



SUPPORTING NEWCOMERS WITH DISABILITIES

AN OVERVIEW



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GOALS

- An Introduction to support Newcomers with Disabilities
- Gain an understanding of the challenges Newcomers with Disabilities face, and potential solutions to support this population
- Improve confidence in using tools and resources to facilitate Equity, Diversity and Inclusion.
- Engage in personal reflection and growth to influence Institutional Change for Newcomers with Disabilities



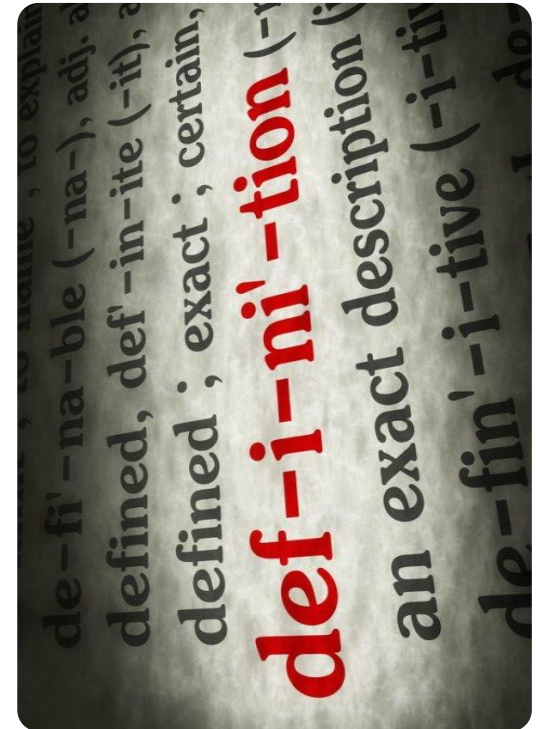
What Does Canada View as a Disability?

The most widely accepted definition of a disability (used by the Government of Canada) is provided by the World Health Organization:

“Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.”

- Disabilities may be visible or invisible, permanent or temporary

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/disability/arc/reference-guide.html>



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Disabilities are Common

- Recent studies have shown that 22%, or **1 in 5**, Canadians report having a disability right now, and that more than 1 out of 3 Canadians will report having a disability within their lifetimes

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/accessible-canada.html>

- Persons with disabilities represent approximately 1.6 billion people globally, the largest minority group in existence
- Persons with disabilities often experience high levels of stigma, shame, discrimination, violence and abuse
- Many newcomers will arrive in Canada either with a disability or may end up developing one while in Canada



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Medical Conditions are Disabilities

All of these conditions are disabilities according to the government of Canada:

- HIV or AIDS
- Hepatitis C
- Asthma
- Cancer
- Chronic Pain
- Heart Conditions
- Stuttering
- Arthritis
- Diabetes
- Back / Knee Problems
- Conditions at Birth
- Lyme disease
- Post-Polio
- Some Phobias
- Some Allergies
- Amputations
- Learning Disabilities
- Endometriosis
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Fibromyalgia
- Acute Stress
- Addictions
- Immune Compromised



We need to see disabilities for what they are: **common**, and **NORMAL**

Mental Health Conditions are Disabilities

- More studies have shown that immigrating to Canada increases the mental health challenges of newcomers, often leading to depression, anxiety, and stress that may exacerbate medical or other permanent conditions

http://olip-plio.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Immigrant-Mental-Health_June22_Branka-Agic1.pdf

- Mental Health challenges include people with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (wars, refugee experience, or terrorist attack survivors), commonly known as PTSD



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Mental Health Conditions are Disabilities

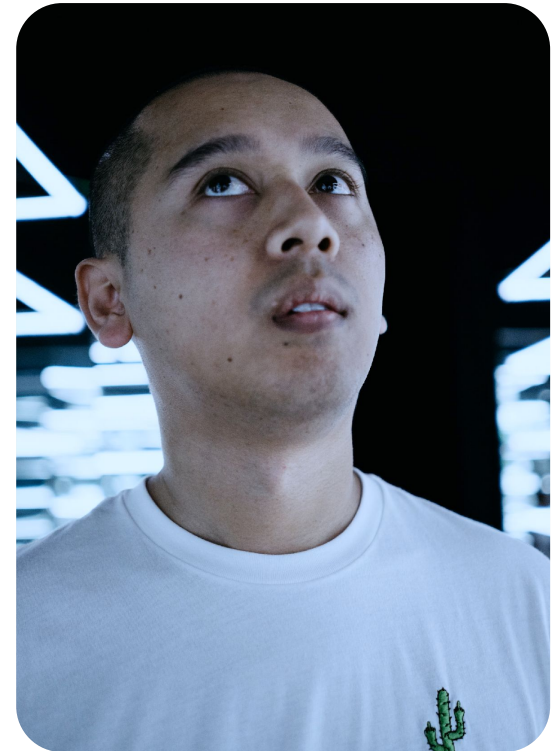
- A major challenge in supporting this population is that the majority of newcomers do not see themselves (identify) as people with disabilities
- Disabilities are common. People with hidden disabilities often do not disclose
- There is always a risk for people with invisible disabilities that they will not be believed and they may be labelled as using the system to gain special advantages



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Can You Recognize a Disability?

- Many people do not link their condition with having a disability, while many newcomers will outright reject the label of **DISABILITY**
- Thus many Newcomers, Permanent Residents, and Canadian Citizens are unaware of their basic human rights as people with disabilities, and that they have access to many free supports offered at all levels of government



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The Immigration System

- The Canadian Government links highly skilled immigrants with adding economic value and productivity so that Canada may prosper
- The immigration system discriminates against people with disabilities viewing them as economically burdensome and dependent on social and healthcare systems
- The current requirement is for all newcomers to complete a pre-immigration medical exam that may identify a person with disabilities as medically in-admissible to Canada perpetuating the misconception that disabilities are an undue financial burden on the social and healthcare systems

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/immigrate-canada/inadmissibility/reasons/medical-inadmissibility.html#excessive-demand>



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Effects of the Immigration System

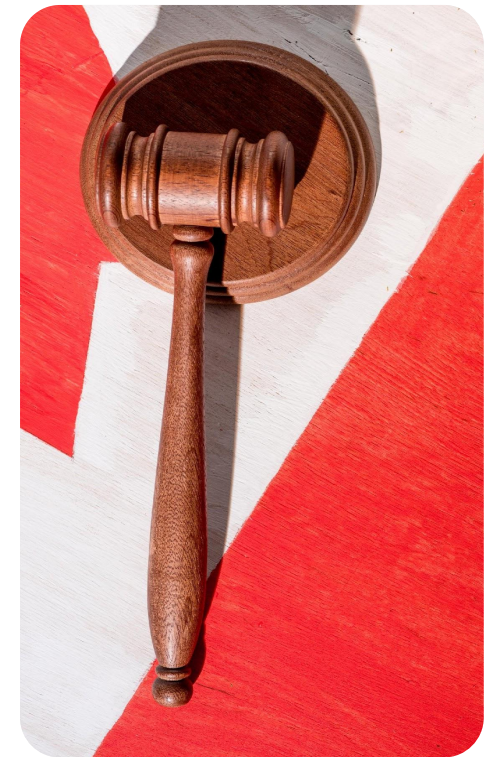
- Disclosing their disability may cause high anxiety and fear for many newcomers who are afraid of jeopardizing their immigration/residency status
- Depending on their cultural background a newcomer may also risk damaging their relationship with their community or family, by telling others about their disability because of the shame and stigma embedded in their own cultures



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Disability, Immigration and the Law

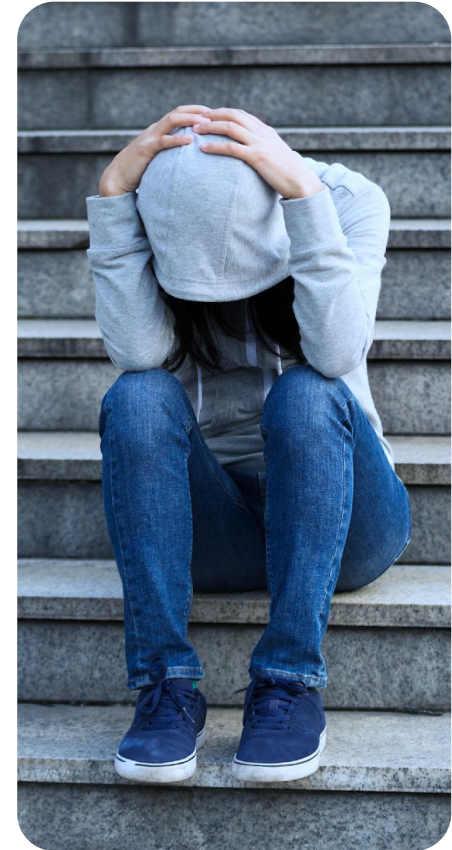
- The Human Right to be treated with respect and **INCLUSION** is the law in Canada. **The UN Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** gives universal recognition to the dignity of persons with Disabilities
- **The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Section 15(1))** specifically prohibits discrimination on grounds of mental or physical disability
- Under the **Canadian Human Rights Act** federally regulated employers must prevent discrimination and provide access and support to persons with disabilities
- **Provincial and territorial governments** have similar laws and regulations
- **City of Edmonton:** Accessibility for People with Disabilities Policy, effective 2021 to 2024 is an internal policy to examine barriers and challenges persons with disabilities face in the City



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Understanding Personal/Cultural Shame and Stigma

- Imperfections and limitations are hard to accept in any society
- Many newcomers do not know the diagnosed definition for their condition
- Persons with disabilities may adapt and compensate to keep condition hidden for fear of ridicule and shame
- Racialized poor are especially vulnerable to rejection and violence
- Value and contributions of persons with disabilities are consistently unrecognized and degraded
- We cannot know the culture and beliefs of all people who come to Canada, yet we know that there is bias and discrimination in most cultures and countries around understanding and accepting disability



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What About Bias?

The term “bias” (also “implicit bias” and “unconscious bias”) refers to the unconscious assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes that human brains have about different groups. These learned mental short-cuts affect how we perceive and respond to people



Some key features about unconscious biases:

- Everyone has biases
- They can be activated within a fraction of a second
- We can hold biases against our own group
- We can hold biases that go against our stated beliefs
- Unconscious biases prevent us from fairly comprehending the information or the people in front of us
- Biases are persistent, but can be changed with attention and work

Unfortunately, bias includes newcomers with disabilities

<https://www.uvic.ca/equity/employment-equity/bias/index.php>



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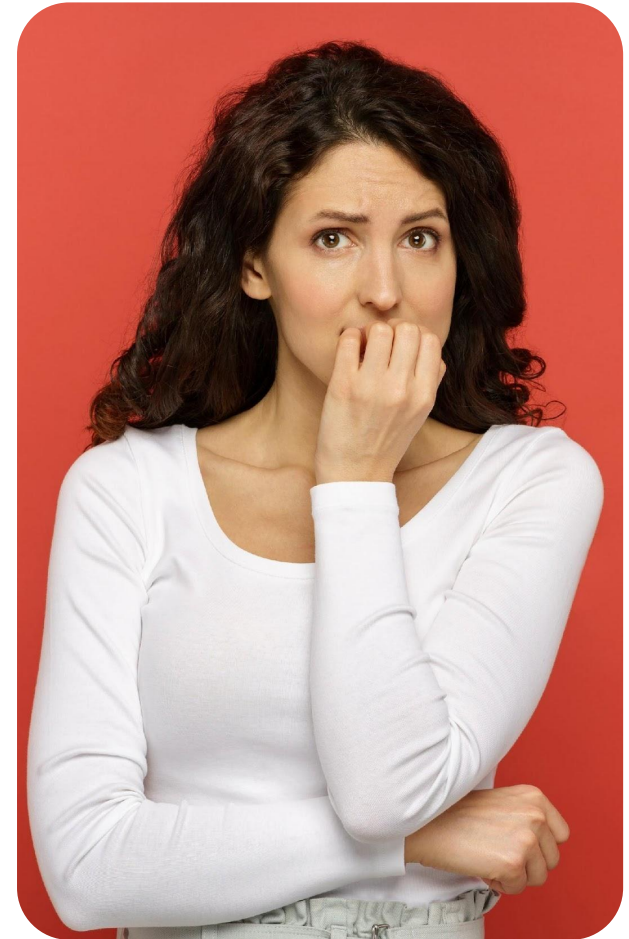
Damaging Assumptions Around Disabilities

- Persons with disabilities NEED help
- Persons with disabilities need to have other people make decisions for them
- Persons with disabilities use their disabilities as a crutch and need to 'get over it'
- Accommodations for persons with disabilities are an unfair advantage
- Only obvious conditions like being in a wheelchair or Down's Syndrome are disabilities
- Only severely disabled people need accommodations
- Accommodations are expensive, or hard to put into place



Fear of Disclosure

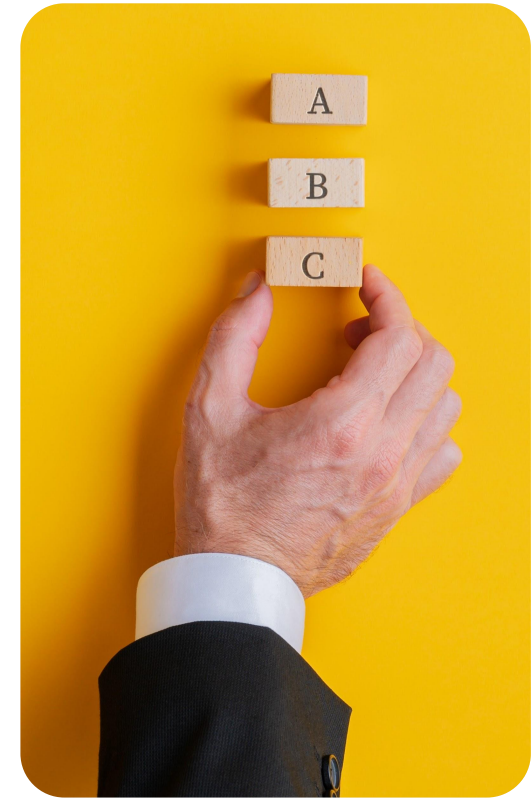
- For many newcomers there is immense fear that by disclosing their disability, it may jeopardize their chances of staying in Canada
- No one wishes to be discriminated against, by disclosing newcomers risk being generalized by their disability and discriminated against
- Newcomers fear that they will not be believed if their disability is invisible.
- All of these factors add to the real risks of disclosure



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A Last Priority

- The last priority for newcomers is their own mental health and physical wellbeing
- The immigration/settlement process into Canada is stressful for all newcomers, yet we often fail to ask how stressed a newcomer is, nor do we offer supports
- Newcomers have many urgent issues such as employment, adequate-affordable housing, financial and food security, education, and more
- This means that newcomers will for years, try to address their most immediate needs, and not ask for support or help to address their disabilities
- This may add to the struggles they face in their immigration journey, and add years to the time it takes for them to settle and find successes in Canada



How To Provide A Safe Place For Newcomers To Disclose

- **Inform** the Newcomer that everything they tell will be held in confidence protected by Freedom of Information and Privacy Act (FOIP), and **not** disclosed without their consent
- **Start** with cultural safety and humility to build trust for disclosure
- **Inform** people with disabilities that in Canada they have guaranteed rights to equity and justice, and supports are available to ease their conditions and help them thrive
- **Explore** fully all options and supports available to them
- **Respect** their right to choose and make their own decisions
- **Respect** their right to NOT disclose if they so wish
- **Support** Self-Advocacy



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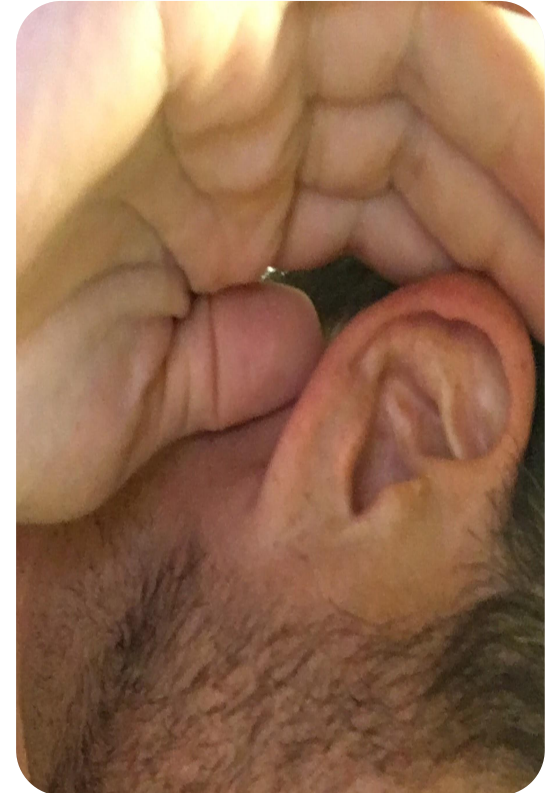
What Does A Safe Place Look Like?

- Similar to training around safe places for LGBTQ2S+, the first step is letting the person know it is safe
- For newcomers with disabilities this means we need to be the ones to bring up the topic of disability first in a conversation
- Inform them that people with disabilities in Canada are people-first (I am a **person** *with* Diabetes), however some people with disabilities prefer different terms such as; (I consider myself an Autistic person), and that we will respect their preferences
- When a newcomer discloses a traumatic experience, do not doubt its authenticity or ask for proof
- Yet asking for proof of conditions happens to people with disabilities constantly
- Believe the newcomer's story and provide assurance that supports exist to help them.



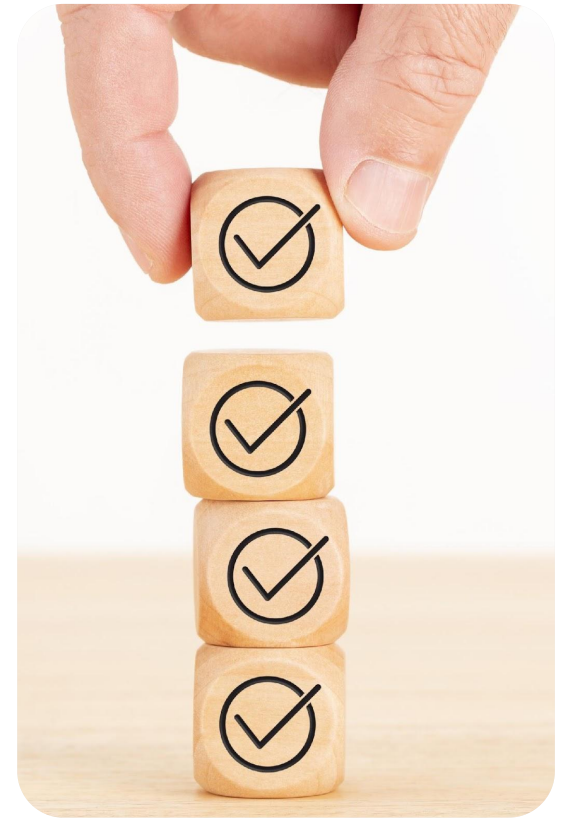
Active Listening and Language

- Actively listening to newcomer's story shows respect and builds trust, and may encourage a newcomer to safely disclose their disability
- Actively listen and observe verbal and non-verbal messages and give attentive, appropriate feedback
- LISTEN and respect how an individual identifies their disability, and describes it in terms of language and experience
- Do not assume anything, ask questions if you do not understand as misunderstandings can occur due to cultural differences
- Present a non-judgemental open attitude and neutral body language
- Language has power to make people feel welcome or to reinforce stigmas and shame around disability



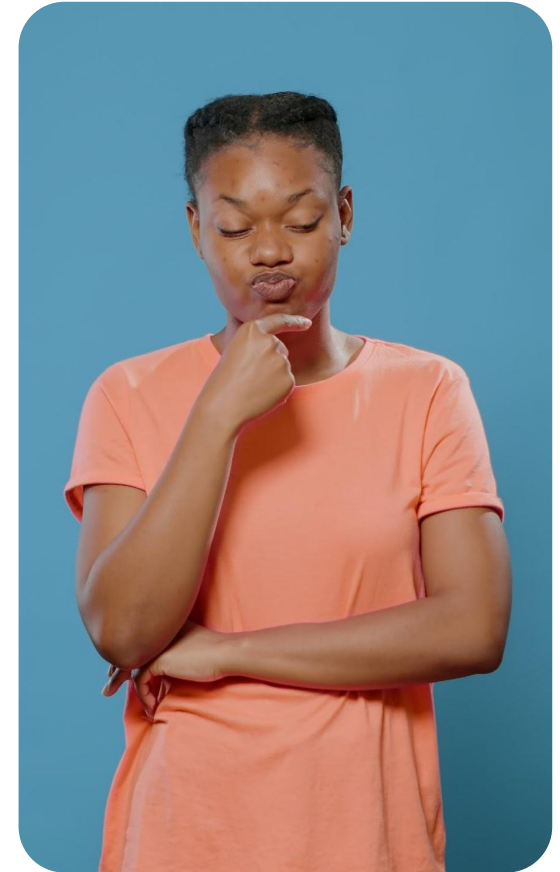
Checklist for Helping Newcomers with Disabilities

- ❑ Avoid stereotyping or assumptions based on a newcomer's disability, appearance or presumed ethnicity.
- ❑ Listen to newcomer's story without probing and asking for proof about their traumatic experience or disability
- ❑ Inform newcomers of their rights to supports and services
- ❑ Respect the newcomer's decisions, after all options for supports and human rights have been explored



Be Aware

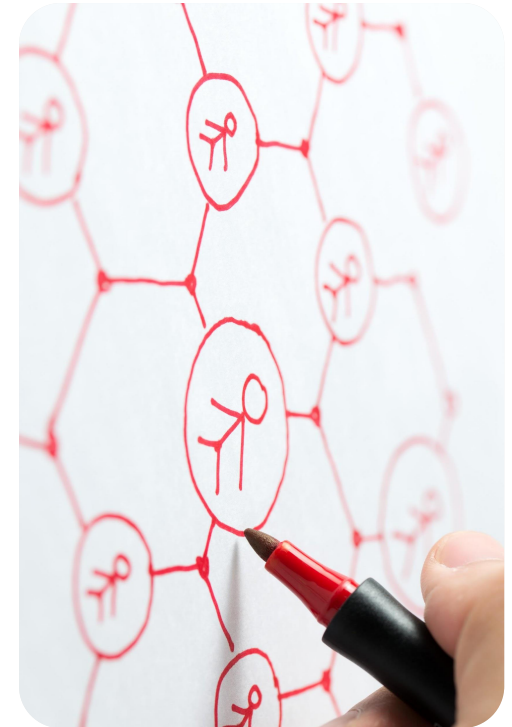
- Remember that you do not have to be a doctor or trained professional regarding disabilities
- You do NOT have to know how to support each type of disability
- The greatest support you can give, is to listen to the newcomer in a non-judgmental way, and provide them with information and referrals to agencies that can support them
- Often if you ask the newcomer what they need for their condition, they may tell you
- They also may choose not to disclose to you (that is their right)



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How You Can Help Influence Change

- Stories often give insight into how visible/invisible disabilities affect the lives of persons with disabilities and result in insightful and practical changes in policy that lead to effective service delivery
- Network and build partnerships with community groups helping all people with disabilities in order to build equitable and just communities
- Partnerships generate strong lobbies for change at institutional and community levels
- Support self-advocacy for newcomers with disabilities, and offer to be an ally if they need help

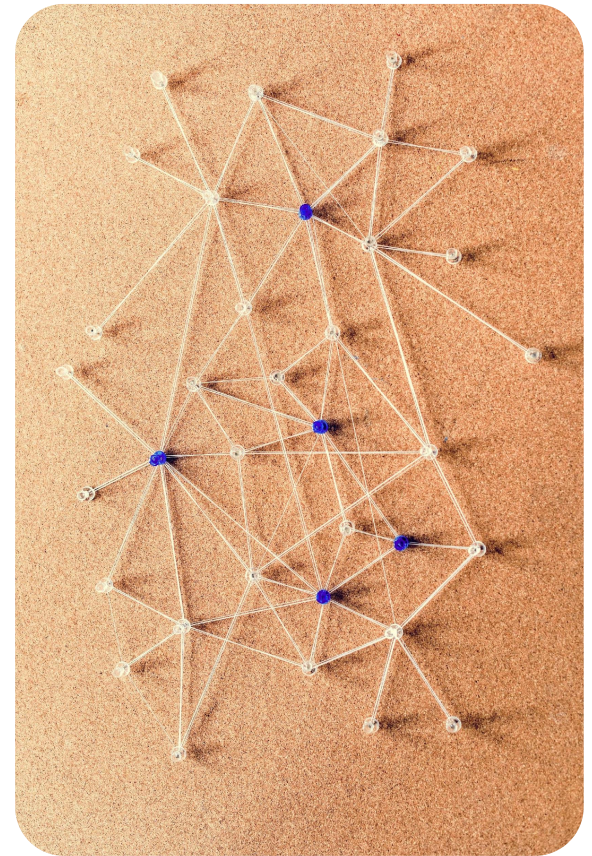


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Refer To Other Organizations

- Many organizations and non-profits exist to support people with disabilities
- If a newcomer discloses a permanent condition or disability to you, refer the newcomer to an organization that specializes in supports for their condition
- If you do not know what organizations to refer them to, you can always connect with one of these Alberta wide organizations for more information
- 211 National, free, information hotline
- Voice of Albertans with Disabilities <https://vadsociety.ca>
- Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities advocate.disability@gov.ab.ca or calling [1-800-272-8841](tel:1-800-272-8841)
- EmployAbilities for Newcomers <https://employabilities.ab.ca/programs-edmonton-and-greater-area-landing-page/employabilities-for-newcomers/>

Working together we can make their immigration journey a little less challenging, and perhaps help them find a home here in Canada



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