**Government Relations 101**

Welcome to Government Relations 101. A basic understanding of the different levels of government and disability legislation can help to make all of us better advocates for people who are blind or partially sighted.

In this document you will learn about:

* The Canadian government at a glance
* The Federal government
* Provincial governments
* Municipal governments
* Meeting with elected officials
* Disability legislation at a glance

# **The Canadian Government at a glance**

When you need to advocate on an issue, it can be challenging to figure out who the appropriate elected official is and how to access them. It’s important to have a basic understanding of how the government works so that you can identify and reach the people who can create change.

There are three different levels of government in Canada:

1. Federal
2. Provincial
3. Municipal

Some issues fall under more than one jurisdiction, so it is important to consider whether the issue that you’re advocating on impacts people in your municipality, your province, or in the country as a whole.

A good example of this is transportation. While an issue with a national airline would impact people who are blind or partially sighted from coast to coast, an issue with your local public transit system would impact those who live within your municipality. You wouldn’t want to contact the federal government to advocate about accessibility barriers for public transit users in Moncton.

# **The Federal Government**

## **The House of Commons**

The House of Commons is made up of elected officials called Members of Parliament, or MPs. Every MP is a member of a political party. When a general election is held, the party with the largest number of elected MPs usually forms the government.

MPs are elected by the constituents who live in their riding. A riding consists of approximately 100,000 people, and Canada is divided into 338 ridings. That's why areas with a high population density, like Toronto, have several MPs in a very small geographic area, while areas with a low population density, like Nunavut, may have a single MP for a very large geographic area.

The job of MPs is to represent the views of their constituents. MPs introduce, debate, and vote on bills that will become legislation.

Some MPs from the party in power serve as Cabinet Ministers. A Cabinet Minister is the formal head of a specific department of government, such as finance, employment, or accessibility. The Cabinet Minister sets priorities and leads policies for their specific department.

Some MPs from the party in power become Parliamentary Secretaries. A Parliamentary Secretary serves as a liaison, helping a Cabinet Minister connect with other MPs. When a Cabinet Minister is away from the House of Commons, the Parliamentary Secretary may be called upon to answer policy questions during Question Period.

Some MPs from the opposition party become Shadow Ministers or Critics. A Shadow Minister or Critic is the lead on a specific issue that matters to their party, and they try to move these priorities forward on behalf of the party.

## **The Senate**

The Senate is made up of appointed official called Senators. Senators are appointed by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister. Each Senator represents a specific geographic region. Like MPs, Senators introduce, debate, and vote on bills that will become legislation. Before a bill can become a law, it must first pass through the House of Commons and the Senate.

## **Areas of federal jurisdiction**

According to the Constitution Act of 1867, the federal government has jurisdiction over matters of national interest, while the provinces have jurisdiction over matters of regional interest.

Some areas of federal government jurisdiction include:

* Banking
* Justice and criminal law
* Labour
* Public works and government services
* Postal services

For more information on areas of federal jurisdiction, please see our guide on [How to navigate the Canadian government system](https://www.cnib.ca/sites/default/files/2023-01/How%20to%E2%80%A6navigate%20the%20Canadian%20government%20system_EN.docx).

### **Tips for communicating with the Federal Government**

To figure out who your MP is, visit elections.ca or parl.gc.ca and search by your postal code. Remember, if the issue is not a national issue, contacting an MP will not help you to resolve it.

To write a postage-free letter to your MP, address it to their House of Commons office as follows:

Name of MP

House of Commons

Ottawa, Ontario

K1A 0A6

To find any hired or elected Government of Canada employee, including contact information, visit [the Government Electronic Service Directory (GEDS)](https://geds-sage.gc.ca/en/GEDS?pgid=002).

# **The Provincial Government**

Like the federal government, provincial governments are made up of representatives that are elected by the people in their ridings to serve in the provincial Legislative Assembly.

The titles of these elected officials vary from coast to coast and can include:

* Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP)
* Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA)
* Member of the House of Assembly (MHA)
* Member of the National Assembly (MNA)

Like federal MPs, Members of Provincial Parliament introduce, debate, and vote on bills, and they represent their constituents' views at the provincial level. Provincial governments also have Cabinet Ministers and Shadow Ministers or Critics. Unlike the federal government, provincial governments do not have a Senate.

## **Areas of provincial jurisdiction**

Some areas of provincial government jurisdiction include:

* Education
* Healthcare (including hospitals)
* Social Services

For more information on areas of provincial jurisdiction, and to learn how to find out who your MPP is, please see our guide on [How to navigate the Canadian government system](https://www.cnib.ca/sites/default/files/2023-01/How%20to%E2%80%A6navigate%20the%20Canadian%20government%20system_EN.docx).

# **Municipal Governments**

Like federal and provincial governments, municipal governments are made up of elected officials. These officials are called Councillors or Aldermen. Depending on the size of a municipality, they can serve the entire municipality or a specific riding or ward within the municipality. A city councillor or alderman represents their constituents at the municipal level, vote on by-laws, develop policies, and deliver programs and services.

## **Areas of municipal jurisdiction**

Some areas of municipal government jurisdiction include:

* Bylaw enforcement
* Community accessibility
* Parks and pathways
* Police services

There are over 3,000 municipalities in Canada. To find who represents you, please refer to your municipality’s website. For more information on areas of municipal jurisdiction, please see our guide on [How to navigate the Canadian government system](https://www.cnib.ca/sites/default/files/2023-01/How%20to%E2%80%A6navigate%20the%20Canadian%20government%20system_EN.docx).

# **Meeting with elected officials**

When you are meeting with an elected official about an issue that matters to you, it is important to remember that the elected official may be hearing about the issue and your proposed solutions for the first time. This can feel daunting, but there are some steps that you can take to ensure that your meeting goes well.

Hear from elected officials about how constituents can effectively engage with them on issues: [Champions for Change – Policy Maker Questions video](https://youtu.be/4uPMkG9EQHI).

## **Four steps to a successful meeting**

There are four steps to having an effective meeting with an elected official:

1. Identify the appropriate person.
2. Contact the appropriate person.
3. Prepare for the meeting.
4. Attend the meeting.

## **Step 1: Identify the appropriate person**

It’s important that your message is reaching the person who has the power to create change. If the issue you’re advocating on is a federal government issue, you can identify the appropriate person by visiting the Parliament of Canada website and searching by postal code: [www.parl.gc.ca](http://www.parl.gc.ca/). You can also visit Elections Canada website and search by postal code: [www.elections.ca](http://www.elections.ca).

If the issue you’re advocating on is a provincial or municipal government issue, you can search the website of your provincial or municipal legislature.

## **Step 2: Contact the appropriate person**

Once you have identified the appropriate person to contact, reach out to them to set up a meeting. Elected officials have employees who respond to calls and emails. Treat these people the same way that you would treat the elected official. Introduce yourself and give a summary of the issue you would like to discuss

If your campaign is time sensitive, don’t wait until the last minute to contact the appropriate person. Elected officials have very busy schedules and will not be able to take a last-minute appointment.

Remember that elected officials receive a large volume of emails, so it may be best to contact them by phone. If you don’t receive a response within a week, you can send a respectful follow-up email.

If your elected official is unavailable to meet, you may be able to arrange an initial meeting with one of their employees and schedule a follow up meeting with the elected official for a later date.

## **Step 3: Prepare for the meeting**

Be sure that you have a clear understanding of the issue that you’d like to discuss and prepare a few key messages that you want to share during the meeting. Elected officials may have many meetings each day, so it’s important that you are well prepared to deliver your key messages in a clear and concise way.

Don’t share your entire lived experience. Instead, choose a portion of your lived experience that you want to share as a way to emphasize your key messages.

## **Step 4: Attend the meeting**

If the meeting is at a provincial or federal legislature, consider wearing formal business attire. A meeting in an elected official’s riding office may be less formal. Casual business attire should suffice. You should arrive 15 minutes before the scheduled meeting. Meetings with elected officials often start late, end early, or get rescheduled because of last-minute conflicts in the official’s schedule. Be prepared for this and be flexible.

It may be helpful to think of the meeting in four different parts.

* First, you’ll want to introduce yourself and briefly explain why you’re advocating on the issue.
* Second, you’ll want to define the issue and its impact to the community. Share some facts to support your argument.
* Third, you’ll need to allow your audience a chance to respond. Listen carefully so that you’ll know what part of your message resonated with them. Give brief answers to any questions. If you don’t know the answer to a question, commit to following up with the information after the meeting. If members of your audience disagree with you, respectfully bring the conversation back to your key messages and brief examples of your lived experience.
* Fourth, you’ll want to wrap up the meeting with a thank you and next steps. If next steps have been discussed, summarize them, and express your gratitude for the opportunity to speak. Leave a written summary of the issue with your contact details.

Many elected officials have social media accounts. If the meeting went well, ask the official if you can take a photo with them to post on social media as a thank you for the meeting. Elected officials, particularly MPs, are keen to visibly showcase who they are meeting with and what they’re doing in the community.

## **Tips on having an effective meeting**

* Have a few key messages in mind before you enter the meeting.
* If you will be speaking as part of a team, get organized before the meeting. Figure out who will say what and when so that the meeting flows smoothly.
* Use proper titles. If you’re speaking to an MP named James Leung, address the person as Minister Leung.
* Use correct pronunciation of names.
* After brief introductions, define the issue clearly and concisely. Next, identify potential solutions in order of priority. This will ensure that your most important messages are heard in the event that the meeting is cut short.
* Share your lived experience so that your audience has a deeper context for your call to action.
* Avoid long anecdotes and explanations.
* If you or your audience start to drift from the topic, bring the conversation back to your key messages.
* Remember to leave time for questions.
* Prepare for questions to the best of your ability. If someone asks a question that you don’t have an answer for, offer to send them the information later.
* Thank your audience for listening.
* Leave a written copy of your key messages and your contact details.

For further information on having effective meetings with elected officials, please see our guide on [How to meet with an elected official](https://www.cnib.ca/sites/default/files/2023-01/How%20to%E2%80%A6.meet%20with%20an%20elected%20official_EN.docx).

## **Writing a follow up letter**

A follow-up letter is more than just a thank you. While you certainly want to thank the official for taking the time to meet with you, the follow-up letter is also an opportunity to reiterate your key messages and any action items that were agreed upon in the meeting.

Here's a template letter to get you started:

Dear (insert name, using correct title),

Thank you for meeting with me on (insert date) to discuss (topic of meeting).

(Include 2 or 3 sentences that summarize the key points of the discussion).

(Include 2 or 3 sentences that summarize any next steps that were agreed upon during the meeting).

I have attached some fact sheets with more information about (topic) for your reference.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact me at (email address) or (phone number).

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

(Your name)

(Your address, to remind the recipient that you are a constituent)

## **Before sending the letter:**

* Did you define any acronyms?
* Did you omit any technical terms in favor of a clear explanation?
* Is the tone respectful and collaborative?
* Did you do a spelling and grammar check?
* Is the font and format consistent?
* Are all attachments accessible?
* Are all attachments included?
* Did you save a copy for yourself?
* Did you set a date to follow up on your own action items?
* Have you copied the people you want to include?

# **Disability Legislation at a Glance**

CNIB believes that people who are blind or partially sighted have the right to live the lives they choose. There are laws and standards that help us to advocate alongside people who are blind or partially sighted when they experience barriers or discrimination. Having a basic understanding of the laws and standards that protect our rights will help you to be a better advocate.

The laws and standards that we’ll explore here include:

* The Canadian Human Rights Act
* The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
* The Accessible Canada Act
* Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

# **Federal Legislation**

## **The Canadian Human Rights Act**

[The Canadian Human Rights Act](https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/h-6/) ensures equal opportunity for all individuals in Canada who may be victims of discrimination based on prohibited grounds.

The prohibited grounds within the legislation include the following:

* Race
* National or ethnic origin
* Color
* Religion
* Age
* Sex
* Sexual orientation
* Gender identity or expression
* Marital status
* Family status
* Genetic characteristics
* Disability
* Conviction for an offense for which a pardon has been granted or in respect of which a record suspension has been ordered.

The Canadian Human Rights Act applies only to federally regulated activities. There are separate provincial and territorial anti-discrimination laws that apply to provincially regulated activities.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission was created as a result of the Canadian Human Rights Act. The role of the Canadian Human Rights Commission is to investigate claims of discrimination based on the prohibited grounds listed above.

## **The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**

The Canadian Constitution is a set of laws that determine how Canada operates. The Constitution is the supreme law of Canada. All other laws must comply with the laws set out in the Constitution.

[The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-15.html) is part of the Canadian Constitution. Section 15 of the Charter outlines equality rights as follows:

**15.**(1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

This section of the Charter clearly states that everyone in Canada is to be treated with the same respect, dignity, and consideration. This means that governments must not discriminate in laws or programs.

## **The Accessible Canada Act**

[The Accessible Canada Act](https://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/A-0.6/index.html) prohibits discrimination based on disability. It applies nationwide and focuses on areas of federal jurisdiction, including the federal public sector, Crown Corporations, and all federally regulated organizations. The goal of the Accessible Canada Act is to create a barrier-free Canada by 2040 by identifying, removing, and preventing barriers.

Accessibility Standards Canada was created as a result of the Accessible Canada Act. The role of Accessibility Standards Canada is to develop legal requirements for accessibility in areas of federal jurisdiction.

As a result of the Accessible Canada Act, federally regulated organizations must create accessibility plans that are consistent with the rules outlined by Accessibility Standards Canada. In developing accessibility plans, organizations must consult with people who have disabilities; create processes to receive and respond to feedback; and report on progress toward implementation of accessibility plans.

If an organization covered by the Accessible Canada Act is found to have contravened the legislation, penalties may be assessed. These can range significantly, depending on the severity of the contravention and other factors.

## **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

Though the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is a piece of international legislation, Canada ratified the Convention in 2010. This means that Canada is committed to applying the rights outlined in the convention and is bound to the Convention under international law.

The Convention requires that States Parties (countries that have ratified the Convention) protect the rights to equality and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities in a variety of areas, including freedom of expression and opinion, respect for home and the family, education, health, employment, and access to services. The Convention also explains the types of actions that States Parties must take to ensure equal rights for people with disabilities.

As part of its commitment to the Convention, Canada must submit a report to the United Nations every four years, outlining how the country has advanced the rights of persons with disabilities.

# **Provincial Disability Legislation**

# **Provincial Human Rights Laws**

Provincial and territorial human rights laws are similar to the Canadian Human Rights Act and apply many of the same principles. They protect people from discrimination in areas of provincial and territorial jurisdiction, such as restaurants, stores, schools, housing, and most workplaces.

Provincial and territorial human rights acts include the following:

* Alberta Human Rights Act
* British Columbia Human Rights Code
* Manitoba Human Rights Code
* New Brunswick Human Rights Act
* Newfoundland and Labrador Human Rights Act
* Nova Scotia Human Rights Act
* Ontario Human Rights Code
* Prince Edward Island Human Rights Act
* Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms
* Saskatchewan Human Rights Code
* Northwest Territories Human Rights Act
* Nunavut Human Rights Act
* Yukon Human Rights Act

## **Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)**

The [AODA](https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05a11) was established on June 13, 2005. It aims to identify, remove, and prevent barriers for people with disabilities. It applies to all levels of government, non-profit organizations, and private sector businesses in Ontario that have one or more fulltime, parttime, seasonal, or contract employees.

The AODA outlines five standards:

1. Information and Communications Standards
2. Employment Standards
3. Transportation Standards
4. Design of Public Spaces Standards
5. Customer Service Standards

There are currently two new AODA standards under development:

1. Healthcare Standards
2. Education Standards

## **The Accessibility for Manitobans Act (AMA)**

The [AMA](http://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/a001-7e.php) was established in December 2013. It aims to proactively identify, remove, and prevent barriers in key areas of daily living.

The AMA outlines five standards:

1. The Customer Service Accessibility Standard
2. The Employment Accessibility Standard
3. The Information and Communication Accessibility Standard
4. The Design of Public Spaces Standard
5. The Transportation Standard

The Manitoba Government is committed to achieve significant progress by 2023.

## **An Act Respecting Accessibility in Nova Scotia**

[The Act Respecting Accessibility](https://www.nslegislature.ca/legc/bills/62nd_3rd/3rd_read/b059.htm) aims to make Nova Scotia inclusive and barrier free by 2030.

It includes six accessibility standards:

1. Goods and Services
2. Information and Communication
3. Transportation
4. Employment
5. Built Environment
6. Education

For more information on disability rights in Canada for people who are blind or partially sighted, please visit [CNIB Know Your Rights](http://www.cnib.ca/knowyourrights).