

Support for persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 outbreak

Written by Administrator

Saturday, 31 October 2020 23:00 - Last Updated Sunday, 01 November 2020 22:00

We recently received this email from the head of the Office of Disability Issues within the Government of Canada outlining various supports for persons with disabilities.

Dear Ms. Parlor:

On behalf of the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion, I am responding to your email regarding support for persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 outbreak. I regret the delay in replying.

I understand the circumstances that prompted you to write. The Government of Canada recognizes that some vulnerable groups are disproportionately impacted by this pandemic, in particular Canadians with disabilities. As such, we understand that some are dealing with underlying medical conditions that put them at greater risk of serious complications related to COVID-19. Others face discrimination and barriers in accessing information, social services, and health care. For others, the need for self-isolation and physical distancing creates additional challenges.

From the onset, the Government has taken steps to ensure that the interests and needs of persons with disabilities are being taken into consideration in the decisions and measures adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in the spirit of “nothing without us” from the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, the Government established a COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group, comprised of experts in disability inclusion, to provide advice on the real-time lived experiences of persons with disabilities during this crisis, the issues, challenges and systemic gaps that exist as well as the best strategies and measures to be taken.

This Advisory Group has played a key role in providing advice on guidance issued by the Public Health Agency of Canada on COVID-19 and persons with disabilities (www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/guidance-documents/people-with-disabilities.html)

as well as the Public Health Ethics Framework entitled

A guide for use in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada.

The section on ethical values and principles recognizes the human rights of all people regardless of condition, including persons with disabilities. The framework is available at:

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www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/canadas-reponse/ethics-framework-guide-use-response-covid-19-pandemic.html

In addition to public health guidance, the Advisory Group and the disability community have raised accessible communications and the need for engagement with persons with disabilities as a key issue. That is why, as part of National AccessAbility Week, the Government announced an additional \$1.1 million in funding to support national disability organizations through the Disability component of the Social Development Partnership Program. This funding will enhance their communications and engagement activities to better address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with disabilities.

Over the years, the Government of Canada has put in place several initiatives to address barriers faced by Canadians with disabilities, including legislation and policy, social and economic supports, and transfers provided to the provinces and territories. Therefore, the federal government and provincial and territorial governments are all responsible for legislation, programs, policies and services for persons with disabilities. In addition to administering specific programs and services for persons with disabilities, the Government of Canada supports provinces and territories in providing health, income and social supports through two large transfers: the Canada Social Transfer and the Canada Health Transfer.

The Government is working closely with provinces and territories to ensure that all necessary and appropriate supports are available to ensure a comprehensive coordinated response to COVID-19. To further support vulnerable Canadians during this pandemic, the Government is transferring an additional \$500 million to provinces and territories for critical health care system needs and to support mitigation efforts, as needed. This could include help to support access to testing, acquisition of equipment, and enhancing surveillance and monitoring.

Further, on July 16, 2020, the Government announced over \$19 billion in transfer payments to help provinces and territories safely restart their economies. This investment, through the Safe Restart Agreement, will help address the seven priorities agreed upon by Canada's First Ministers. For example, this funding will provide support to vulnerable Canadians who are more at risk for more severe cases of COVID-19. It will also help to increase testing and contact tracing of the virus to protect Canadians from a future outbreak and support the capacity of our

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health care systems, including services for people facing mental health challenges. Lastly, it will provide income support for vulnerable workers who do not have paid sick leave, so that all Canadians can stay healthy.

In addition, Minister Qualtrough has written to her provincial and territorial counterparts to raise fundamental issues related to equitable access to health care, visitation policies and access to protective personal equipment for persons with disabilities. She requested that social assistance recipients not have temporary federal emergency benefits clawed back from their current benefits.

Since the beginning of the outbreak, the Government of Canada announced a range of financial measures that benefit persons with disabilities. From May to August 2020, the Canada Emergency Student Benefit (CESB) provided emergency financial relief to students and recent graduates who were unable to work, or unable to find work, due to reasons related to COVID-19. Eligible students received \$1,250 per month, plus an additional \$750 per month if they had dependents or a disability, for a maximum of \$2,000 per month. Other financial measures include a one-time special payment through the Goods and Services Tax and Harmonized Sales Tax credit for low- and modest-income Canadians, including persons with disabilities. The average additional benefit is close to \$400 for single individuals and close to \$600 for couples.

On June 5, 2020, the Government of Canada announced a one-time, non-taxable and non-reportable payment of \$600, to support Canadians with disabilities for extraordinary expenses incurred during the pandemic. On July 17, the Government announced plans to make the benefit available to more people and expand the one-time payment to include approximately 1.7 million Canadians with disabilities.

The special one-time, non-taxable payment of up to \$600 will be automatically issued to individuals who have a valid Disability Tax Credit (DTC) certificate provided by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) or are eligible for the DTC and applied for it by September 25, 2020, as well as beneficiaries, as at July 1, 2020, of Canada Pension Plan (CPP) Disability pension, Quebec Pension Plan Disability pension and various disability supports provided by Veterans Affairs Canada. Seniors with disabilities, who were eligible for the one-time seniors' payment announced on May 12, 2020, and who are also eligible for the one-time disability payment, will receive a total of \$600 broken into two payments. The first batch of this payment is expected to go out to eligible Canadians with disabilities starting October 30, 2020. For more information about the one-time payment, please visit www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/covid19-emergency-benefits/one-time-payment-persons-disabilities.html

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On June 5, 2020, the Government of Canada also announced a new National Workplace Accessibility Stream of the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities. This stream will provide additional funding in 2020-2021 to help Canadians with disabilities and their employers to improve workplace accessibility and access to jobs in response to COVID-19. Some of the activities supported by this fund will include setting up accessible and effective work-from-home measures, as well as expanding online training opportunities; creating inclusive workplaces, whether virtual or physical; connecting people with disabilities and employers; training for in-demand jobs; and wage subsidies.

The Government of Canada is also committed to ensuring that vulnerable populations can access the essential supplies and services that they need during this difficult time. The Emergency Community Support program will flow \$350 million through national organizations that have the ability to get funds quickly to community organizations (for example, non-profits, charities and other qualified donees) that serve vulnerable populations. These organizations play a vital role in reducing barriers through delivery of groceries, medications or other needed items, or personal outreach to assess individuals' needs and connect them to community supports. This funding could also enable organizations to offer more transportation services, such as accompanying or driving seniors or persons with disabilities to appointments.

Further, the Government of Canada is investing \$100 million to improve access to food for Canadians facing social, economic, and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. About 1 in 5 Canadians accessing food banks receive provincial disability supports. This investment will help organizations find new creative ways to reach persons in need, so they can continue to carry out their important work while respecting physical distancing guidelines.

As part of Canada's COVID-19 Economic Response Plan, the Government has transitioned from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit to a simplified Employment Insurance (EI) program, effective September 27, 2020, to provide income support to eligible workers who remain unable to work. Recognizing that many workers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic will have lost their jobs or worked reduced hours, the Government has introduced a set of temporary measures to facilitate access to EI benefits. These measures include allowing Canadians to qualify for EI with 120 hours of work, introducing a minimum benefit rate of \$500 per week (or \$300 for extended parental benefits), and providing a minimum entitlement of 26 weeks of regular benefits.

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As part of the EI program, the EI sickness benefit provides up to 15 weeks of income support to eligible claimants who are unable to work because of illness, injury or quarantine, to allow them time to restore their health so that they can return to work. The EI sickness benefit complements a range of other supports that are available for longer-term illness and disability in Canada, including benefits offered through employer-sponsored group insurance plans, private coverage plans held by individuals and CPP long-term disability benefits, in addition to provincial and territorial programs.

The Government of Canada has also introduced a suite of new benefits that are delivered by the CRA to support economic recovery and Canadians who are unable to work due to COVID-19. First, the Canada Recovery Benefit helps workers who have stopped working or had their employment or self-employment income reduced by at least 50 percent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is effective since September 27, 2020, for one year and provides a benefit amount of \$500 per week, for up to 26 weeks, to workers ineligible for EI, mainly the self-employed and those working in the gig economy.

Second, the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit supports public health measures by providing income support to workers who are unable to work because they are sick or must self-isolate due to COVID-19, or have underlying conditions that would make them more susceptible to COVID-19. This benefit provides \$500 per week, for up to 2 weeks, effective September 27, 2020, for one year.

Third, the Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit responds to situations in which workers are unable to work because they must care for a child under the age of 12 or a family member who requires supervision because schools, day-cares or care facilities are closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, or because the child or family member is sick and/or required to quarantine or is at high risk of serious health implications because of COVID-19. It is effective from September 27, 2020, for one year, and provides \$500 per week, for up to 26 weeks, per household to eligible Canadians.

For the most up-to-date information about the measures put in place by the Government of Canada, I invite you to regularly visit www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/economic-response-plan.html. On this website, you will find helpful tools, such as a virtual assistant, and related resources for individuals and businesses. Additional information about the EI benefits and the recovery benefits can also be found at the following websites:

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- www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei.html (for the EI benefits); and
- www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/cerb-application/transition.html#h2.2 (for the recovery benefits).

To learn more information about Canada's whole-of-government actions to respond to the virus outbreak, I invite you to visit our website at www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/canadas-reponse/government-canada-takes-action-covid-19.html

Aside from supports specific to the pandemic, the CPP Disability program, a component of the Canada Pension Plan, is Canada's largest federal income security program for persons with disabilities. It is intended to provide eligible contributors with partial income replacement if they are incapable of regularly working at any substantially gainful occupation due to a severe and prolonged disability. Beyond the CPP Disability pension, other forms of support exist and might be available to you. At the federal level, the CRA administers tax credits that are available to persons with a disability, which may assist them in increasing their disposable income. These credits include the DTC and other tax credits that can help offset the cost of medical expenses, including medication, personal aids, therapy sessions, and caregiver and attendant fees. If you wish to obtain further information, you may contact the CRA, by calling, toll-free, 1-800-959-8281, or by visiting the Agency's website at www.cra-arc.gc.ca.

You can also visit the Benefits Finder website, available at www.canadabenefits.gc.ca, which helps users identify federal, provincial and territorial benefits available to Canadians, and the programs and services that are most relevant to an individual's situation.

I would also like to take the opportunity to bring to your attention measures announced in the Speech from the Throne, delivered on September 23, 2020, to support persons with disabilities. As part of its agenda, the Government announced a Disability Inclusion Plan, which will include: a new Canadian Disability Benefit modelled after the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors; a robust employment strategy for Canadians with disabilities; and a better process to determine eligibility for Government disability programs and benefits.

We recognize that while we have made great strides in fostering inclusion and equality for persons with disabilities, there is still much work to do as we move toward a more accessible and inclusive Canada. As the COVID-19 situation evolves, the Government of Canada will

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continue to work with the disability community, other governments, stakeholders and all interested citizens to improve the social and economic inclusion of Canadians with disabilities.

I hope that this information proves helpful in addressing your concerns. Thank you for taking the time to write.

Yours sincerely,

Krista Wilcox
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