Environmental Scan: Emergency Management Policies and Programs for People with Disabilities in Canada (Executive Summary)

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About the MacEachen Institute

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Opening Note

Given the time constraints around information collection for this project, it is understood that the report is not a comprehensive catalogue of all emergency measures for people with disabilities in Canada. The goal of this environmental scan is to begin to capture and understand the current environment – around current approaches, policies, procedures, programs, laws/by-laws, and best practices in emergency measures management for people with disabilities across Canada. This includes public safety events (e.g. natural disasters, flooding, fires, industrial accidents, acts of terrorism), public health events (e.g. viral disease outbreaks); and how current general emergency measures management plans integrate the needs and accessibility requirements of people with disabilities.

Executive Summary

Sponsor and Purpose of the Study

This research project was sponsored by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). The Canadian federal and provincial governments are committed to advancing accessibility in their respective jurisdictions. The purpose of this project was to scan Canadian federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions for existing approaches, best practices, policies and procedures that exist at the intersection of persons with disabilities and emergency management.

This project is meant to be initial scanning work of policies and programs to support persons with disabilities during an emergency; it is not a comprehensive catalogue of all emergency measures for persons with disabilities in Canada.

Scope and Method: Federal, Provincial and International Jurisdictional Scan of Public Documents on Persons with Disabilities and Emergency Management

We use the *Accessible Canada Act* definition of "Disability" in this report. The Act defines "disability" as "any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment — or a functional limitation — whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society."

This environmental scan includes: (1) a review of publicly available material in Canadian and selected international jurisdictions; and (2) the results of a survey we conducted of Canadian federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions about their emergency management policies and programs.

Our review was conducted between September 2019 and March 2020. We examined relevant documents from Canada, Canadian provinces and territories, the United Kingdom, the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. We also reviewed publicly available information from not-for-profit organizations (e.g. Red Cross).

For the purposes of the study, we used a cybernetic understanding of control, which examines a system's ability to gather information, set standards and change behaviour. We collected and analyzed data according to these three themes.

This report focuses on Federal and Provincial/Territorial programs; however, many relevant programs and policies lie within local authorities (e.g. municipal governments). Canada also has many diverse geographic and demographic contexts to consider, and this report only considers these when presented in jurisdictional documents. Persons with disabilities who reside in institutions are only discussed in the report when their specific circumstances were raised by jurisdictions.

Finally, most survey data were collected by the end of February 2020, approximately two weeks before COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. Therefore, the study does not refer intentionally to challenges that emerged as a result of the global pandemic.

Context: Many people have disabilities; people with disabilities are diverse as are their networks and capabilities

According to the 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability (CSD), approximately one in five Canadians aged 15 years and over has at least one disability that impacts their day-to-day life.[1] Challenges and barriers can be compounded for persons with disabilities, as they can experience multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Intersections of age, race, disability, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, immigration status and socio-economic status can accentuate the barriers a person may face.[2]

When considering emergency response, government encourages persons with disabilities to develop personal support networks. Persons with disabilities, however, face particular challenges when integrating with the general public that may hinder their capacity to develop support networks. Persons with disabilities may not be employed or enrolled in school, for example. It is also important to consider needs at the individual level, rather than treat persons with disabilities as a homogenous group.

Context: Emergencies increase uncertainty and put systems under enormous stress; vulnerable populations can become more vulnerable

There are several types of emergencies—fires, floods, natural disasters, chemical spills, disease outbreaks, violence, for example—and no emergency is exactly like the previous one. Emergencies occur in a legal, ethical, financial, public, environmental and institutional context; there can be time pressure, shifting conditions, unclear goals, degraded information and team interactions. They can involve a few people in one place, or millions spread out over countries.

Difficult questions about how to allocate limited resources come to the fore during emergencies. The physical and intellectual challenges and surprises that operational staff face can be trying, if not overwhelming. Public, private and not-for-profit sectors have improved emergency response over the last decades by adopting numerous policies and practices. Nevertheless, the strain exerted on a system during an unplanned event can make vulnerable people even more vulnerable as available resources become scarce and people's risk exposure increases.

Context: National and international commitments to improving support for persons with disabilities during emergencies already exist and continue to grow

Concern for persons with disabilities in emergency management has been growing nationally and internationally since the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities. There is also agreement across several Western jurisdictions that the access and functional needs of persons with disabilities should be integrated within each stage of an emergency—planning, response and recovery. A functional needs approach is understood to enhance Disaster Risk Reduction, as well as individual and community resiliency.

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[1] Statistics Canada. "A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017". Canadian Disability Survey. November 2018. Retrieved from: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2018002-eng.htm

[2] City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) and City of Ottawa. "People Living with Disability: Equity & Inclusion Lens Snapshot". 2017. Retrieved from: https://documents.ottawa.ca/sites/documents/files/disabil_ss_en.pdf, p. 3

Information is decentralized but not disaggregated

Given the complexity and time-sensitive nature of emergency response, information-sharing is crucial to success. There is no one central repository of information. In the past, some jurisdictions tried to compile databases of information for vulnerable persons, but these databases were challenging to maintain.

Although it is accepted that collecting disaggregated data by sex, age, gender and disability is good practice, it is implemented inconsistently.[3] The lack of collection and analysis of disaggregated disability data can mean that decision-makers are less motivated to design age-, gender- and disability-appropriate programs.[4]

Standards vary as do practices for developing and reporting on them

Many governments have implemented standards to outline accessibility of public programs and services. The *Accessible Canada Act* demonstrates the Federal Government's commitment to support persons with disabilities and remove barriers throughout society. Many provinces and territories across Canada have also implemented accessibility legislation that covers provincial and territorial jurisdiction.

With a variety of jurisdictions across the country, some variation is to be expected. However, it raises questions about fairness and creates challenges for coordinating across jurisdictions. Moreover, many jurisdictions directly include persons with disabilities when developing standards. This is considered best practice but not all jurisdictions do it. Finally, there is at times a dearth of performance data on how effectively public agencies serve persons with disabilities during emergencies. More performance metrics can help to strengthen accountability and benchmark performance and monitor progress over time.

Stigma is a challenge; focus on functional needs, not disabilities

Behaviour change often includes training and awareness programs. Many jurisdictions have implemented programs, and some have introduced Functional Needs Frameworks (FNF) to support inclusive and person-centred emergency preparedness.

While standards are a focus for many government organizations, the non-profit organizations often focus on addressing stigma and negative perceptions of persons with disabilities. They cite stigma as a key barrier preventing persons with disabilities from fully participating in emergency management initiatives.

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[3] IFRC, 2018, p. 100
[4] IFRC, 2018, p. 98

Areas for improvement, COVID-19 and further studies

Many organizations, particularly in the not-for-profit sector, have recommended areas in which government can improve performance with respect to persons with disabilities and emergency management. Many of these recommendations are outlined in the section that summarizes reports by the not-for-profit sector (Part D in this report).

The COVID-19 pandemic has called attention to support for persons with disabilities during an emergency. COVID-19 has demonstrated that emergencies like this one require a whole-of-society response that includes public, private and not-for-profit organizations, as well as the general public, particularly in circumstances that are changing rapidly.

Importantly, while there are many observations in this report that can help improve emergency management as it relates to pandemics, COVID-19 will almost certainly raise new issues and perspectives that were not captured by this report.