



**Written Submission for the Pre-Budget  
Consultations in Advance of the  
Upcoming Federal Budget**

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### List of Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** CNIB Foundation recommends the Government of Canada continue to strengthen Canada's workforce by investing \$6 million over 3 years in CNIB's "Come to Work" program.
- **Recommendation 2:** CNIB Foundation recommends the Government of Canada donate retired smartphones to CNIB's Phone it Forward program as current government smartphones are replaced with newer technology.

## About CNIB Foundation

Celebrating 100 years in 2018, CNIB is a non-profit organization driven to change what it is to be blind today. We deliver innovative programs and powerful advocacy that empowers people impacted by blindness to live their dreams and tear down barriers to inclusion. Our work is powered by a network of volunteers, donors and partners from coast to coast to coast.

## CNIB Foundation response to COVID-19

There are 1.5 million Canadians living with significant and irreversible sight loss today. These Canadian are already at greater risk of social isolation and reduced community participation than their sighted peers. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased these risks with higher levels of isolation and new barriers to accessing essential services in a world defined by physical and social distancing.

Millions of Canadians, including those with sight loss, have been displaced from work. For some this is temporary, but we know that the economy won't rebound to pre-pandemic status overnight. During this time, CNIB Foundation has ramped up our virtual career and employment programs to ensure Canadians with sight loss are ready to enter the job market when the economy reopens. We offer virtual employment bootcamp, one-on-one career support, goal setting workshops, and peer support groups, many of which are funded through a \$1 million investment from Budget 2019.

In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for our career and employment programs has increased significantly as the pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities – vulnerable groups and those living on low-incomes have experienced the most job losses, reduction in hours worked, and restricted access to community services and supports<sup>1</sup>. As the Government of Canada focuses on restarting the economy after the pandemic, CNIB Foundation urges that the government prioritize opportunities for economic growth and labour market engagement that includes people who are blind or partially sighted.

## Addressing a Need for Canadian Businesses

With years of experience serving Canadians who are blind or partially sighted, CNIB Foundation is a leader in the area of employment training and development for those living with sight loss. We smash barriers and ensure Canadians have the support they need to live connected, rewarding, and independent lives.

According to a report by the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, most companies consulted in that report had practices for accommodating existing employees who acquired a disability. However, most were not actively connecting with jobseekers and potential new hires with disabilities because there is no clear, straightforward approach to identifying qualified candidates with disabilities<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Economic and Fiscal Snapshot 2020*. Department of Finance Canada, July 8, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *Rethinking Disability in the Private Sector – Report from the Panel on Labour Market Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2013.

Through a \$1 million investment in Budget 2019, the CNIB Foundation's Come to Work program is developing a solution that is employee-focused, with the jobseeker, or Talent Pool member, identifying their skills, interests, and accommodation needs. As a community partner, the CNIB Foundation helps Canadian businesses begin the process of engaging and employing our Talent Pool. CNIB Foundation staff work with employers across the country to understand the unique business's talent needs and refer candidates with sight loss resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship.

## **Building on Past Investments**

Only 28 percent of working-age adults with sight loss are employed full time, compared to the national employment rate of 65.5 percent. This un-and under-employment of Canadians with sight loss costs the Canadian economy an estimated \$15.3 billion<sup>3</sup>. With the \$1 million invested in CNIB's Come to Work program from Budget 2019, CNIB Foundation has seen considerable movement in cultivating both a pool of talented jobseekers with sight loss, and relationships with Canadian enterprises looking to hire.

Through our Come to Work program, CNIB Foundation continues to match supply with demand. By increasing the pool of work-ready talent, Come to Work is ensuring our pool of jobseekers are prepared for the duties required by employers. Come to Work continuously draws in talent and creates a full pipeline of work-ready people with sight loss for employers across the country to draw from.


However, the systemic barriers that prevent Canadians who are blind or partially sighted from accessing employment opportunities are even more prevalent and engrained in workplace culture than we thought. Attitudinal and implicit biases continue to be a barrier to hiring people with sight loss. Simply, employers are unsure how Canadians who are blind or partially sighted can work like their sighted peers. This has caused a huge unemployment rate for the sight loss community. As a result, the CNIB Foundation has invested much of the first year of our program in employment-readiness programs for Talent Pool members to ensure they have the skills and training that are needed by employers.

While our employment-readiness program is essential to ensuring our Talent Pool has the skills that employers are looking for, CNIB Foundation has also spent much of our first year of this project connecting with potential employers to offer support and dispel myths about hiring an employee with sight loss. The outreach component of our Come to Work program is an integral component of this project, as attitudinal barriers keep many Canadians with sight loss from entering the workforce. Working with employers to combat these attitudinal barriers and implicit biases ensures our Talent Pool has opportunities at Canadian businesses across the country.

A future investment of \$6 million over three years will see the maturation of this program as Talent Pool members have the skills they need to be interviewed and employed by a Canadian business. This funding will also open more doors to potential employer

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<sup>3</sup> *International Levels of Employment Study (ILES)*, 2018, CNIB. Presented at 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Accessibility Conference, May 2019, University of Guelph.



partners through our extensive outreach campaign to Canadian employers from coast to coast to coast. This funding is imperative, given the economic and employment situation that the COVID-19 pandemic has created for many Canadians with sight loss.

In the first year of this program, our Talent Pool has grown to nearly 600 participants across the country. We have relationships with Canadian businesses ranging from international companies like Apple to medium sized, regional enterprises like Waterloo Brewing Company. In the coming months, the CNIB Foundation will engage with BIAs and Chambers of Commerce to continue growing the number of partner organizations and businesses that are ready to hire an employee with sight loss. We are seeking additional resources to continue engaging with Canadian businesses, while ensuring our Talent Pool is progressing through work-readiness activities including:

- Workshops and seminars
- Technology training
- Program reviews and feedback

Building on the success of our first year, we wish to strengthen the impact of the Come to Work Program in partnership with the Government of Canada. Through this funding we will:

1. Provide programs and resources that move people on their employment journey through the 5 stages of job readiness from "Adjusting to Vision Loss" to "Working Already".
2. Expand the network of Come to Work employer partners across all industries. We request that the Government of Canada becomes an employer partner.
3. Deliver consultation services that facilitate accommodations and workplace training for employers and employees, which sets both parties up for success.
4. Partner with government to share our best practices in disability employment, which can help improve the employment sector.

**CNIB Foundation recommends the Government of Canada continue to strengthen Canada's workforce by investing \$6 million over 3 years in CNIB's Come to Work program. This will be a critically important step in ensuring Canadians with sight loss are included and integrated into the workforce when the economy starts to reopen in a post-pandemic landscape.**

## **Unleashing the Power of Technology**

Many people don't realize the tremendous impact modern smartphones have in the lives of individuals who are blind or partially sighted. Today, accessible smartphone apps make it possible for people with sight loss to do all kinds of things that may have seemed challenging before.

Having a smartphone is essential for anyone seeking employment as they respond to emails, phone calls, and job listings from potential employers. Having a smartphone is even more essential to a job seeker who is blind or partially sighted. An accessible smartphone ensures any candidate looking for employment can respond to emails and phone calls, record contact information at networking events, and navigate to and from an interview independently.

## **About Phone it Forward**

Despite how life changing a smartphone can be for a user who is blind or partially sighted, these devices can be cost prohibitive for someone who is looking for work, or on a fixed income. Phone it Forward is one of CNIB's newest programs, aimed at collecting and refurbishing used smartphones or tablets and then giving them free of charge to Canadians who are blind, partially sighted, or Deafblind. With a smartphone or tablet loaded with a suite of curated accessible apps and one-on-one or small group training, participants can communicate via phone, text, email, voicemail, access information through the internet, travel and navigate exterior spaces, and listen to audio books, music, or podcasts.

CNIB Foundation prioritizes phone deployment to working aged people actively seeking employment, youth pursuing post-secondary education, and seniors who are at risk of isolation. The demand for Phone it Forward currently far exceeds the number of smartphones we can provide.

## **The Need for Refurbished Smartphones**

CNIB Foundation is asking the Government of Canada to donate smartphones to CNIB's Phone it Forward program through Innovation, Science, and Economic Development's Computers for Schools Program. The CNIB Foundation recommends this be administered by adding a targeted stream to the existing Computers for Schools program – similar to the Connecting Families initiative under the same program.

Though we receive smartphone donations through community giving, third party events and direct mail from corporations and individuals, demand continues to exceed supply. Refurbished Government of Canada smartphones would be used to fill this gap and put a smartphone in the hands of every Canadian who is blind or partially sighted who wants one.

**CNIB Foundation recommends the Government of Canada donate retired smartphones to CNIB's Phone it Forward program as current government smartphones are replaced with newer technology.**

## **Conclusion**

As the Canadian economy restarts after the COVID-19 pandemic, CNIB Foundation urges the Government of Canada to support critical employment programs for Canadians with disabilities. By investing in CNIB Foundation's Come to Work program, the federal government will play a role in boosting the participation of Canadians with sight loss in the workforce, which will play an important role in boosting the economy after the shutdown caused by COVID-19.

CNIB Foundation's Phone it Forward program aims to put a smartphone in the hands of any Canadian who is blind or partially sighted who wants one – with a particular emphasis on those who are actively seeking employment. CNIB Foundation recommends the Government of Canada donate all old smartphones to CNIB's Phone it Forward program.

CNIB's collaboration with the federal government is instrumental to our goal of changing what it means to be blind today. We believe the Government of Canada has a role to play in boosting participation of Canadians with sight loss in Canada's workforce, and ensuring that technology is accessible, available, and affordable.