

Report: Common barriers faced by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in British Columbia – And how self-advocates and BCPF can lead the way for change

Many people in British Columbia face challenges that can prevent them from fully participating in society and being included in their own community.

These challenges are not just about individual abilities, they are often the result of barriers in the environment, services, policies, and attitudes of society. From inaccessible buildings and transportation to lack of inclusive education, employment, and digital access...these barriers make it harder for people to live independently, access healthcare, pursue education and employment, and participate in social and cultural life.

This report highlights 20 common barriers experienced by members of BC People First Society.

Understanding these barriers is an important step toward creating a more inclusive and equitable province. By identifying the challenges, we can also see where change is needed through advocacy, accessible services, inclusive policies, and meaningful opportunities for self-advocates to lead the way.

1. General Accessibility Barriers

- Physical: Inaccessible buildings, lack of ramps, elevators, or adapted washrooms.
- Transportation: Limited public transit access, inaccessible vehicles, or high cost of travel.
- Digital: Websites, apps, and online services that are not compatible with screen readers or plain language.

- Sensory: Environments with bright lights, loud noises, strong smells, or crowded spaces can make it hard for many people—especially neurodivergent people—to participate safely and comfortably.
- Communication, education, employment, healthcare, community living, and many other accessibility barriers are faced by people in BC.

2. Communication Barriers

- Information often not in plain language or with visual supports.
- Professionals, government staff, and community organizations may not know how to communicate clearly or in plain language
- Lack of interpreters, captioning, or AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) support.
- Documents provided by service providers and employers not provided in large font, Braille, or easy read options.
- Environments with too much noise, information, or sensory input can make it hard for someone to focus, understand, or respond.
- Rapid speech, jargon, or giving too many instructions at once can overwhelm some people's processing ability.
- Support workers, family members, or professionals sometimes "speak for" the person or filter what they say, instead of allowing them to express their own opinions.

3. Education Barriers

- Schools may not provide inclusive classrooms, individualized supports, or transition planning.
- Teachers and staff may have low expectations or lack training in supporting all students.
- Students may face social exclusion, bullying, or lack of peer support.
- Access to post-secondary education and vocational programs is often limited or not adapted.

4. Employment Barriers

- Employers have biased assumptions about capability, limiting job opportunities.
- Workplaces fail to provide accommodations or proper training for safety procedures, putting some people at a higher risk of accidents or injuries.
- Lack of supported employment programs that lead to meaningful employment outcomes.
- Sheltered Workshops still exist! And violate people's human rights.
- Lack of workplace accommodations or employers deny accommodation requests.
- Challenges with interviewing, workplace social inclusion, and advancement opportunities.
- Limited access to career development, mentorship, or job coaching tailored for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- People with disabilities often do not get the support they need to find part-time, flexible, or creative employment that matches their interests and strengths.
- Few programs help develop entrepreneurial skills like budgeting, marketing, or managing a small business.
- Training programs rarely address legal, financial, or administrative aspects of running a business, leaving people without necessary guidance.
- Limited support for self-employment or entrepreneurship, such as business coaching and start-up grants, even though for many neurodivergent people the only way to get the appropriate needed workplace accommodations is to start your own business.

5. Social and Community Barriers

- People with disabilities often experience isolation and social exclusion.
- Limited opportunities for peer networks, recreation, and civic participation that people choose or want to do, rather than being forced to do by caregivers.

- Community spaces and programs may fail to include people with disabilities in meaningful ways.

6. Health and Mental Health Barriers

- Limited access to primary care, specialists, and preventative services.
- Many important health services are not covered so people have to pay out of pocket for things like therapy, physio, rehab, dental care, mobility aids, or specialist supports.
- High out-of-pocket costs for services not covered by MSP make healthcare hard to access.
- Health providers may underestimate health concerns or misattribute symptoms to disability (“diagnostic overshadowing”).
- Mental health supports often not accessible, trauma-informed, or tailored to the needs of people with intellectual or developmental disabilities.
- Miscommunication with healthcare providers or caregivers can lead to mistakes with medication or treatment.
- Lack of accessible health information can prevent understanding of safety instructions.
- Many people with disabilities receive fewer preventive screenings (like mammograms, Pap tests, dental check-ups) because providers assume they aren’t necessary or because facilities aren’t accessible.
- Healthcare providers may attribute symptoms to the person’s disability rather than investigating actual medical conditions, leading to misdiagnosis or delayed treatment.
- Medications are prescribed to people with disabilities without knowing what the effect on them will be. PWD are used as test subjects without permission.
- Doctors, nurses, and specialists often lack training in caring for patients with intellectual disabilities, including communication techniques, behavioural understanding, or adapting procedures.
- People may be excluded from making decisions about their own care due to assumptions about capacity or overreliance on guardians.

- Long waitlists to see specialist put people at risk.

7. Housing and Independent Living Barriers

- Shortage of affordable, accessible, and supported housing options.
- Elevators are out of service regularly.
- Reliance on group homes or family support may limit independence.
- Navigating housing programs can be complex and confusing without plain language support.
- Rent is more expensive than a mortgage but there is not much support for people with disabilities to purchase their own home, even though it would be cheaper and better in the long run.
- Affordable housing can have clauses that don't allow someone to run a business from their home, which make its very difficult when the only accessible employment for some people with disabilities is self-employment.

8. Systemic and Policy Barriers

- Bureaucracy, eligibility criteria, and paperwork are often confusing or inaccessible.
- Policies may exclude some people from decision-making.
- Funding models can create gaps in services or force competition among needs.
- Meeting IQ requirements for services is ableist and an outdated non-personalized service model that needs change for equity.

9. Attitudinal and Cultural Barriers

- Stigma, low expectations, and discrimination persist in schools, workplaces, healthcare, with service provider staff, and in the community.
- Ableism can lead to underrepresentation in politics, boards, and advocacy spaces.

- Cultural misunderstandings may compound barriers for Indigenous people, immigrants, or racialized individuals with disabilities.

10. Legal and Rights-Based Barriers

- Limited awareness of rights under the Accessible BC Act, human rights laws, or UNCRPD.
- People may not know what programs, benefits, or supports exist.
- Challenges accessing justice, advocacy, and complaint mechanisms.
- Barriers to civic participation, and inclusion in public decision-making.

11. Financial Barriers

- Limited personal income or access to disability benefits.
- High costs for supports, therapies, accessible technology, or transportation.
- Economic dependency can restrict independence and choice, and lead to being in vulnerable situations.

12. Emergency and Crisis Preparedness Barriers

- Emergency alerts and disaster planning are often not accessible or adapted to people with disabilities.
- People with intellectual disabilities may be overlooked in crisis response or evacuation plans.
- First responders may not know how to communicate or provide support during a crisis.

13. Technology Access and Digital Literacy Barriers

- Beyond accessibility, some people lack devices, internet, digital skills, or support to participate fully online.
- People are being excluded from telehealth appointments, remote learning, virtual advocacy, and employment opportunities.

14. Intersectional Barriers

- People with disabilities who are racialized, Indigenous, LGBTQ2S+, immigrants, or newcomers face compounding discrimination.
- Cultural and language barriers can restrict access to services and supports.
- Gendered assumptions can limit access to reproductive health services or sexual health education.

15. Voting and Civic Participation Barriers

- People with intellectual and developmental disabilities may find it hard to vote because polling places, ballots, or election materials are not easy to read or understand.
- Election staff may not know how to help people with disabilities vote independently or respectfully.
- Some people are wrongly told they cannot vote or that they are not capable of making decisions; or not capable of running as an election candidate.
- There is often little education or guidance on how to vote, so people may feel unsure or nervous about the process.
- Online or mail-in voting may be difficult if it is not designed to work with assistive devices or if people need extra help using technology.

16. Transportation Barriers

- Accessible transportation can be too expensive for many, especially in rural or remote areas.
- There are not enough accessible transportation options or taxis in both big cities and rural areas, to cover the demand.
- Even if accessible transport exists, scheduling, frequency, and rural location create barriers to work, appointments, and social participation.
- High travel costs limit participation in work, education, healthcare, and community activities.
- Inaccessible or poorly designed transportation can put people at risk of injury.

- Lack of training for transit staff on supporting riders with disabilities can increase risk.
- Crowded vehicles, loud noises, or unpredictable stops can cause anxiety or sensory overload.
- Specialized transportation programs may have limited service areas or strict eligibility criteria.
- Bus stops, train stations, or ferry terminals may lack ramps, lifts, or clear signage.
- Sidewalks and pathways to transit stops may be uneven or blocked, making it hard to reach transportation safely.
- Escalators and elevator are out of service regularly.
- Online apps for transit or ride-hailing may not work well with screen readers or may be too complex to navigate.
- An app for HandyDart booking needs to be implemented to make scheduling easier and better for those who are non-speaking.
- Staff may not know how to assist passengers with mobility challenges, sensory sensitivities, or communication needs.
- Poor training can create unsafe situations or discourage people from using public transit.

17. Recreation, Culture, and Leisure Access Barriers

- Limited inclusive sports, arts, and cultural activities.
- Washrooms are not often big enough for wheelchair users or people who use other mobility devices.
- Programs may exist but not adapted or welcoming for participants with intellectual or developmental disabilities.
- Leisure pass applications are too complicated and require hard-to-get tax documents. People on PWD should receive easier access to community recreation passes.
- There is often limited staff awareness about disability supports, including invisible disabilities, resulting in inconsistent or inadequate assistance.

18. Legal Advocacy and Representation Gap Barriers

- Difficulty accessing legal advice or representation in discrimination, housing, or employment disputes.
- Guardianship or supported decision-making arrangements sometimes limit self-determination.
- Lack of plain language guides, outreach, or advocacy can prevent people from accessing opportunities or exercising their rights.

19. Caregiver and Support Gap Barriers

- Shortage of trained personal support workers or respite options can prevent independence.
- Reliance on family caregivers may create stress and limit choice in daily living.
- Service provider reports may be very biased, focused on behaviours related to disability rather than the person's strengths, goals, the context behind those behaviours; or how the environment, supports, or policies affect the person's experiences.
- Frequent changes in support staff can prevent people from building trust and receiving consistent care.
- Overworked or stressed caregivers may struggle to provide quality support.

20. Safety Barriers

- Past experiences of being ignored, misunderstood, or dismissed can make people less willing to speak up.
- Fear of punishment, embarrassment, or being treated as "difficult" can cause people to stay quiet even when they need help.
- People with intellectual disabilities may be more vulnerable to bullying, harassment, or exploitation.
- Some people face unsafe conditions in group homes, day programs, or care settings.
- Reporting mechanisms for abuse or neglect may be hard to access or understand in plain language.

- People with intellectual disabilities may be more at risk of scams, online bullying, or exploitation due to limited digital literacy or lack of accessible safety guidance.

Summary & Key Insights

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities in BC face layers of barriers, from physical and communication challenges, to systemic exclusion, social isolation, and attitudinal discrimination. There is a major lack of understanding around how these barriers are due to societal and system designs rather than individual ability.

Addressing these barriers requires universal design, accessible environments, inclusive policies, plain language information, technology access, and meaningful opportunities for participation and decision-making at all levels of society.

BC People First Society can play a big role in breaking down barriers and creating real change in BC. Here's how:

Advocacy and Awareness

- Speak up about the barriers people face to governments, businesses, and the community.
- Run campaigns that raise awareness about accessibility, inclusion, and human rights.

Peer Support and Leadership

- Empower self-advocates to take leadership roles and make decisions about programs, services, and policies.

- Offer training and mentorship so people with can advocate for themselves and others.

Education and Plain Language Resources

- Create easy-to-read guides, videos, and workshops on rights, benefits, and community resources.
- Teach others—families, professionals, and the public—how to communicate clearly and inclusively.

Community Engagement

- Organize welcoming and inclusive social and recreational events.
- Build networks where self-advocates can connect, share experiences, and support one another.

Policy and Systems Change

- Provide feedback to government programs and policies to ensure they are accessible and equitable.
- Partner with other organizations to push for changes in healthcare, education, employment, housing, and technology access.

Technology and Accessibility Initiatives

- Support access to devices, internet, and digital skills training.
- Promote accessible online spaces and virtual programs, like telehealth or remote learning.

Celebrating Success and Impact

- Highlight achievements of self-advocates in the community and workplaces to challenge stereotypes.
- Show how inclusion benefits everyone, encouraging broader societal change.