Waterloo Region
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

More than 150 organizations call for a new approach to defining disability in Canada

Waterloo Region Community Legal Services (WRCLS) has joined more than 150 organizations from across Canada calling on the federal government to establish a single, rights-based definition of disability and to change how people with disabilities qualify for federal supports.

The joint statement, released ahead of the upcoming federal budget, sets out two complementary paths:

- A new rights-based system for defining disability, built outside the tax system.
- Immediate fixes to the Disability Tax Credit (DTC).

Download the joint statement.

Why this matters

The DTC is a gateway to the Canada Disability Benefit and 16 other federal disability programs, plus a growing number of provincial and territorial programs. It was created nearly 40 years ago as a tax-relief measure and was never designed to be the eligibility test for all other disability supports.

Far too few eligible people access the DTC because of persistent administrative barriers. Statistics Canada reports that fewer than one in six people with disabilities in Canada, and only about a third of people with very severe disabilities, access the DTC. This means hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities aren't receiving the benefits they're entitled to.

People with disabilities in Canada are also 50 per cent more likely to experience poverty than people without disabilities and twice as likely to experience food insecurity. Failing to bridge these gaps means failing to uphold Canada's responsibility to protect the fundamental human rights of people with disabilities.

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A question of principle

Adopting the proposed changes is a question of principle. No one should be kept from disability supports by an overly restrictive definition of disability or by persistent administrative barriers that make applying for benefits too difficult.

Getting this right would also make government work better. Federal programs — including the DTC, the Canada Pension Plan disability benefit, and veterans programs — use different definitions of disability and different eligibility rules, which can mean repeated assessments. A single definition and a centralized process for establishing disability status would cut that duplication for people with disabilities, medical practitioners, and the government.

What the statement calls for

The statement's signatories recognize progress has been made toward reforming the DTC.

Recent federal administrative changes announced as part of this year's Spring Economic Update are expected to unlock an estimated $345 million in support over six years for people facing access barriers. Lasting change will require fundamental reform.

The statement calls on the federal government to commit to a collaborative process to design a new eligibility system that would:

- Use the Accessible Canada Act's definition of disability as the starting point for access to federal disability programs.
- Create a centralized process for determining disability status outside the tax system that's dignified, accessible, and rights-based.
- Automatically extend federal disability certification to people already receiving disability benefits through provincial or territorial social assistance programs.

It also calls for immediate action to remove barriers in the current DTC application process while the new system is built, including:

- A new plain-language application form.
- Direct reimbursement of medical practitioners who certify applications.
- Fewer unnecessary temporary certificates and simpler renewals.
- An option for supported decision-making.

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- More funding for the Disability Benefit Navigation program.

All reforms must be designed in partnership with people with disabilities, in keeping with Canada's human rights commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including the principle of "nothing about us without us."

Together, we can build a Canada where no eligible person is kept from disability supports by administrative barriers.

Read the full statement and the list of signatories:

Download the joint statement (PDF, 33 KB)