

COVID-19: Country Resources for Disability

Issue 13 - 13th July 2020

Eddie Bartnik, Brian Coffey and Jennifer Thomas

Introduction

This special edition of Update features a more in depth look at how some IIDL member countries are responding to COVID -19, including national strategies and coordinating mechanisms, surveys and data, interfaces with health/mental health, practical resources and systemic reflections on progress and lessons learned so far.

The Sponsoring Countries Leadership Group of IIDL is planning a series of zoom events focussing on the theme – “Lifting the veil on COVID-19” and additional resources will become available for IIDL and IIMHL members in coming months.

Eddie Bartnik
Chair- Sponsoring Countries Leadership Group
International Initiative for Disability Leadership

Canada

COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group

On April 10, 2020, the Government of Canada announced it was establishing the COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group, comprised of experts in disability inclusion, Chaired by The Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion.

The Advisory Group was created to provide advice on the lived experiences of persons with disabilities during this crisis; along with disability-specific issues; challenges and systemic gaps; and strategies, measures and steps to be taken in response, in keeping with a “Nothing Without Us” approach. Its creation was highlighted as a promising practice by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Members have been meeting weekly and have engaged in discussions on health care with the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Health, and on support to the charitable sector with the Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Minister of Families, Children and Social Development. They also provided input to a guidance document from the Public Health Agency of Canada on COVID-19 and people with disabilities.

To advance work on specific priority areas including equality of access to health care and supports, public communications and accessibility, finances and employment, support for civil society and the not-for-profit sector and support for populations at highest risk, members have formed working groups. The Advisory Group, informed by the working groups, will continue to engage in exchanges on a broad range of disability-related considerations, concerns, and related measures.

For more information on the COVID-19 Disability Advisory Group and its members, please see the statement by Minister Qualtrough, at the link below.

Statement by Minister Qualtrough on Canada's Disability-Inclusive approach to its COVID-19 pandemic response:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2020/04/statement-by-minister-qualtrough-on-canadas-disability-inclusive-approach-to-its-covid-19-pandemic-response.html>

Public Health Agency of Canada's Guidance document on COVID-19 and people with disabilities in Canada:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/guidance-documents/people-with-disabilities.html>

COVID-19 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Guidance:

https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/COVID-19_and_The_Rights_of_Persons_with_Disabilities.pdf

Additional specific initiatives:

In Canada, responsibilities for disability-related policies are a matter of shared jurisdiction across federal, provincial and territorial governments. The following are key federal government initiatives with regards to accommodating persons with disabilities during the pandemic, including persons with intellectual disabilities and persons on the Autism Spectrum. Provincial/territorial governments may also have additional policies not reflected below.

- The Public Health Agency of Canada's [COVID-19 and people with disabilities in Canada guidelines](#) outline several measures to support persons with cognitive/intellectual disabilities. These include guidance around the provision of care and the wearing of masks for outdoor engagements. The [Infection Prevention and Control for COVID-19: Interim Guidance for Home Care Setting](#) provides guidelines specific to the COVID-19 pandemic for home care providers. A third document, the [Public health ethics framework: A guide for use in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada](#), provides guidance to policy makers and public health professionals making public health decisions in the context of COVID-19.

- April 2020 saw the launch of a new portal dedicated to mental wellness on Canada.ca/coronavirus and the [Canada COVID-19 app](#). This [Wellness Together Canada](#) program connects Canadians experiencing mental health and other challenges due to peer support workers, social workers, psychologists and other professionals providing required supports.
- The Government of Canada has also included links to [provincial and territorial resources related to physical and mental health](#) on the Canada.ca website.
- Funding to help vulnerable Canadians, including persons with disabilities, impacted by social isolation and physical distancing has included:
 - support for [partnerships with organizations](#) that will help continue to build inclusive and accessible services, communities and workplaces to increase the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities;
 - support for volunteer-based home support, transportation services, and virtual contact gathering through the [Emergency Community Support Fund](#); and
 - support to national disability organizations [to enhance their communications and engagement activities](#) to better address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with disabilities.
- The [Canada Emergency Student Benefit](#) (CESB), which provides financial support from May to August to post-secondary students and recent graduates who cannot find summer employment due to COVID-19. Students with dependents or a disability receive an additional \$750 in support for a total of \$2,000 for each 4-week period.
- Recognizing that Canadians with disabilities are at higher risk of job loss during economic downturns, the Government has also announced a new National Workplace Accessibility Stream through the Opportunities Fund for Persons with Disabilities. Some of the activities supported by this fund will include setting up accessible and effective work-from-home measures, expanding online training opportunities and creating inclusive workplaces, whether virtual or physical. The announcement also included new investments through the Accessible Technology Program help Canadians with disabilities participate more fully in the digital economy, improving quality of life and opportunities for success.
- Canada has launched two short, online, crowdsource surveys related to persons with disabilities and COVID-19. The first survey focuses on parents of children aged 0-14 and includes a question about whether any children in the household have a disability. It was in the field from June 9 to June 22. Initial results will be released later this week, with an analysis focused on families with disabilities to be published early in August. The second survey focuses specifically on those with long-term conditions and disabilities and includes questions regarding the impact of the pandemic on employment, household expenses, support networks and access to services. It was in the field from June 23 to July 6. The initial release of data is expected early in August.

Statistics Canada has also just released an Infographic and related information on Persons with disabilities and COVID-19, available at this link:

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200706/dq200706a-eng.htm?HPA=1>

Australia

Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID -19) Management and Operational Plan for People with a Disability Australian Government April 2020

COVID-19 presents a significant and unprecedented challenge for many people with disability, including children and young people, the people who support them, and the disability sector as a whole. Some people with disability are more likely to be vulnerable to the effects associated with COVID-19 including impacts which continue following the pandemic period. The Management and Operational Plan for COVID-19 for People with Disability (the Plan) has been developed to provide a targeted response for people with disability, their families, carers and support workers.

The Plan also reflects the Government's commitment to upholding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020. Both of these documents take a social model view of disability.

The Plan was developed by an Advisory Committee and is intended to guide the Australian health sector response.

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/04/management-and-operational-plan-for-people-with-disability.pdf>

The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) provides a comprehensive range of updated material and resources. Link:

<https://www.ndis.gov.au/coronavirus>

You can sign up for regular newsletters and updates on all matters related to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

<https://www.ndis.gov.au/news/enewsletters>

Information on mitigating COVID-19 in specialist disability accommodation.

<https://www.ndis.gov.au/providers/housing-and-living-supports-and-services/housing/specialist-disability-accommodation>

The NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission is the regulator of the NDIS and providers.

<https://www.ndiscommission.gov.au/resources/coronavirus-covid-19-information>

Dr Sam Bennett, General Manager – Advice, Research and Evaluation with the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) presented a holistic overview of The NDIA Response to COVID -19 at the IIDL National Network zoom event held 26th January 2020 titled: “Looking at COVID-19 through the fresh lens of capacity building. – Discovering positive opportunities during a difficult time”.

The link to his presentation is: <https://www.iimhl.com/files/docs/20200709.pdf>

Key messages included:

- It has been a collaborative task to continue to deliver the NDIS during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The NDIA have been working closely with the disability sector and is acting on feedback so we can better support participants during this time.
- The NDIA have adapted our workforce and operations to meet the challenges we've faced so we could continue to support our participants and providers.
- Feedback and guidance has helped the NDIA implement new initiatives and changes to support participants, providers and our staff. The role of Disabled Peoples Organisations and Families Organisations has also been important.
- We are evaluating the impact, asking all of our participants how they have fared over the last period and what aspects of our changed approach we should retain

New Zealand

COVID 19, and disabled people

In this the most challenging of situations the COVID 19 pandemic shone a light on what works for disabled people and what doesn't work for disabled people. New Zealand's overall COVID 19 response which was hard and fast created significant limitations on the usual freedoms of movement that New Zealander's expect and enjoy. Positively this meant an earlier than expected recovery from the lock down circumstances of Alert Levels 4 and 3 and avoided the health system being overwhelmed by COVID and the decisions on whom might be prioritised COVID health services.

In emergency situations such as COVID 19 the lack of “time and information” creates a context that requires people to work together, share information, listen, and respond without the same level of information that would usually inform policy and practice

decisions. Furthermore, there is a clear understanding that traditional institutional barriers should not prevent doing the right thing.

Officials, advocates, Disabled Peoples Organisations (DPOs), and non-government organisations working in the disability sector identified early the risk that disabled peoples' rights and issues needed to be understood during COVID 19 to ensure their rights and needs were not disproportionately impacted by the circumstances, new legislation and regulations.

Within New Zealand a number of mechanisms were established within the COVID 19 response to focus on disabled people and to ensure that disabled peoples' needs were being considered within the broader COVID 19 response.

These mechanisms were designed to gather intelligence, to inform action, and take action.

They took a collective action approach to bring together Government agencies, disabled people's organisation and the provider sector to share information and agree responsibilities for action.

The key mechanisms took the form of:

Government officials and non- government officials working together and responding to issues and risks

Weekly meetings, chaired by the Office for Disability Issues, of senior officials from across government agencies, were established to identify, report, monitor and respond to human rights, access to services and support risks and issues for disabled people.

Information gathered from these weekly forums were supplemented by a repeated on-line survey "How is Life Going for the Disability Community", co-designed with representatives from DPOs and other disability groups. See results of Surveys, 1, 2, and 3 on the ODI website. <https://www.odi.govt.nz/whats-happening/message-from-minister-sepuloni/>

The Ministry of Health (Disability Directorate) facilitated a twice weekly COVID 19 Sector Leadership Response Group which included disability service providers, government agencies, District Health Board representation, disability community representatives to ensure the broad range of COVID 19 health issues were understood and able to be responded to quickly. This led to significant flexibility and responsiveness being immediately available from a range of Ministries to disabled people and families.

Disabled people, their families, and service providers benefited from the opportunity to innovate and be flexible

The Ministry of Health enabled family members to be able to be paid to provide support when support staff were not available and enabled personal budgets to be used in respect of the purchases of resources to support children to be engaged during the lock down period. The success of these measures in increasing the self determination of families has been such that the Ministry of Health is now looking at how this level of flexibility can continue as an integral component of disability support.

The Ministry of Justice, Joint Venture initiative on Family Violence and Sexual Violence developed a disability specific work programme.

The Ministry of Transport making access to the Total Mobility Scheme (subsidised taxi transport) free up to a limit of \$80 per journey for disabled people to assist disabled people to access essential services and support.

The Ministry for Social Development provided additional funding to support more flexible approaches to the provision of day programmes which were suspended during COVID 19 lock down.

Service providers, and other disability groups, DPOs, District Health Board providers, schools, Ministry of Education learning support staff initiated a comprehensive programme of well-being checks with disabled people and the families of disabled people to ensure access to essential services, including the ability to secure food and medicine.

The protection of the rights of disabled people and disability leadership

The protection of the rights of disabled people was a key strategy with the DPO coalition and the Disability Rights Commissioner met directly with the Minister for Disability Issues on a regular basis to ensure that rights of people were maintained.

DPOs ensured there was strong advocacy for the communication needs of disabled people and that the communications were for disabled people by disabled people. Information from these meetings was then used in twice weekly updates to produce COVID 19 communications in accessible formats for disabled people on the COVID 19 website.

Those voices were also present in the cross-government emergency planning and response.

Through these mechanisms networks were established to gather a range of issues and information from disabled people, families and organisations in the disability sector to ensure as many issues and concerns as possible were understood within the broader, COVID 19 cross- government welfare response.

Ministerial leadership

The Minister for Disability Issues and the Associate Minister of Health were briefed on a weekly basis on the COVID 19 response for disabled people and the issues and risks for disabled people.

This was complemented by meetings with the Disabled Peoples' Organisation (DPO) coalition, the Disability Rights Commissioner and other leaders in the disability sector.

The Minister for Disability Issues then took these issues to the Social Wellbeing Committee of Cabinet to ensure all Ministers were aware of the issues for disabled people and to ensure those issues were considered through all portfolios involved in the COVID 19 response and through the National Welfare Coordination Group (COVID-19) led out of the Civil Defence and Emergency Management.

On 24th June the Ministerial Leadership Group on Disability Issues, eight Ministers, chaired by the Minister for Disability Issues, met with the Independent Monitoring Mechanism (IMM) review what worked and didn't work for disabled people during COVID 19. Many of these learning will be used to enhance the Disability Action Plan (2019-2022) programmes of work.

What have we learned:

- Most disabled people responding to the snapshot "How is Life Going for the Disability Community" survey reported that they were doing okay or better on the range of issues canvassed.
- Service providers, given the opportunity to shape their services to the needs of the people they were serving, provided responses that were highly appreciated by disabled people and their families.
- Many disabled people commented that COVID 19 lock down worked for them as it removed many of the day to day hassles of getting around their communities. This is seen as more of a comment on the day to day inaccessibility of communities than the delights of being in lock down.
- Ensuring the rapidly changing, rapidly developed COVID 19 communications and information were accessible was challenging. Rapidly developed policy documents were not "born accessible" and therefore difficult to translate into accessible formats quickly enough. Accessible information was not always easy to locate on the COVID 19 website.
- Full and early access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was good in some locations and not good in others and the need for distribution of PPE to disability service providers and disabled people was not universally well understood across the health system.
- The shift to accessing services and goods through digital platforms widened the digital gap and disabled people were too often on the wrong side of that gap.
- Families and caregivers of disabled family members felt isolated and anxious without access to respite services and behavioural services.

- There was little or no consideration given to collecting data as to whether disabled people were accessing the range of 0800 helplines and other emergency supports and services stood up during COVID 19.
- Disabled people were concerned that the additional assistance and support required to stay safe and access food and essential services created a dependence on others and diminished choice and control. There was concern at being disproportionately reliant on charity compared to non -disabled people.