Supporting Newcomers with Disabilities

This issue explores barriers to accessing settlement services for newcomers to Canada with disabilities and how settlement service providers can improve their accessibility. This info sheet focuses on adults with disabilities, but more information on supporting both children and adults can be found on AMSSA's Specialized Resource Page on Newcomers with Disabilities.

Introduction

1 in 7 adults in Canada report having a disability that limits their daily activities.[1] Although the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (2001) states that foreign nationals are inadmissible on health grounds if their health condition "might reasonably be expected to cause excess demand on health or social services,"[2] newcomers to Canada may have disabilities that are not expected to cause excessive demand. In addition, refugees, protected persons, and those in the family class are exempt from this clause.[3] Finally, disability is not necessarily a lifelong condition, and newcomers may develop or be diagnosed with disabilities after arrival in Canada. Therefore settlement services can expect to encounter clients with disabilities in the course of their work. IRCC's recipient guidelines contain provisions for funding this.

Terminology and Statistics

The term "disability" encompasses many different conditions, including physical and developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, and chronic diseases. The most common types of disability in Canada are:

- Pain-related (9.7%)
- Flexibility (7.6%)
- Mobility (7.2%)
- Mental health-related (3.9%)
- Dexterity (3.5%)
- Hearing (3.2%)
- Seeing (2.7%)
- Learning (2.3%)
- Memory (2.3%)
- Developmental (0.6%)
- Unknown (0.3%)

The prevalence of disability increases with age, and women are more likely than men to have a disability. About one quarter of all people with a disability are considered to have a severe disability.[4]

The World Health Organization defines **disability** as an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.
- An **impairment** is a problem in body function or structure.
- An **activity limitation** is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action
- A **participation restriction** is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.

Settlement Needs of Newcomers with Disabilities

Newcomers with disabilities can be regarded as multi-barriered. Disability in Canada correlates negatively with employment rates, income, education, and housing, so newcomers with disabilities can be expected to face additional hardship in these areas.[5]

Legend: ■ People with disabilities   ■ People without disabilities
(*Figures are for people in Canada over age 15*)

Newcomers may also need to be supported to understand the social meaning of disability in Canada:
- Legislation prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities and guarantees people with disabilities equal benefit and protection under the law.[6]
- Employers and service providers have a duty to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities (unless the accommodation this would cause "undue hardship").[7]

Social Model of Disability

The "social model of disability" is a term used to reflect the fact that while impairments and conditions are issues of fact, the degree to which an impairment affects an individual's ability to participate in society is highly dependent on social and cultural factors.[8] Impairments or conditions which pose relatively small barriers to full participation in Canada might have posed large barriers in a newcomer's home culture, and vice versa.

Footnotes

[1] Statistics Canada (2012). Disability in Canada: Initial findings from the Canadian Survey on Disability.

[2, 3] Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (2001).

[4] Statistics Canada (2012). A profile of persons with disabilities among Canadians aged 15 years or older.

[5] Statistics Canada (2012). Canadian Survey on Disability ; Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (2010). Research Highlight: 2001 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey.
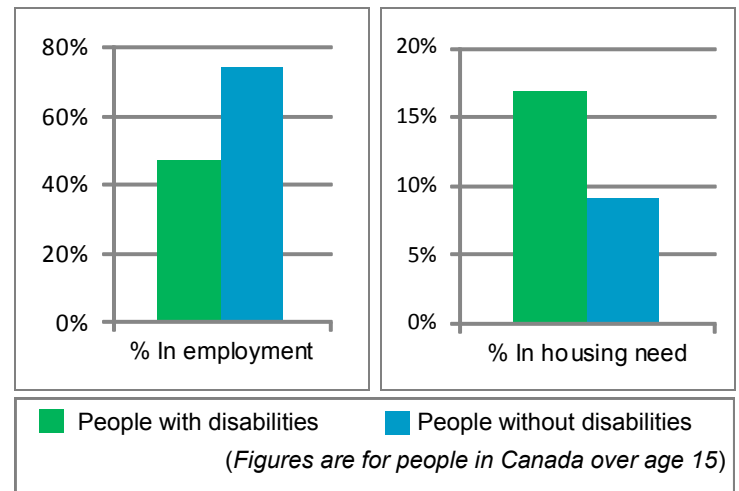
[6] Canadian Human Rights Act (1985); Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

[7] Canadian Human Rights Commission (2013). The Duty to Accommodate

[8] Watson Hyatt, Glenda. "What is in a word? The evolution of disability language," *SPARC BC News,* Fall 2005, p. 12-14.

Barriers to Accessing Settlement Services

The barriers to accessing settlement services faced by people with disabilities are as diverse as newcomers with disabilities themselves, varying by country/culture of origin, type of impairment or condition, and the individual themselves. Settlement at Work provides a useful summary of the five types of barriers to accessibility:

Barrier	Definition	Example
Physical / Architectural barriers	Features of buildings or spaces.	Hallways/doorways that are too narrow to be used with a wheelchair or electric scooter.
Technology barriers	Technology that can't be adapted to support assistive devices.	Flashing website graphics that may cause seizures.
Information / Communication barriers	Something that prevents a person from understanding information.	Print of documents is too small to read.
Organizational barriers	An organization's policies, practices, or procedures	A policy that prohibits computers in classrooms and workshops, with no exception for assistive technology.
Attitudinal barriers	Attitudes of people involved in the provision of a service	Assuming that a client with a developmental disability will not be able to find suitable employment.

Improving Access to Settlement Services

Physical Barriers

Measuring Up lists seven principles of universal design:

- **Equality:** space is useful to people with diverse abilities.
- **Flexibility**: the space accommodates a wide range of abilities.
- **Simplicity:** the space is easy to navigate and understand.
- **Perceptible information:** the space communicates necessary information effectively regardless of a person's sensory abilities or any background conditions.
- **Tolerance:** the space minimizes hazards and safety concerns.
- **Low physical effort:** The space can be used easily with minimal effort.
- **Appropriate size and space:** The space is sized to accommodate everyone's approach, reach, manipulation and use regardless of body size, posture or mobility.

Technology Barriers

The Web Accessibility Initiative gives guidelines on ensuring that websites and other technology are fully accessible, including features like support for screen-reading technology, captioning for audio content, support for keyboard shortcuts, and other measures.

Information and Communications Barriers

CNIB's Clear Print Accessibility Guide has recommendations concerning the contrast, colour, spacing, font, layout, and paper finish of printed materials.

Public Works and Government Services Canada provides Guidelines for Writing in Plain Language, including focusing on the reader, using familiar words and phrases, and keeping sentences concise.

Organizational barriers

Review organizational policies and procedures through the lens of accessibility. A policy that guides staff who think a client may have an undiagnosed disability will help ensure that the clients' needs are better met.

Attitudinal barriers

Remember that an individual's condition or impairment may have posed much bigger problems for them in their home culture, or it may not have posed any problems at all.

Accessible Events and Activities

- **Advertising:** Provide plenty of notice, and include information about the event's accessibility in advertising materials.
- **Registration:** Have a way for people to indicate their needs during the registration process.
- **Transportation:** If possible, choose an accessible location for the event and post clear signage.
- **Setting up the room:** Leave plenty of space around tables and other gathering points and try to eliminate/reduce background noise.
- **Volunteers and facilitators:** Train volunteers and facilitators in how to respectfully respond to and assist people with disabilities.
- **Agenda:** Ensure regular breaks in the agenda of meetings and workshops.
- **Presentations:** Remind presenters to remain on schedule and ensure they describe the content of their slides or other visual materials.

For more information see Measuring Up's Accessible Public Event Guidelines and Employment and Social Development Canada's Guide to Planning Inclusive Meetings.

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