

RACE & DISABILITY CANADA

A PLAYBOOK

# From Awareness to Action

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A Playbook for Disability Sector Leaders

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# Introduction

Leadership in the disability sector requires commitment, community, and collaboration at its core. This playbook is designed for disability sector leaders and IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility) Professionals — staff who hold the diversity portfolio within a disability organization — committed to advancing inclusion by addressing the intersection of race and disability.

Whether you are a CEO, CTO, Non-profit Organization Manager, Social Worker, or Community Organizer, you will find here the tools, resources, and peer insights to strengthen your leadership, expand your network, and create lasting impact.

# About Race and Disability Canada

Our work highlights that racialized people with disabilities in Canada face unique barriers where racism and ableism intersect — barriers often overlooked in larger, well-known disability organizations where dominant narratives about disability typically shape services and policies.

Many programs assume all people with disabilities experience the same challenges, but for racialized people with disabilities, systemic racism and ableism combine to limit inclusion, accessibility, and leadership opportunities.

A lack of race-and-disability based data further hinders organizations from designing culturally relevant services and supports. Race and Disability Canada's work has examined the intersections of race and disability in the Canadian context, the capacity-building needs of disability sector organizations, and strategies to amplify the leadership of racialized people with disabilities.

This playbook distills those findings into **practical tools and strategies** for advancing race and disability inclusion in the disability sector.

To learn more, visit: [racedisability.ca/research](https://racedisability.ca/research)

# Identify — Recognize the Landscape

## Why This Matters

Mainstream disability organizations (larger, more well-known disability organizations) in Canada often struggle to meaningfully engage with the intersections of race and disability. Although there is growing awareness about equity and inclusion, there is a widespread culture of silence that prevents open and courageous conversations about race, often rooted in:

- Fear of conflict and discomfort
- Lack of confidence in using race-specific language (e.g., "Black," "racialized")
- Worry about being misunderstood or labeled racist
- Power dynamics in organizations that stifle anonymity

This reluctance leads to the deliberate avoidance of "sensitive" topics, often to preserve a false sense of harmony. As a result, most of these organizations:

- View and address disability in isolation without acknowledging other overlapping social identities such as race, gender, culture, or religion
- Lack racialized staff with disabilities in leadership roles
- Overlook or minimize the value of collaborative, community-driven decision making
- Reinforce a cycle of exclusion and disconnected policies that fail to reflect the lived realities of racialized people with disabilities

*"Mainstream organizations say they care about inclusion, but their actions rarely reflect that when it comes to race."*

— COMMUNITY PARTICIPANT

*"Public services say they're inclusive, but they rarely accommodate racialized people with disabilities."*

— COMMUNITY PARTICIPANT

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Pay attention to whose voices you listen to and whose are missing. Think about how you can bring more perspectives into the conversation.
- Create space for new leaders, especially those from diverse backgrounds.
- Acknowledge the importance of race and disability together, apply this understanding in your daily work, and set up practices that help you stay consistent.

# Investigate — Explore What Works

## Learning from the Field

Across Canada, disability-sector leaders are addressing race and disability intersections in ways that offer valuable lessons. Race and Disability Canada's IDEA Project identified several promising practices from both mainstream disability organizations and community-led disability organizations — alongside critical areas where systemic barriers remain.

## Employment Experiences

Systemic barriers shaped by racist and ableist hiring practices continue to hinder fair access to employment. Challenges in employment emerged as one of the most common themes. Although 70.1% of participants disclosed their disability to potential employers in hopes of receiving support, many hesitated due to fear of discrimination. Experiences varied: some individuals were granted accommodations, while others encountered denial or inadequate assistance.

**67%**

faced accessibility barriers when seeking jobs

**50.8%**

experienced difficulties during interviews

**62.1%**

encountered workplace discrimination

*"Positions related to accessibility are often given to people with no disabilities."*

— COMMUNITY PARTICIPANT

*"Employers refused accommodations, canceled interviews after I asked about wheelchair access, or ignored my requests altogether."*

— COMMUNITY PARTICIPANT

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Examine your organization's current hiring practices to identify patterns, gaps, or barriers to access for racialized people with disabilities.
- Intentionally design job postings, applications, and interview processes to be fully accessible, ensuring that racialized people with disabilities have full access to opportunities.
- Establish ongoing feedback and accountability processes to ensure accessibility needs are consistently identified, addressed, and followed up on in a timely manner.

## Healthcare Experiences

Healthcare access is a major barrier, particularly for racialized people with invisible disabilities. Discrimination, disbelief and dismissal from medical professionals, and lack of culturally relevant services remain widespread issues.

**37.9%**

experienced barriers or discrimination accessing healthcare

*"Being racialized makes ableism worse, and ableism makes racism worse. It's an unrelenting cycle."*

— COMMUNITY PARTICIPANT

*"The lack of diverse representation in disability services isolates racialized people like me."*

— COMMUNITY PARTICIPANT

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Listen to and validate diverse perspectives. Take reports of discrimination or disbelief seriously and acknowledge how race and disability intersect to create unique challenges.
- Advocate for culturally relevant and inclusive healthcare.
- Reflect on your own assumptions and actively challenge racist and/or ableist stereotypes in healthcare spaces.

## Education Experiences

Participants shared experiences of exclusion and stigma in elementary and high school. These barriers negatively affected the educational outcomes for many racialized students with disabilities.

**70.2%**

faced accessibility barriers in educational settings — including lack of accommodations, limited recognition of diverse learning needs, and inconsistent support systems

*"When I disclose my needs as a racialized person with a disability, I'm either ignored or treated as if I'm exaggerating."*

— COMMUNITY PARTICIPANT

*"Professors who wanted to be inclusive transformed my academic experience and helped me release years of shame."*

— COMMUNITY PARTICIPANT

## Systemic Gaps in Mainstream Disability Organizations

Mainstream disability organizations are still building the structures needed to fully support the intersection of race and disability. Existing systems often do not fully recognize or respond to the unique experiences of racialized people with disabilities, leaving gaps in representation, access, and relevant supports and services. A contributing factor is the widespread discomfort many organizations feel when addressing race directly.

Even as awareness of equity and inclusion grows, conversations about race and disability are often avoided due to fear of conflict, uncertainty about language, or concerns about making mistakes. This culture of silence can unintentionally reinforce the habit of viewing race and disability in isolation, rather than as interconnected identities.

Challenges identified through research include:

- Lack of race-and-disability based data
- No specific initiatives aimed at reducing the barriers faced by racialized people with disabilities
- IDEA initiatives are under-resourced and need greater support
- Lack of dedicated funding for initiatives to address the intersections of race and disability

## Key Statistics

These challenges are not just organizational — they affect the everyday experiences of racialized people with disabilities. When initiatives are under-resourced or when conversations about race and disability feel too difficult to have, important needs can go unmet. The data shows how these gaps translate into real barriers in employment, education, and healthcare. By recognizing these areas, disability organizations have an opportunity to build stronger, more inclusive systems that work for everyone.

### PERCENTAGE OF RACIALIZED PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES REPORTING BARRIERS ACROSS KEY AREAS OF LIFE

AREA OF LIFE	PROPORTION AFFECTED	PERCENT
Barriers in job seeking		67%
Challenges in job interviews		51%
Discrimination in the workplace		62%
Accessibility issues in education		70%
Healthcare discrimination		38%

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Ensure decision-making structures and advisory processes include the voices of racialized people with disabilities.

- Allocate dedicated resources to initiatives that address the intersections of race and disability.
- Create ongoing opportunities for supported dialogue and reflection on how race and disability shape experiences within your organization.

# Address — Act for Impact

By confronting discomfort, building organizational confidence, and moving from silence to engagement, mainstream disability organizations can begin addressing the systemic gaps that exclude communities of racialized people with disabilities.

Improving organizational practices takes ongoing effort to recognize how race and disability affect systems, policies, and workplace structures.

## What Is Needed

- **Intentional leadership** that strengthens inclusivity by recognizing how race and disability shape people's experiences.
- **Structured dialogue platforms** to enable courageous conversations on how race and disability intersect, supporting meaningful systemic change.
- **Investment in leadership development**, particularly on the intersections of race and disability, through leadership programs hosted by Race and Disability Canada. To learn more about our programs, visit: [racedisability.ca/ideaproject](https://racedisability.ca/ideaproject)
- **Capacity building through structured mentorship programs** that connect racialized staff with disabilities to experienced leaders, enabling skill development, peer support, and pathways to leadership.
- **Diversification of leadership** — ensuring racialized people with disabilities are represented at all levels.

### CASE STUDY SPOTLIGHT

## Staff-Driven Cultural Change

Under new leadership, one organization adopted a "bottom-up" approach to cultural development by creating structured committees, engaging employees at all levels, and prioritizing racialized voices. This shift fostered a culture of genuine inclusivity and increased the representation of racialized staff with disabilities in leadership roles.

### TAKE INSPIRATION

By creating intentional spaces for participation and decision-making, your organization can strengthen inclusion, amplify diverse perspectives, and build leadership pathways for underrepresented staff. Small, deliberate steps — like structured committees, inclusive feedback mechanisms, and elevating marginalized voices — can drive meaningful, lasting cultural change.

# Conclusion

Building equity in leadership is both a responsibility and an opportunity. By recognizing the unique barriers faced by Indigenous, Black, and racialized people with disabilities, investing in diverse leadership, and fostering spaces for intentional and respectful dialogue, the disability sector can move closer to a truly inclusive future.

The strategies in this playbook — grounded in the lived experiences and research of Race and Disability Canada's IDEA Project — are a starting point. **Lead change from where you are.**

Subscribe to [our newsletter](#) to access tools, peer insights, and updates that will help drive long-lasting, systemic change in your organization.

Curious about the intersections of race and disability, or how training might support your organization? Connect with us to start the conversation.

## Contact Information

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