



Fostering a More Inclusive and Accessible Ontario

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act
Annual Report 2021

Learn how Ontario is becoming more accessible

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A message from the Minister

Fostering a More Inclusive and Accessible Ontario

I am pleased to present the 2021 [*Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*](#) (AODA) Annual Report.

The AODA annual report is a reflection of our government's ongoing dedication and hard work, along with countless partners, in making Ontario more accessible. The report, [*a requirement under the act*](#), highlights engagement with stakeholders across the province to work towards our common goal of a province where everyone has an equal opportunity to live the Ontario Dream. It shows the government's efforts towards making Ontario more accessible and inclusive. The report also provides the public with transparency and accountability around activities that are moving Ontario to becoming the most accessible jurisdiction in North America.

In 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to present challenges to all Ontarians and especially to seniors and people with disabilities.

In response, government initiatives and services were enhanced or new ones were created, to help ease the burden of the pandemic on those most in need.

For example, the government partnered with the Ontario Community Support Association on the Accessible Drive to Vaccines program - ensuring that all Ontarians that wanted access to the COVID vaccine could access it. We also extended the Ontario Community Support Program – providing deliveries of food, medicine and other essentials to those who needed assistance.

All across our great province we continued to move accessibility forward by continuing to target our work in the four key areas outlined in our cross-government framework, [Advancing Accessibility in Ontario](#), which was launched in 2020. The key areas of focus are:

- breaking down barriers in the built environment
- government leading by example
- improving understanding and awareness about accessibility
- increasing participation in the economy for people with disabilities.

Throughout 2021, we also received first-hand insights from several of our [Standards Development Committees](#) on how to address accessibility barriers within specific sectors. I'd like to thank them for their continued advocacy and advice.

These committees capitalize on the knowledge of accessibility experts and people with lived experience and sector/industry representatives to help develop new, targeted standards under the AODA.

Three committees and a technical subcommittee in the areas of health care and education submitted their Initial Recommendations Reports to the government in 2021, which were posted online for public comment. In early 2022, they submitted their Final Recommendations Reports to the government for consideration.

We are also proud to have launched a new [Design of Public Spaces Standards Development Committee](#) led by distinguished accessibility strategist Julie Sawchuk.

Ms. Sawchuk is the right person at the right time to lead this initiative and with her resolve and experience, Ontario will become a more accessible province as we continue this journey. This Committee held its first meeting in spring 2022.

The government also welcomed noted disability rights and accessibility champion, Matthew Shaw, to chair our [Accessibility Standards Advisory Council](#).

In early 2022, renowned accessibility advocate Rich Donovan was appointed as the fourth legislative reviewer of the AODA.

Mr. Donovan will consult extensively with the public, including people with disabilities, gathering feedback and determining where improvements can be made to the AODA.

I encourage everyone to participate in his public consultations and look forward to his recommendations.

In closing, I would like to personally thank all of our committee members, program partners, other levels of government and the many dedicated community members across our province who are actively working to further accessibility in Ontario.

Together, we are creating a province where the skills and talents of people with disabilities are recognized and rewarded. A province that is stronger because it provides equitable opportunities for everyone. Together, we are fostering a more inclusive and accessible Ontario.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Raymond Cho". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Raymond Cho,
Minister for Seniors and Accessibility

Legislated committees and council

[Standards development committees](#) and the [Accessibility Standards Advisory Council](#) are established under the AODA and help to advance accessibility in Ontario. These advisory groups represent a variety of voices and sectors, including people with disabilities, municipalities, businesses and community organizations.

Standards development committees review existing accessibility standards, offering suggested changes or proposing new standards in their area of focus. They provide recommendations to the government on ways to identify, reduce, and remove, accessibility barriers.

The Accessibility Standards Advisory Council is responsible for, among other things, advising the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility on progress made by standards development committees in the development of proposed accessibility standards and in achieving the purposes of the AODA. The council also provides advice to the government in identified areas of interest.

Standards development committee achievements

In 2021, the [Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education](#) and [Postsecondary Education](#) Standards Development Committees submitted their initial recommendations reports to the government. Those reports, as well as the [Health Care Standards Development Committee's](#) initial recommendations report, were then posted online. After public consultations, the committees worked on their final recommendations reports during the remainder of the year. Those reports will be submitted in 2022.

The two education committees formed a technical sub-committee to focus on transitions between different levels of education for students with disabilities, as well as the workforce and community. The sub-committee's [initial recommendations](#) on removing barriers during these transitions were also posted online in 2021.

As part of the government's work to make Ontario's public spaces more accessible and inclusive, [Julie Sawchuk was announced as the Chair of the Design of Public Spaces Standards Development Committee](#) in 2021. This committee will work to review accessibility standards in outdoor and indoor public spaces, such as bike paths, playgrounds, service counters and accessible washrooms. As an accessibility strategist, best-selling author and professional speaker, Ms. Sawchuk offers an important perspective as a person with lived experience.

Accessibility Standards Advisory Council achievements

[Matthew Shaw was appointed as the new Chair of the Accessibility Standards Advisory Council](#) in 2021. The council also welcomed eight other new members throughout the year. Mr. Shaw brings to the role of Chair his own lived experience and knowledge of accessibility best practices across diverse sectors, as well as his experience as a champion of disability rights and accessibility for all. One of the council's key priorities in 2021 was advising the government on how to address the accessibility barriers that COVID-19 created or worsened for people with disabilities and sector organizations.

Within 2021, the Accessibility Standards Advisory Council heard from multiple standards development committees on progress in the development of new accessibility standards. The council also provided advice to the Minister on the scope of the Fourth Legislative Review of the AODA. The council also consulted with Ontario Digital Service on the Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence Framework and was named a continuing partner with Ontario Digital Service's [Open Government Partnership](#) to support engagement on data and accessibility.

Compliance and enforcement

The Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility oversees compliance with the AODA and the [Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation](#). The ministry works to help ensure about 412,000 organizations fulfill their obligations under the act. These are organizations that provide goods, services or facilities to the public.

Building awareness

Each year, the ministry conducts targeted outreach and education campaigns to increase awareness of provincial accessibility laws and requirements.

The ministry conducted several email campaigns that targeted the private and business/non-profit sectors to support them in meeting deadlines for their [2021 accessibility compliance report](#). The ministry also released a video for these organizations with detailed information on how to file their compliance report. It was titled, "Accessibility Compliance Reporting: What Businesses and Non-Profits Need to Know," and was released as a [video](#) and [described video](#), in English and [French](#).

For the designated public sector, Ontario Public Service and the Office of the Legislative Assembly, the ministry engaged in outreach by phone, email and social media. The goal of this outreach was to significantly increase the number of organizations filing their 2021 accessibility compliance report.

The ministry also regularly publishes the [AODA Toolbox](#), an enewsletter with relevant resources and practical tips that organizations can use to become more accessible, and to better understand the overall benefits of accessibility. In 2021, the ministry published four editions of the AODA Toolbox that included timely updates, key issues, resources, and success stories. Each of these editions were distributed to the AODA Toolbox's 9,000-plus subscribers.

Ensuring compliance

The ministry's Compliance Assurance Branch is responsible for ensuring compliance with accessibility standards and other requirements under the AODA. It achieves this through a modern regulatory approach that includes providing information to increase organizations' awareness of provincial accessibility laws, auditing organizations to verify that they are following requirements and enforcing requirements if non-compliance persists, where appropriate.

2021: Compliance and enforcement activities

Self-certified accessibility compliance reporting

The Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation establishes that certain organizations are required to submit accessibility compliance reports. These organizations are:

- businesses and non-profit organizations with 20 or more employees
- all designated public sector organizations
- organizations from the Ontario Public Service
- organizations from the Office of the Legislative Assembly.

These organizations are asked to confirm that they have met their accessibility requirements by answering various questions. As outlined in the AODA, each organization must make its report available to the public.

Each sector has a different schedule to submit these reports:

- the provincial government, inclusive of the Ontario Public Service and the Office of the Legislative Assembly, reports **every year**
- all designated public sector organizations are required to report **every two years**
- all private and business/non-profit sector organizations with 20 or more employees are required to report **every three years**.

The provincial government and designated public sector organizations were required to submit a compliance report by December 31, 2021. For this reporting cycle, 92 per cent of designated public sector organizations and 100 per cent of provincial government organizations submitted their reports.

Business/non-profit sector organizations with 20 or more employees were originally scheduled to submit their compliance reports by December 31, 2020. However, in response to the challenges faced by businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, this deadline was extended to June 30, 2021. Approximately 15,000 business/non-profit organizations submitted their reports.

Audits

The ministry conducts two types of audits to oversee compliance with the AODA:

1. **Attestation audits** are used to facilitate accessibility compliance reporting among organizations that had:
 - reported previously but failed to meet the most recent reporting deadline
 - submitted a report indicating non-compliance
 - never filed in the past.
2. **Verification audits** are used to ensure that organizations that indicated compliance in their report are, in fact, meeting requirements. Verification audits are conducted every year to obtain and verify evidence of compliance.

The ministry was aware of the adverse impact the COVID-19 pandemic was having on obligated organizations throughout 2021. As a result, the ministry focused on making it easier for organizations to understand and meet their requirements through a variety of activities and projects that encouraged and supported compliance with the AODA.

Overall, in 2021, the ministry launched:

- 445 attestation audits (247 were completed by December 31, 2021)
- 34 verification audits (22 were completed by December 31, 2021).

An additional 208 audits that were carried over from previous years were also completed. Of these, 189 were verification audits and 19 attestation audits.

In total, 211 verification audits were completed in 2021. These audits assessed the General Requirements sections of the Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation and the AODA, as well as the Customer Service, Information and Communications, Transportation, and Employment standards.

The results of the 211 completed verification audits break down as follows:

- 195 designated public sector organizations were audited for a total of 112 requirements.
 - The highest rate of compliance for the designated public sector was with the establishment of customer service policies, use of service animals and support persons, and notice of temporary disruptions, with 96 per cent of those audited in compliance.
 - The lowest rate of compliance for designated public sector was with documented individual accommodation plans, with only 59 per cent reporting back as being in compliance.
- 16 business and non-profit organizations were audited for a total of 33 requirements.
 - The highest rate of compliance for the business/non-profit sector was with the recruitment process, providing notice to successful applicants, and the return-to-work process, with 56 per cent of those audited in compliance.

- The lowest rate of compliance for the business/non-profit sector was under establishing accessibility policies and the provision of training, with only 13 per cent in compliance.

To identify long-term trends in compliance across all types of organizations, there are four foundational requirements that are consistently audited year over year. These requirements have been selected because they are consistent with the spirit of the act and are best suited to gauge progress in making Ontario more accessible.

The four foundational requirements include:

- establishing accessibility policies
- developing multi-year accessibility plans
- training staff
- establishing a feedback system.

For 2021, the foundational requirements compliance rate was approximately 77 per cent.

Enforcement

When audited organizations are found to be non-compliant, the ministry works with them to establish compliance before considering enforcement measures. When an organization is persistently non-compliant, the matter may be escalated to a ministry inspector who determines appropriate enforcement measures, including issuing Director's Orders or administrative monetary penalties.

Compliance extensions were granted to organizations adversely affected by the pandemic to allow them more time to respond and to provide supporting evidence of compliance as needed. As a result, there were fewer instances of non-compliance requiring escalated enforcement measures in 2021. Specifically, 99.5 per cent of verification audits were resolved as compliant without escalation to an inspector for enforcement and no Director's Orders or administrative monetary penalties were issued.

Programs and initiatives

Response to COVID-19

The ministry invests in programs and initiatives each year to help improve the daily lives of people with disabilities and seniors. As COVID-19 and the provincewide shutdown continued in 2021, the ministry responded with a number of initiatives and services to support these groups.

For instance, the [Ontario Community Support Program](#), established in 2020, continued to provide deliveries of food, medicine and other essentials to low-income seniors and people with disabilities in need across Ontario. In 2021, over 1.3 million deliveries were made through the program.

The government also invested \$3.7 million in a [partnership with the Ontario Community Support Association](#) to help people with disabilities, including seniors with mobility issues, get to and from vaccination sites to get their shot through the [Accessible Drive to Vaccines program](#). In 2021, roughly 2,300 rides were provided through the program. In addition, the ministry helped to remove barriers for Ontarians with disabilities at vaccination sites by developing an accessibility tip sheet with clear information about how to provide accessible services during the vaccination process.

During the period when fitness and recreation centres were closed due to COVID-19, Ontario took action to ensure people with disabilities could continue their physical therapy. This was achieved by introducing regulatory amendments under the [Reopening Ontario \(A Flexible Response to COVID-19\) Act, 2020](#), that recognized the need for ongoing access to physical therapy services and facilities.

Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification program

The [Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification program](#) helps educate Ontario building owners about specific accessibility changes they can make to improve their facilities. The government provided funding to the Rick Hansen Foundation to launch the program in municipalities across the province and rate the accessibility of up to 250 selected buildings. Free accessibility assessments on these sites were well underway in 2021, although the program faced implementation delays due to COVID-19.

Project SEARCH

[Project SEARCH](#) is a job skills training program that provides employment experience to youth with developmental disabilities to help them prepare for the transition from high school to the workplace. As part of Project SEARCH, the ministry provided funding to Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital to support an initiative called Employment Inclusion Project. The first phase of the Employment Inclusion Project was completed in 2020-21. As part of Project SEARCH, the Ministry of Education is leading an initiative that will help students with disabilities develop job skills. This project is running throughout 2021 and will close in early 2022.

New online tool for accessible parking permits

The ministry [supported the launch](#) of a new [online renewal tool](#) that makes it faster and simpler for permanent Accessible Parking Permit holders to renew, replace or change information on their permits. This digital option works on a computer, tablet or smartphone and can be done from the comfort of home. This removes barriers for people with disabilities since they no longer have to visit ServiceOntario in person or rely on the mail to access these services.

Inclusive Community Grants Program

The [Inclusive Community Grants Program](#) helps municipalities, local organizations and Indigenous communities make Ontario's communities more inclusive and accessible.

In 2021, the government [invested \\$2.9 million](#) over two years through this program to support 55 diverse and engaging community projects that positively impacted the quality of life for people with disabilities and older adults.

Abilities Centre support

[The Abilities Centre](#) in Whitby is a community hub that delivers inclusive programming to help build life skills and employment opportunities for people with disabilities while also promoting the value of inclusive hiring to employers. As part of the [2021 Ontario Budget](#), the government strengthened its support of the Abilities Centre by investing an additional \$4.5 million over three years, beginning in 2021-22.

Some of this funding went towards the Abilities Centre's LEAD ON program which supports organizations in embedding accessibility and inclusion into their organizational planning and processes. This helps increase the involvement and participation by persons with a disability within their organization.

EnAbling Change Program

The ministry provides funding to not-for-profit, industry associations and professional associations across a range of sectors through the [EnAbling Change Program](#) to educate their stakeholders about the benefits of accessibility and support regulatory compliance with the AODA.

In total, the government is investing up to \$1.3 million to support 14 projects through the 2021-22 EnAbling Change Program. The objectives for the 2021-22 program are related to COVID-19 recovery, online innovation and building on best practices for inclusion and accessibility.

The [recipients of the 2021-22 program](#) include:

- Canada's National Ballet School
- Canadian Blind Hockey
- Council for Persons with Disabilities Peterborough

- Electricity Human Resources Canada
- Let's Talk Science
- Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre
- Ontario Chamber of Commerce
- Orchestras Canada/Orchestres Canada
- Retail Council of Canada
- Ryerson University (renamed Toronto Metropolitan University in April 2022)
- Trucking HR Canada
- University of Waterloo
- University of Windsor

EnAbling Change Program - 2021-22 project highlights

Canada's National Ballet School

In 2021-22, the ministry is funding [Canada's National Ballet School's Inclusive Movement for Kids](#) project with more than \$100,000 through the program, so that children of all abilities across Ontario can enjoy dance.

Orchestras Canada/Orchestres Canada

In 2021-22, the ministry is funding Orchestras Canada/Orchestres Canada with approximately \$48,000 to design and deliver six expert-led webinars to educate not-for-profit performing arts organizations in Ontario about their legal obligations under the AODA.

Electricity Human Resources Canada

For 2021-22, the ministry is providing more than \$100,000 to Electricity Human Resources Canada to create a set of made-in-Ontario reference tools, learning materials and short videos. This funding will help employers in the electricity sector expand employment opportunities to people of all abilities.

Advancing Accessibility in Ontario framework

In 2020, the government announced its Advancing Accessibility in Ontario framework that outlined key areas of focus and initiatives across government. In 2021, the ministry consolidated the [information about the framework](#) into a new web page on ontario.ca.

Outreach and education initiatives

Increasing awareness of Ontario's accessibility standards helps organizations reduce barriers for people with disabilities. In 2021, the ministry continued to provide targeted information to organizations across all sectors on how to promote accessibility both within and outside their organization, as well as help them meet their accessibility requirements. Outreach activities included a variety of initiatives: publishing stakeholder e-newsletters, creating and distributing helpful resources and promoting National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October.

National Disability Employment Awareness Month marketing campaign

From September 27 to October 31, 2021, the ministry ran a marketing campaign to raise awareness about National Disability Employment Awareness Month among employers -- including businesses and non-profit organizations -- and people with disabilities. The campaign ran on social media, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Pinterest. The ads drove traffic to ministry web pages, including ontario.ca/accessiblebusiness (which had information for employers), as well as ontario.ca/disabilities and ontario.ca/accessibilityinfo (which had information for people with disabilities). Overall, the campaign resulted in about 18,000 link clicks.

Minister's events and announcement outreach

In 2021, Ontario gradually moved through its reopening plan. Minister Cho participated in ministry- and stakeholder-led virtual and in-person events to highlight the importance of accessibility, as well as the government's inclusion initiatives and priorities.

Helping make municipalities more accessible

The Minister promoted the government's commitment to making communities more inclusive by partnering with municipalities and stakeholders to bring greater accessibility to aspects of daily life, including transit and infrastructure. Examples include:

- Rural Ontario Municipal Association Conference (January 25 to 26)
- Accessible transit infrastructure project in [Peel Region](#) (February 12)
- Ontario Good Roads Association Conference (February 22 to 25)
- [Inclusive Community Grants](#) announcement (April 6)
- Accessible transit infrastructure project in [East Mississauga and West Toronto](#) (June 10)
- [Accessible Drive to Vaccines](#) announcement (June 22)
- Association of Municipalities Ontario (August 15 to 18).

Working with businesses to educate and demonstrate inclusive workplaces

Minister Cho met with employers and community partners to highlight the need for accessible workplaces, training and employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Examples include:

- [Training and job opportunities in accessible media](#) announcement (May 17)
- Minister's tour of Onward Manufacturing (September 16)

Celebrating and recognizing people with disabilities and leaders in accessibility

Throughout the year, Minister Cho raised awareness about the benefits of inclusion by celebrating accessibility leaders and reinforcing the government's commitment to making Ontario more accessible. Examples include:

- [David C. Onley Award for Leadership in Accessibility](#) (May 28)
- [National AccessAbility Week](#) (May 29 to June 4) - Minister's statement (May 31)
- [Terry Fox Run](#) – Minister's statement (September 16)
- [National Disability Employment Awareness Month](#) - Minister's statement (October 6)
- Minister's accessibility tour of Peterborough (October 18)
- Minister's accessibility tour of Whitney (October 19)
 - Four Seasons Algonquin Cabins
 - Four Corners Algonquin Camping and Glamping
 - Algonquin Dreamcatcher Motel, East Gate Motel and Rolling Rapids Motel
 - Camp Bongopix
- [International Day of Persons with Disabilities](#) - Minister's statement (December 3)
- EnAbling Change Program announcement about [Canada's National Ballet School](#) (December 8)
- Minister's visit to the Canadian National Institute for the Blind and Lego Braille Demonstration (December 15).

Furthering accessibility standards and determining best practices

Ontario continues to build on improving accessibility for Ontarians with disabilities by strengthening its accessibility standards. In 2021, Matthew Shaw was [announced as Chair of the Accessibility Standards Advisory Council](#) in April and Julie Sawchuk was [announced as Chair of the Design of Public Spaces Standards Development Committee](#) in December.

Accessibility in 2022

While reflecting on the progress made in 2021 to further accessibility in our province, we must recognize the many accessibility advocates across Ontario who work tirelessly each year to make it a more inclusive place. In 2022, the government will continue shaping and improving our programs and services alongside these accessibility champions to make a true difference for seniors and Ontarians with disabilities. Key milestones will include the appointment of the fourth legislative reviewer of the AODA early in the year and the submission of the final recommendations reports from various standards development committees. These milestones will help shape the future direction of accessibility work across the province and help the government foster a more inclusive and accessible Ontario.

