rights Commission on mental health and employment, and
- the introduction of a federal accessibility law (Bill C-81) to eliminate systemic barriers and advance equality of opportunity in nationally regulated corporations and organizations.