

## **Ensuring No One is Left Behind: The Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Climate Emergency Preparedness and Response**

*Written Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance to inform the 2020 Budget*

**Submitted on behalf of:**



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## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the government, with leadership from Public Safety Canada, develop and implement a national emergency response and planning strategy reflecting the principles of *The Accessible Canada Act*.
2. That the government, specifically Public Safety Canada, assess the status of emergency preparedness in response to the unique needs of people with disabilities to identify gaps in the current system and subsequently inform the codification of rules and regulations.
3. That the government provide funding to develop a training program based on national and international best practices to educate first responders to provide appropriate, efficient and equitable services to individuals with disabilities.



## ABOUT MARCH OF DIMES CANADA

March of Dimes Canada (MODC) is the country's largest community service organization for people with physical disabilities, and offers a wide array of programs and services to Canadians with disabilities, their families and communities. MODC has operated as a service-delivery organization in Ontario since 1951 and has an in-depth understanding of the diverse needs of people living with disabilities based on our role as a service provider.

MODC delivers services under four core program areas:

- **AccessAbility® Services** improve personal mobility and community accessibility for people with disabilities.
- **Community Engagement & Integration Services** enhance independence, community participation and quality of life for people with disabilities.
- **Community Support Services** provide assistance to people with physical disabilities to enable them to live in their community and remain in their own homes for as long as possible.
- **Employment Services** assist people with disabilities to obtain and retain a job.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Extreme weather events, such as heatwaves, drought, wildfire and heavy precipitation causing floods and landslides, are expected to increase in frequency due to global climate change<sup>1</sup>. Given the increased probability of natural disasters, there has been a shift in approaching weather-related disasters from “post-impact activities (i.e. ad hoc relief and reconstruction) to a more systematic and comprehensive risk management process”.<sup>2</sup> Yet, emergency preparedness planning has largely failed to integrate the unique needs of people with disabilities as part of its response<sup>3</sup>. People with disabilities are particularly vulnerable in the event of a natural disaster, as people with disabilities experience multidimensional inequalities (due to personal factors, environmental factors, bodily impairments, and activity limitation and participation restrictions)<sup>4</sup>.

In 2017 one in five (6.2 million people) Canadians aged 15 years or older had one or more disabilities<sup>5</sup>. And this number is expected to increase as the population grows older, as the likelihood of disability increases with age<sup>6</sup>. Yet, the 2019 *Emergency Management Strategy for Canada: Toward a Resilient 2030* lacks any action related to addressing the gaps in emergency

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<sup>1</sup> Keim, M (2008). Building Human Resilience: The role of public health preparedness and response as an adaptation to climate change. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 35(5), 508-516. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2008.08.022>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, G., Savoia, E., Elgura, L., Crowther, S., Cohen, B. ...Koh, H. (2009). Emergency preparedness for vulnerable populations: People with special health care needs. *Public Health Rep*, 124(2), 338-343. doi: 10.1177/003335490912400225

<sup>4</sup> Gaskin, C.J., Taylor, D., Kinnear, S. ... Moran, M. (2017). Factors associated with the climate change vulnerability and the adaptive capacity of people with disability: A systematic review. *Water, climate, and society*, 9, 801-814. doi: 10.1175/WCAS-D-16-0126.1

<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada. A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and older, 2017. Retrieved June 27, 2019 from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2018002-eng.pdf?st=COL-hma4>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



response planning with respect to people with disabilities<sup>7</sup>. In response to the theme of the 2020 budget submission, *Climate Emergency: The required transition to a low carbon economy*, our recommendations offer specific action items to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities within all future emergency response planning.

## RECOMMENDATIONS EXPLAINED

**Recommendation 1. That the government, with leadership from Public Safety Canada, develop and implement a national emergency response and planning strategy reflecting the principles of *The Accessible Canada Act*.**

With the passage of *An Act to ensure a barrier-free Canada* (also known as *The Accessible Canada Act*), Canada's first national accessibility legislation, there is now a requirement ensuring the proactive identification, removal and prevention of barriers to accessibility. The Act focuses on areas under federal jurisdiction relevant to national emergency management including design and delivery of programs services; the procurement of goods, services and facilities; and communication (other than information and communication technologies)<sup>8</sup>. While *The Accessible Canada Act* provides for the development of accessibility standards and gives the Government of Canada authority to create accessibility regulations within these areas, this will happen over a period of time. In the meanwhile, it is critical that a national emergency response and planning strategy that ensures the inclusion of people with disabilities in emergency response and planning efforts be developed. This should be done in alignment with the principles of *The Accessible Canada Act*, in particular "laws, policies, programs, services and structures must take into account the disabilities of persons, the different ways that persons interact with their environments and the multiple and intersecting forms of marginalization and discrimination faced by persons."<sup>9</sup>

In January 2019, Public Safety Canada released *Emergency Management Strategy for Canada: Toward a Resilient 2030*<sup>10</sup>. While the strategy recognizes that "the impact of disasters are not uniform across society, and that different variables can intersect and contribute to the level of risk facing vulnerable populations"<sup>11</sup>, there are no actionable items within the strategy to rectify the gaps in emergency preparedness with respect to people with disabilities

A comprehensive strategy must include, but should be limited to, the following key considerations: identifying effective means of communicating real-time emergency information in accessible formats, the involvement of people with disabilities in the development of pre- and post-disaster planning, transportation considerations for people with disabilities before,

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<sup>7</sup>Public Safety Canada (2019). *Emergency Management Strategy for Canada: Toward a resilient 2030*. Retrieved from: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/mrgncy-mngmnt-strtg/index-en.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> An Act to ensure a barrier-free Canada (2019). Retrieved from: <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/bill/C-81/royal-assent>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Public Safety Canada (2019). *Emergency Management Strategy for Canada: Toward a resilient 2030*. Retrieved from: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/mrgncy-mngmnt-strtg/index-en.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



during and after a natural disaster, the need for further training for first responders and addressing the needs of people with multiple disabilities.

**Recommendation 2. That the government, specifically Public Safety Canada, assess the status of emergency preparedness for people with disabilities to identify gaps in the current system and subsequently inform the codification of rules and regulations.**

At present, there is limited information available in Canada regarding the current state of emergency preparedness for people with disabilities in the event of a natural disaster. Given that it is the responsibility of the federal government to coordinate “the activities of government institutions relating to emergency management with those of the provinces”<sup>12</sup> the federal government must take a leadership role to establish evidence-based policies and programs with respect to emergency management and people with disabilities, and promote a common approach to emergency management.

An assessment of emergency preparedness for people with disabilities must be done in parallel to the development of a comprehensive strategy regarding emergency management and people with disabilities (see Recommendation 1), to ensure gaps in the current system are addressed and solutions are identified and ultimately adopted in code and regulations. This assessment should gather information using regional expertise of both people with disabilities and emergency management personnel, to recognize gaps in the area of emergency preparedness and disability, as well as to identify best practices among federal, provincial/territorial and municipal governments. Following this assessment, a research agenda to answer knowledge gaps based on the limited data that exist on the needs of people with disabilities in disasters should be highlighted, and subsequently an agreed upon set of experimental studies and needed data should be identified to further best practices.

**Recommendation 3. That the government provide funding to develop a training program based on national and international best practices to educate first responders to provide appropriate, efficient and equitable services to individuals with disabilities.**

Currently, the majority of resources available in Canada relating to emergency management and people with disabilities put the responsibility and onus of emergency management planning on people with disabilities in the form of guides, webinars and pamphlets<sup>13</sup>. There is a lack of coordinated training for first responders and emergency personnel in regards to how to best support people with disabilities in the event of a climate-related emergency.

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<sup>12</sup> Emergency Management Act (2007, c. 15). Retrieved from: <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/e-4.56/page-1.html>

<sup>13</sup> Public Safety Canada (2010). Emergency preparedness guide for people with disabilities/special needs. Retrieved from: <https://www.getprepared.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/pplwthdsblts/index-en.aspx>



To address this issue, we recommend the development of a training program based on national and international best practices for first responders to ensure the appropriate, efficient and equitable delivery of service to people with disabilities. The training should be developed in coordination with the federal government's provincial and territorial counterparts, and should be made available at no cost to all existing and future first responders. The training program should be designed to be inclusive of all disabilities (as defined in *The Accessible Canada Act*), and educate first responders on the barriers people with disabilities experience, particularly in the context of emergency planning and preparedness. The training should also speak to the importance and value of supports for people with disabilities including service animals, wheelchairs and computers. This training should be developed in collaboration with emergency planners, first responders and people with disabilities.



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