

Welcome Guide

for Newcomers with Disabilities



What newcomers with disabilities need to know
about living in BC with a physical disability



Introduction

About Spinal Cord Injury BC (SCI BC)

Welcome to BC! We hope newcomers with disabilities will find a home and community here.

Our mission is to help people with spinal cord injury (and related disabilities) and their families adjust, adapt, and thrive as they deal with a new injury or struggle with the ongoing challenges of living and aging with a physical disability. This guide has been put together with the experience of people with SCI and similar disabilities living around [BC](#), and the information we have gathered from serving thousands of people living with physical disabilities in BC through our Infoline Service.

Wherever [newcomers](#) with disabilities go in BC, [SCI BC](#) has information and support to help them adjust, adapt, and thrive. We connect people with SCI and similar disabilities to peers – people with similar disabilities and experiences – to support and learn from each other through group events and activities in communities around BC.



Spinal Cord Injury BC's free [Infoline Service](#) is available Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm. Newcomers with disabilities can get information and answers to questions about living with a disability in BC by phone or email. We provide information and support and access to a wide variety of information on topics such as accessible housing, travel, employment, funding support, medical equipment, transportation, medical resources, and education. More in depth support is available for those who need assistance to navigate forms and access services.



infoline agents Heather and Bert

**Contact the SCI BC
Infoline: 1-800-689-2477
or info@sci-bc.ca**

About This Guide

We created this guide to:

- Help **newcomers** with **physical disabilities** like spinal cord injury and other forms of paralysis (polio, spina bifida, stroke, and multiple sclerosis, for example) to find the support they need to adjust, adapt and thrive in BC.
- Supplement information provided in **Province of BC Welcome Guides** with necessary information for newcomers with disabilities, their families and settlement workers, collected from the lived experience of people living in BC with similar disabilities.
- To build capacity among disability organizations to respond to the needs and questions of newcomers with disabilities in BC.

This guide was conceived by SCI BC member and former settlement worker, Jana Husseini. Jana mentored newcomers with disabilities and saw a need for more information and support. Spinal Cord Injury BC has received a growing number of inquiries to our Infoline Service from agencies and community groups supporting newcomers with disabilities in need of housing, funding, and medical supplies or equipment, and saw the gap in information for newcomers on disability related services they need in BC.

This Welcome Guide for Newcomers with Disabilities came out of consultation with newcomers, settlement workers, and people with disabilities. This guide is geared toward settlement workers and support communities supporting newcomers with disabilities. As we look to future versions, we hope to work with newcomer communities and settlement organizations to make the guide more usable and translatable for newcomers and their families.

This guide was created and written by

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Acknowledgements:

This project benefited from the expertise and feedback of many in BC's dedicated settlement sector. Thank you to everyone who contributed to this project:

Amal Ballu, NASMAI
Jane Drew, Peace River North School District
Ryan Drew, SUCCESS
Sabrina Dumitra, AMSSA
Mahi Khalaf, ISSofBC
Myung Lee, Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria
Saleem Spindari, Muslim Food Bank
Bahar Taheri, Refugee Hub, ISSofBC
Adel Tawakul, SUCCESS



We are grateful for the funding support provided to this project by Vancouver Coastal Health Community Investments and the City of Vancouver.

With thanks and respect to the newcomers who collaborated with us on the early outline for this guide in May of 2018, and shared their experiences and insights throughout this process.

SCI BC's work takes place on the territories of Indigenous peoples who have lived on and cared for the land for time immemorial. Our offices are located on the traditional and ancestral territory of the Coast Salish peoples – the xʷməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh), and ləkʷəŋən (Lekwungen) First Nations and the Lheidli T'enneh Nation.

How to use this Guide:

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This document is designed to be used on a computer, tablet or other mobile device. [Links like this](#)  will take you to other locations in the same document, and [links like this](#)  may link you to web pages depending on your device's settings. You can search this guide by using your PDF viewer's search function (control-F or command-F on most computers). This version is designed for ease of use with screen readers and for people who use screen magnification.

A print-at-home version with full text links is available at www.sci-bc.ca/newcomers 




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Terms used throughout this guide:

Newcomer

Describes all terms that fall into this category for the purpose of this guide: immigrant, refugee, Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) , community sponsored refugees, etc.

Person-first language

is wording that puts a person before their medical diagnosis, such as being a person with a disability.

Identity-first language

is language that leads with a person's diagnosis, such as being a disabled person.

There is debate in the disability field about which language is preferred. The commonly understood labels that people with disabilities use for themselves can change, but it is important to be guided by the preferred labels used by individuals for themselves. For consistency, and to align with SCI BC's norms, person-first language will be used here.

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Disabilities in BC	6
Disability in BC: Culture and Law	11
Human Rights and Government	14
Education and Training	16
Employment, Work and Volunteering	18
Food and Nutrition	20
Health and Disability	22
Accessible Housing and Shelter	26
Money and Finances	28
Transportation	30
Leisure, Recreation, and Sport	34
Recommended Disability Related Supports In Your First Year	36
Useful Terms (glossary)	37



Disabilities in BC

Geography and Climate

British Columbia (BC) is a large province, full of mountains, trees, and a rugged coastline.

BC has a range of geography and climates. Winter weather can range from very cold with dry snow to more moderate temperatures on the coast, with correspondingly wetter snow and much more rain. Either way, it's essential to have a winter plan in place. Summers can range from hot and dry to cool and rainy.



More on preparing for winter with a wheelchair or crutches on [SCI BC's blog](#) .

BC's coastal climate is the mildest in Canada, with very little snowfall in most coastal communities in the winter. Communities in BC's interior and in the mountains will get snow and slush throughout the winter months from November to March and can be very cold.

People with disabilities will need a waterproof jacket year-round throughout BC. In most communities, they will also need a warm winter coat. They need to make sure to check the weather before they leave home every day in BC because our weather changes quickly. Many people in coastal areas carry an umbrella or light raincoat with them most days between September and May. If the person with disability is not able to hold an umbrella while using a wheelchair, it's important to have a long waterproof jacket with a hood for the rain which is very easy to find in BC.

Salt and sand are used to provide traction on packed snow for vehicles and pedestrians throughout winter months (November to March) in most of the province, or to prevent it from accumulating. Both salt and sand can damage the wheelchair parts and may cause irritation and cracks on unprotected skin if the person with disability is pushing their wheelchair.



People with disabilities need to protect themselves and their mobility equipment (like a wheelchair, power wheelchair, walker, or crutches) against the weather by:

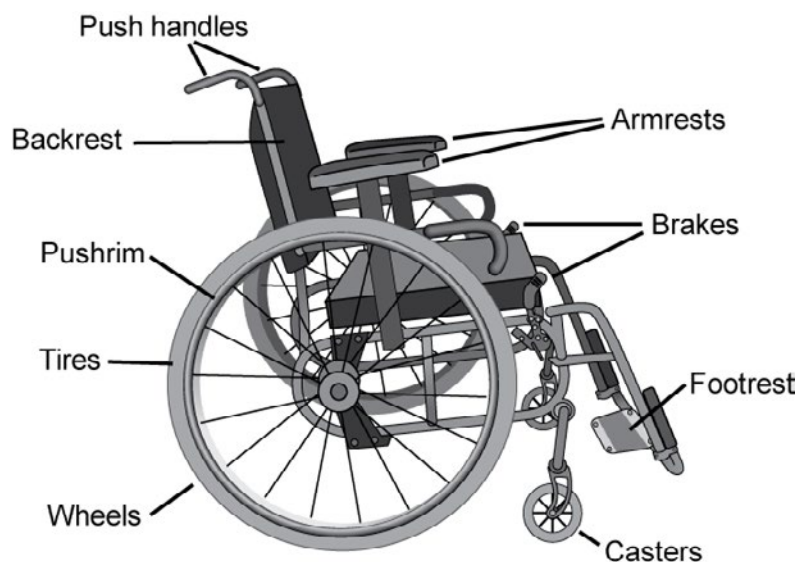
- Wearing gloves to protect their hands against rain, ice or snow when pushing their wheelchair, even when the temperature is mild.
- Wiping off their wheelchair after using it on roads covered with snow or where there is salt and sand. Power wheelchairs are very vulnerable to road salt and should be kept clean and serviced by a repair technician regularly.
- Washing their hands when they get in from outside to get salt and sand off their hands.
- Making sure to protect their power wheelchair controls from rain and moisture. Consulting their repair technician for advice or try covering the control unit with a plastic shower cap or kitchen wrap.

Using mobility equipment in rain and snow

While getting around with a disability in rain, snow, and ice is difficult, there are many ways that make it safer and easier.

Manual and power wheelchairs may need wider tires with treads for winter terrain for areas outside of Vancouver and Victoria where snow is more common in the winter months (November to March). These tires are available from bike shops, online, or from mobility equipment vendors. Some winter tires for wheelchairs do require wider wheel rims which would be ordered from a wheelchair vendor. There are attachments available for manual wheelchairs like the Freewheel to help manual wheelchair users get around in the snow, available from many wheelchair dealers or repair centres.

If a person with disability has weak hand function and uses a wheelchair, rainy conditions can make it hard to push their wheelchair the way they are used to. They can use gloves with a leather or silicone palm or look for coated [push rims](#) (the metal ring attached to the wheel of a manual wheelchair for pushing) that make gripping easier in wet conditions. There are also power assist devices that attach to their wheelchair to deal with rough terrain (including snow and rain).



Special tips and accessories are available for crutches, walkers and canes that can make using them in ice and rain easier. Newcomers with disabilities can look for these at a medical equipment vendor or home health store, or ask an Occupational Therapist for suggestions.



Wheelchairs often have sealed bearings and lubricated parts in the wheels and frame that are affected by winter conditions. Moisture and dirt from the road can cause the metal parts around the front wheels to get stiff and can cause the metal parts in the rear wheels to expand or contract, making it hard to get wheels off to transport them. Professional wheelchair repair technicians can help, but people with disabilities can prevent this by **keeping their chair clean and lubricating moving parts like the axles regularly throughout the winter months** 🔄

PEER TIP

If a newcomer is uncertain about how to maintain adaptive equipment against wet or cold weather, they should consult a wheelchair repair technician at a medical equipment dealer or a local bike shop for a less expensive option.




Useful strategies for Newcomers using mobility devices in winter conditions

- Newcomers using powered mobility devices like a power wheelchair should know that the battery will run down much more quickly in cold weather. They can carry a mobile phone or have another backup plan in case they get stuck.
- Individuals who walk but their disability affects walking strength or balance may find it safer to use a mobility device like a wheelchair, walker or mobility scooter under winter conditions.
- If newcomers are unfamiliar with winter weather, they should allow for time to adjust until they understand how it affects their mobility.
- Ask for help and create a backup plan with a friend or support person in case of weather-related mobility issues.
- A **Family Doctor/General Practitioner** (GP) can refer newcomers with disabilities to an **Occupational Therapist** to discuss their mobility needs if they are significantly affected by winter conditions where they live.
- They can consult with **mobility equipment** vendors to find out about accessories or modifications available for their mobility equipment that are designed for rain or snow.



Plan for the Weather

Most wheelchairs are not designed for snowy conditions. People with disabilities may find it more difficult to get around in the winter months and need to plan for more help and budget for alternative transportation. For example, they may need to take a taxi or [HandyDART](#)  from door to door instead of taking the bus or train.

Cold winter temperatures can affect some people with disabilities differently. People with paralysis or limited mobility may have poor circulation in their legs or not be able to feel parts of their body. They might not know if those parts of their body are affected by the cold. They should be sure to layer clothing on their legs and feet to protect themselves from the cold. They should check areas without sensation regularly to ensure they are warm enough and that their warm layers have not impaired their circulation. Warm socks and boots are crucial for winter in Canada. For those without sensation, consider getting them in a size larger to accommodate warm socks that don't cut off circulation or cause wounds.

If people with disabilities have pain related to their disability, BC's damp climate and winter cold may affect how much pain they have. Using public saunas, baths, heating pads or blankets can help address this kind of pain, while taking care to avoid applying heat to the parts of the body that have no sensation. Dressing for warmth, and avoiding heat loss from the wind, rain or snow using the right winter clothing layers can help reduce the effect the cold climate can have on pain, circulation, and skin integrity as well as keeping people much more comfortable!



Useful Links:

[Hello, Winter: 11 Tips to Navigate the Cold with SCI](#) 

[Best Gloves for Winter Wheeling](#) 

[Tips on Keeping Warm in Cold Weather After a Spinal Cord Injury](#) 



Warmer Weather

People with many types of disabilities experience effects from heat, such as fatigue or dehydration, in addition to the risks that the average person would experience, such as sunburn or heatstroke. In BC during the summer months (June-September), there are often periods of hot weather enough to cause concern.

People with many kinds of disabilities and chronic conditions are more vulnerable to sustained hot weather, and those unable to sweat are even more so. People with conditions that affect their ability to sweat should take care to use a spray bottle of water when outside in hot weather to help themselves keep cool, limit sun exposure, and take steps to ensure they have a cool place to sleep. All people are advised to take steps to protect themselves during hot weather in BC, including covering the head, seeking out shade, and drinking lots of water, especially when in the direct sun during the warmest months of July and August. In some parts of BC you are never far from a cool breeze, but some areas in BC's interior (for example, Kelowna and Kamloops) get very hot.

If a newcomer with disability has areas of friction or reduced circulation, hot weather can also lead to skin breakdown. For an amputee, this may affect the skin on their stump where it meets the prosthetic, for people with diabetes, skin on the legs and feet are most at risk. For people who do not have sensation in parts of their skin or use a wheelchair full-time, it's essential to monitor skin in these areas and keep it clean and free of moisture to avoid skin damage that can't be felt.



BC includes **heat emergencies** as part of the public emergency preparedness system. When an alert is called, local communities open cooling shelters, water spray areas in public places and offer bottled water to those who need it.

Terrain

Many BC communities have steep hills and mountains. It can be easier to push a manual wheelchair up a hill on paved sidewalks and roads; however, it is okay to ask for help – most people in BC will offer a push or other assistance if needed. Many people with disabilities who live in these communities will choose to use a power wheelchair to assist them in getting around their communities. Attachments for manual wheelchairs are also available that offer battery-powered wheels that can be removed as needed to put the wheelchair into a car or on a plane.



APPENDIX:

[List of Home Mobility Equipment Vendors in BC](#)

[Keeping Warm in Cold Weather After a Spinal Cord Injury](#)

[SCI BC Gloves for Winter Wheeling article](#)


[Hello Winter – 11 Tips to Navigating the Cold with SCI](#)

[Wheelchair Maintenance and Minor Repair guide](#)



[Welcome Guide for Newcomers with Disabilities](#)


Disability in BC: Culture and Law

There may be as many as 15,000 people living with some form of spinal cord injury in BC, and many more people with similar disabilities that affect their movement. An estimated 86,000 Canadians live with spinal cord injury, and many more with similar disabilities. Approximately 20% of Canadians live with a disability, and even more if seniors are included.

Many people with paralysis use a manual wheelchair or a power wheelchair. People who have partial [paralysis](#)  or similar disabilities may also be able to walk with leg braces, a cane, walker, or crutches, or have only mild mobility impairment, but experience difficulties with other body systems such as the bladder, bowel, skin sensation, pain, balance, or sexual health.

Individuals with a limb difference or amputation may use a prosthetic limb, may walk with crutches or a cane, or may use a wheelchair or scooter according to their needs, work or school requirements, health, energy levels, and accessibility of their environment.

In BC, [the International Symbol of Access](#)  (ISA) is used in BC law as the symbol indicating accessibility for people with disabilities; however, it is far more widely used to indicate accessible features of a building or service beyond what conforms to an accepted standard of accessibility. Newcomers will see this used on accessible building entrances, service counters, vehicle parking, and signage used by drivers to indicate they need accessible parking known as an [Accessible Parking Permit](#) .

A more recent version of the ISA called the [modified ISA](#)  is used in some BC communities but is not in wide use.



ISA



Modified ISA



Cultural Understanding of Disability in British Columbia

BC has many well-known citizens with disabilities who have made exceptional contributions to our province and to Canada. Several current and former elected members of our provincial and federal governments have visible disabilities. Terry Fox and Rick Hansen are people with disabilities known as Canadian heroes for their work to raise money and understanding for the needs of people living with disabilities like theirs.





People with disabilities are generally treated kindly, and assumed to be equal; however, some inequality and ignorance may still happen from time to time.



If the person's disability is not very visible, people may be puzzled or less helpful if the person is using something assumed to be for people with disabilities, such as a wheelchair accessible bathroom. People with disabilities do not have to explain themselves, and they are not required to disclose their disability in most situations.



Canadians in general can be curious and supportive about visible disabilities. People with disabilities may get a curious question about their disability from a stranger, but it is their choice to answer or not.

Mobility: Wheelchair users who have use of their arms are assumed to be able to get around using a manual wheelchair, although some choose alternatives that are appropriate for their climate, neighbourhood, employment or family needs. Some [OTs](#)  may encourage a person with incomplete spinal cord injury to walk using canes or a walker when a wheelchair might be a more functional option. Newcomers with disabilities have the right to ask for equipment that will meet their needs but [funding programs](#)  require an OT prescription so they may need to compromise.



Disability and Language

English is one of Canada's official languages, spoken by the majority of people living in BC. The English language has many ways to describe disability that change over time, and different disability groups may differ in how they generally describe themselves. In Canada, many words have fallen out of use because they are now considered insulting or put too much focus on the disability, rather than the individual. Newer words that describe the individual themselves, their abilities, and humanity are preferred. It is up to the person with the disability to use words to describe themselves that they are most comfortable with. People supporting newcomers with disabilities should use the words the newcomer prefers.

Commonly used words to describe disability:

Person-first: Terms that identify the person first, then their disability (when it is relevant) ensure that the person is identified before their disability: *someone who has visual impairment, or a person with a disability.*

Factual: terms that describe a disability or impairment where required: *Person with disability, person with low vision, person who has visual impairment.*

Access/accessible: We use access terms when talking about places or services that have been adapted for people with disabilities, use the term [accessible](#) , adapted, or barrier-free. The word [accommodation](#)  is used when a specific change has been made to a service or location to enable a person with a disability to access it, such as accommodations made to a school exam to enable a student with a disability to take the exam.

Examples of insulting or harmful historical phrases or words no longer commonly used: Words describing only the weakness or deficiency of a person: *handicapped, invalid, cripple* refer to the weakness or lack of function alone. All have fallen out of general use and are considered insulting by many people. Some people with disabilities use these terms when talking with their peers but service providers should avoid using this type of language.

APPENDIX:

[International Symbol of Accessibility ISA](#) 

[Modified International Symbol of Disability](#) 




Human Rights and Government


Disability and Human rights in Canada and BC

In Canada, the rights of people with a disability are the same as people without disability. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms indicates that every individual in Canada is equal, regardless of disability, sex, race, religion, age, national or ethnic origin. It also allows for programs or laws that support disadvantaged groups, such as people with disabilities.

The [Accessible Canada Act](#)  (2019), the [Canadian Human Rights Act](#)  (federal laws), and the [BC Human Rights Code](#)  (provincial law) are pieces of legislation that prevent individuals from discrimination (unequal treatment) based on disability. Several Canadian provinces have, or are developing, Provincial Accessibility and Inclusion Acts that apply to provincial governments and services they provide. The [Accessible British Columbia Act \(2021\)](#)  was first introduced in 2021 and is currently in development.

Individuals with cases brought to the BC Human Rights Tribunal are offered support, often free of charge, to prepare their cases through the [Community Legal Assistance Society \(CLAS\)](#)  Human Rights Clinic.

BC's Employment Standards Act also protects the rights of workers with disabilities in BC, ensuring that they have a legal right to reasonable accommodations in the workplace. Federal employment law governs employees of federally-regulated sectors but has similar legal protections for workers with disabilities.

In Canada, people with disabilities have a right to freedom from discrimination, but it can still happen in everyday life. It's important to remember if any person with a disability encounters discrimination or ignorance that there is support and information available, such as from the [Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria \(ICA\)](#) .

In BC, disability is also addressed in our building code that governs how most of the province's infrastructure is designed.



What to do when you experience discrimination



CLICK FOR
an enlarged
version

What to do when you experience racism



^click for
an enlarged
version

© Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership and Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria

Government and Citizenship

Canadian Citizens who are over the age of 18 are allowed to vote in federal elections and the provincial/municipal elections of their province and community of residence. People with disabilities can request accommodations such as voting by mail or in advance polls, curbside voting (for people who have difficulty getting into a polling station) and having someone else mark the ballot for those who have limited hand function or eyesight. For details see: [Information for Electors with Disabilities – Elections Canada](#)

When it is time to apply for citizenship, contact the local Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada Centre if the person with disabilities requires accommodations during the citizenship test (such as a wheelchair accessible venue or assistance with writing).

Though immigrants and refugees with disabilities are not yet able to vote in elections, there are still opportunities to be active in local government.

[Persons with disabilities](#) can contact or volunteer with their [Member of Legislative Assembly \(MLA\)](#) or [Member of Parliament \(MP\)](#).

Elected officials at the province and federal level are also important sources of information and support for people who are encountering difficulties in accessing government services such as passport issues, citizenship and immigration follow-up, access to health or income supports. These elected representatives have office staff who can receive and respond to requests for help and act as facilitators to speak with the MLA or MP themselves when needed.

APPENDIX:

[Accessible Canada Act](#)

[Canada Human Rights Act](#)

[BC Human Rights Code](#)

[Accessible British Columbia Act](#)

Intercultural Society of Victoria handouts linked above.



Get involved in your government

[Find an MLA](#) and [Find an MP](#)

People with disabilities can contact local elected officials, for example, city councillors, mayors and elected local government roles.



The easiest way to find out who are the local elected officials is to search online: Google “[Insert the Name Of Your City/Town/Region] city council”

Read about the Canadian political system on [Canada.ca](#)

Volunteer for a non-profit organization - policymaking or advocacy.

Find a Canadian news source in different languages [through local libraries](#)


Education and Training


A newcomer's first experience with education in Canada may be in an English language class. All newcomers to BC are welcome to take part in [**Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada**](#)  (LINC), offered free of charge by the Government of Canada. In BC, LINC is offered by a variety of resettlement organizations – if a local LINC program is not accessible, search for alternatives through the online [**newcomer services database**](#) . LINC program instructors will work with learners and adapt to their needs, for example for learners who are unable to physically use a computer.




Access to education for people with disabilities


In Canada, public elementary and secondary school goes from kindergarten (age 5) to Grade 12 (Age 17/18), and is free for all residents, regardless of immigration status. Most universities, technical schools, and colleges (known collectively as “Post-Secondary Institutions”) are also public, but charge tuition fees. Public educational institutions are governed by the federal Canadian Human Rights Act, ensuring the duty of these public schools to accommodate students with disabilities.


Public elementary and secondary schools are run by regional school boards governed by provincial law. School boards are responsible for ensuring that children with disabilities are able to access their education without discrimination. For example, many schools in Canada offer physiotherapy and occupational therapy to children with disabilities as part of their school day to avoid impact on the child's social and educational development. Schools, teachers, and parents may create a document for a child with a disability that describes the child's needs and how the school will support them, called an [**Individualized Education Program \(or IEP\)**](#) .

In BC, these services are often available from public school district Learning/Student Support Services departments. Additional support services may be available for children with disabilities through local or regional [**Child Development Centres**](#) .

Within many BC school districts, there are programs such as [**Settlement Workers In Schools \(SWIS\)**](#)  that offer liaison services in the school district and community to help newcomer families access school-based services, including those for students with disabilities.



Post-Secondary Education

Universities and colleges are supported by the federal and provincial governments, but the cost of education is shared with students through tuition fees. Students with disabilities (supported by medical documentation) may qualify for private or provincial government student financial aid in recognition of the additional barriers to getting an education for students with disabilities. For more on eligibility or to apply, visit [StudentAidBC](#) .


The Province of BC also funds several programs designed to ensure post-secondary students have the equipment and access they need. [These programs fund assistive devices](#)  for students, and support for institutions to accommodate students with disabilities.


Centres for Students with Disabilities/Accessibility Services


These centres in universities and colleges have varying titles, but all work with students and professors to adapt curriculum and requirements to the disability needs of the student under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. For example, these centres may assist the student with a disability by providing notetakers, allowing extra time for assignments or exams, enabling physical access to classrooms or school facilities, or providing special tools that enable students with disabilities to have equal access to education. There is generally no charge for registration at these centres for students with disabilities, and their services should not cost anything to the student.

In general, students with disabilities do not have to disclose their disability to these centres or their professors, though they will have to provide a [doctor's note](#)  indicating they have a disability that affects their ability to access education which indicates that accommodations are necessary (often referred to as [documentation](#) ). The details of a student's disability are kept confidential to ensure students with disabilities aren't discriminated against in the competitive post-secondary education system. If students with disabilities plan to attend a university or college and they have a disability, it is voluntary to identify their disability to these centres. However, it is a good idea to contact them before signing up for classes so they can help them get access to their classes and understand what, if any, accommodations may be needed to ensure access to their education, even if they do not require any coursework changes.





Newcomers with disabilities who are pursuing education after high school may be eligible for a variety of [scholarships and bursaries that offer financial support to students with disabilities](#) .

A number of scholarships specific to students with spinal cord injuries are administered through the BC Paraplegic Foundation, including the [GRAGOPEAN Scholarship](#)  administered by Spinal Cord Injury BC and the Vancouver Foundation.

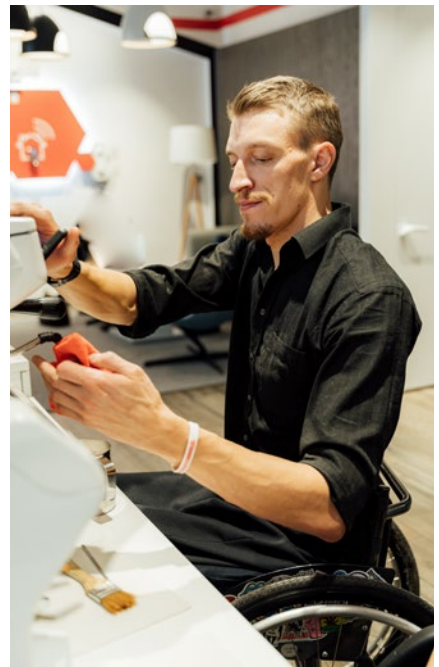
There is also a list of other relevant scholarships and education funding options [here](#) .

Inclusion in Work


Disability is still somewhat misunderstood, especially in relation to employment, despite much progress and efforts to educate the public on the skills and abilities that people with disabilities bring to Canada's workforce. In BC, there are many people with disabilities in every employment sector – small aircraft pilots, nurses, doctors, teachers, artisans, artists, accountants, and skilled laborers; however, many people with disabilities still report experiencing some stigma or discrimination in finding jobs. The inaccessibility of many physical workplaces is also an issue. The overall employment rate for people with disabilities remains well below that for people who do not have a disability.


In Canada, employers have a **duty to accommodate**  people with disabilities in the workplace under provincial **Employment Standards Acts** , up to the point of “undue hardship”, unless the employer can prove that a particular ability is integral to the completion of the job (for example, a job as a driver requires a driver's license, so someone unable to obtain a license due to disability would not be able to have that job). This includes access to the workplace, parking, and washrooms.

Some employers may prioritize hiring qualified people with disabilities. For example, companies that are regulated by the federal government may be encouraged or required to show evidence of diversity in their hiring practices, which has improved inclusion of workers with disabilities in these workplaces. Public Service Workers (government workers) and banks are two sectors where this is the case.





Employment/Work/training supports for people with disabilities


WorkBC is the main employment services provider in BC and has several disability-specific services. Find a WorkBC training centre [here](#) .

The Neil Squire Society provides computer training and adaptations, subsidies for hiring new employees with disabilities, and customized work searches for people with disabilities in BC. Through the [WorkBC Assistive Technology Services](#)  program, people with disabilities may be eligible for equipment or devices necessary to start or maintain employment.

Supports for starting businesses/self-employment


There are a number of programs to help people learn about starting a business, including financial support. People in rural communities may be able to access [Community Futures](#)  support such as office resources and loans to start a business.


The Opportunities Fund will also support people with disabilities while starting a business. [Check out the Opportunities Fund](#)  to learn about eligibility or talk to the closest WorkBC Centre.

The [Self-Employment Program \(SEP\)](#)  run by the BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction assists people receiving BC Employment Assistance (BCEA), including PWD, who have disabilities and match certain criteria in starting and operating a self-employment business.

Physical/environmental accommodation in the workplace

An accommodation is a physical, procedural or other change made to enable access in the workplace for people with disabilities. In Canada, most employers have a Duty to Accommodate a person with a disability in their workplace.

The [Neil Squire Society](#)  can assist job seekers to know which accommodations in the workplace might be necessary, and to develop skills in using assistive technology in the workplace. They also offer consultations to help an employer identify accommodations to fit the employee's needs.

If a workplace is not accessible to an employee; for example, a washroom or parking lot, employees are expected to work with their employer to identify problems and discuss solutions. Employers must document attempts to accommodate employees, including costs and solutions discussed with the employee. Employers should call the SCI BC InfoLine, 1 800 689 2477, info@sci-bc.ca to find out what funding options there may be for employers for renovations for accessibility and review the [Duty to Accommodate](#)  procedures for more information.



Food and Nutrition

In BC, food banks can be found throughout the province. A food bank is a nonprofit organization that collects safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food, and redistributes it to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity including people with **disabilities** 🌀. Many local food banks have mobile programs and can provide delivery to recipients with disabilities and seniors who meet certain eligibility criteria or can provide documentation of need. Contact the closest food bank for information on how to access the mobile service.

To find the closest food bank, please visit: **[Food Banks BC](#)** 🌀

Many disabilities require a modified diet, such as higher fibre, lots of water, or dietary sources of certain nutrients like calcium. For many people with disabilities, especially those who do not have help at home, buying and getting food home can be a difficult task physically. Food is also quite expensive for people on low incomes like PWD. There are many supports available around BC that offer help:

- Vancouver Coastal Health has a map showing places to find free or cheap food and meals. Most communities have food banks or community meals. Ask **[a local immigrant services group](#)** 🌀 for local options or check with the closest community health office affiliated with the Health Authority.
- Meals on Wheels: Many communities have Meals on Wheels services, usually provided by a non-profit organization that offers prepared meals delivered to seniors or people with disabilities for a small fee. These programs are widely available in communities but run by independent non-profit organizations. Search the name of the community and Meals on Wheels or check here for a **[partial list](#)** 🌀.





Services to aid in shopping



Delivery: Most large grocery stores now offer online shopping and delivery. Save On Foods, Superstore, and Walmart are all examples that have a small extra charge for this service, while other grocery stores such as Safeway and Thrifty Foods will take orders by phone and deliver free of additional cost to a person who has a documented disability. Contact the grocery store's customer service counter for more information.





Help with shopping: Shopping for food is not an activity that home care staff from health authorities are allowed to provide for their clients. Contact [**SCI BC's InfoLine**](#)  to know whether direct funding from the health authority through the [**Choice in Supports for Independent Living \(CSIL\)**](#)  program might be an option.



Health and Disability

What sorts of medical care can I find in BC?


Canada has a healthcare system in which the provincial governments oversee payment and provision of healthcare services for most permanent residents and citizens. Visits to family doctors and care within a hospital are paid for directly by the government. However, there will be extra fees for some services, such as filling out forms to document disability status, the cost of medications prescribed outside a hospital, some types of therapies and tests, such as physiotherapy or massage that are offered outside of a doctor's office or hospital. People on very low incomes in BC can access Pharmacare, a program that covers prescription costs above an annual deductible or self-pay limit **and some other types of supplementary care** . Newcomers need to be enrolled in **MSP (Medical Services Plan)**  to access health care in BC. Be aware that medical offices vary widely in the level of physical accessibility they provide.



Finding a doctor as a person with a disability:





Newcomers with disabilities have a greater need for ongoing access a family doctor than the average newcomer, to access prescription medicines, receive referrals to specialist care, and for assessments related to home care or other supports. Currently there is a shortage of family doctors in BC, but there are a few ways newcomers can indicate their level of need. For all of these points of contact, the newcomer should clearly indicate they are an unattached patient with a disability.

- Register for the **HealthConnect Registry** 
- Contact your local community health unit

Newcomers with disabilities have access to these same health services; however, they are provided for by different programs, related to their type of immigration status. Privately sponsored newcomers and government sponsored refugees (GARs) can apply for MSP right away without having to wait 3 months. Applicants should write Convention Refugee on the MSP application form. While they are waiting for MSP, they are covered under the **Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP)**  for basic and supplemental services. IFHP coverage kicks in while applicants are still overseas; they receive their IFHP certificate before going for medical examination and they should have their certificate with them upon arrival to Canada.

More Information: **IFHP Coverage Summary** 


Access to specialist healthcare providers

Access to specialized healthcare in BC is through a **family doctor, often called a GP (General Practitioner) or PCP (Primary Care Practitioner) family doctor** . People without a family doctor can access basic services through local walk-in clinics, or the emergency room at the hospital. A family doctor can make referrals to **G. F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre**  for spinal cord injury, amputation, and other disability-specific care, either as an **in-patient**  or as an **outpatient**  for follow-up care. Visits to all specialists require a referral from a family doctor.

Some types of healthcare providers that provide “allied healthcare” services include physiotherapy, occupational therapy and massage therapy. These services may be covered for certain medically-necessary things determined by a family doctor or provided as part of an inpatient hospital service or outpatient program. Healthcare services that the patients pay for directly are considered “out of pocket” costs and they will be advised of how much the cost is when they book or before they receive the care.




How are my medical needs, equipment and supplies covered?

Government Assisted Refugees (GARS) and privately sponsored refugees may have these expenses covered on an interim basis, generally up to one year, through IFHP. When applicants receive their MSP, IFHP will cover supplemental services (dental, vision, mobility devices, etc.).





After that year, these newcomers may transition to private insurance through an employer or provincial disability benefits. People eligible for Persons with Disabilities (**PWD** ) benefits receive government coverage for most medications, as well as basic medical equipment and supplies such as hearing aids, walkers, or catheters. Some people, especially those with part time or contract work or who don't qualify for PWD will not have any coverage and will have to rely on savings, contributions from family or friends, or apply to funding organizations for assistance (see Chapter Appendix).






Accessing disability-related equipment

When medically necessary equipment or supplies are prescribed by a doctor such as a wheelchair or pressure-relief cushion, an [occupational therapist \(OT\)](#)  may be involved through Home and Community Care or a hospital service. OTs assess the client for exactly what kind of equipment they need and provide the rationale for the program or organization funding the equipment, for example, [Interim Federal Health Program \(IFHP\)](#)  or [BC Medical Service Plan \(MSP\)](#) .

Role of [Home Care](#) and OT:




In BC, nursing, personal care, and some rehabilitation services are provided through [Home and Community Care](#)  Offices/Programs by each [Health Authority](#)  on a community level. People who require assistance with personal care (bathing, dressing, getting in and out of bed, using the toilet, etc.) may need home care support. This can be paid for privately but is costly. People who need home care and are low income or otherwise eligible may be able to receive home support without cost through their health authority either managed by the individual or provided directly by health authority staff. People with disabilities can call the [Home and Community Care office](#)  (operated by the local Health Authority) in their area to ask for an assessment. Find local offices for [Home and Community Care](#) .

[Choices in Supports for Independent Living \(CSIL\)](#)  is a [direct funding program](#)  administered by each Health Authority that provides funding for people with significant disabilities to hire, train, and supervise their own home care staff.

CSIL offers more flexibility and independence on how home support is provided; however, it is quite complex. More information is available from Spinal Cord Injury BC's [CSIL Employer Handbooks](#)  and support is available from [Individualized Funding Resource Centre Society](#)  to navigate the CSIL process and the hiring and bookkeeping requirements.

[Welcome Guide for Newcomers with Disabilities](#) 

Interpretation at healthcare appointments

[Provincial Language Services \(PLS\)](#)  are available through the [Provincial Health Services Authority \(PHSA\)](#) . New immigrants and refugees should request interpretation for appointments from their health care provider, who will then request the service from PLS. [Healthcare providers can request more information](#) , if needed.

Some resettlement and immigrant services providers may also offer interpretation and translation services. Medical Interpreters and their agencies might charge some fees for this service. Newcomers with disabilities can contact their local settlement organization for information about interpretation that is available in their area.

APPENDIX:

Funders for equipment and disability needs not covered by government programs:

[Individual Grant Eligibility | BC Rehab Foundation](#) 

[Kinsmen Foundation of BC](#) 

[Spina Bifida & Hydrocephalus Association of British Columbia](#) 



Mental Health

Mental Health care in Canada is not completely paid for under Canada's healthcare system. Diagnosed mental illnesses are usually treated by medical doctors or nurses with specialty training in psychiatry, who can prescribe medication and supervise inpatient or outpatient care. Talk therapy is respected as a part of mental health care to help patients manage a variety of mental and emotional concerns but is offered at a cost in most cases. This therapy is offered in one to one or group discussions led by a psychologist (a person with a PhD in psychology), nurses, social workers, or registered counselors. Many of these mental health care professionals charge a fee based on the client's income so that clients in need can afford to receive treatments. [Find mental health services for newcomers and in a variety of languages](#) 🌀.



Dental Care

Dental care is not part of our public health care system. People receiving [PWD](#) 🌀 in BC receive some dental coverage. Dental issues stemming from medical conditions like cleft palate may also be covered (for example, a dental plate). In 2022, the Federal Government promised to roll out basic dental care coverage over the next three years. Newcomers with disabilities can check with their local settlement organization or SCI BC's Infoline for the most up to date information on this coverage. Employer-funded private insurance plans usually include some dental care for employees and sometimes their spouses. Government Assisted Refugees have [some available coverage](#) 🌀 from IFH for dental care.

For people with low or no dental coverage, there are a [few lower cost clinics](#) 🌀 in the province but they have very limited services. Otherwise, dental care expenses are paid by the patient.

APPENDIX:

Interpretation services for mental health services in BC:

[Interpreter Services in British Columbia](#) 🌀



[Multicultural Mental Health Resource Centre](#) 🌀


[Mental Health Resources for Refugees and Refugee Claimants - BC Refugee Hub](#) 🌀

[Support Services - VAST](#) 🌀

[Supporting Mental Health for BC's Most Vulnerable Newcomers - AMSSA](#) 🌀

Accessible Housing and Shelter

In BC, most wheelchair accessible housing comes in two forms: low-income housing run or owned by the province of BC ([BC Housing](#) ) or low-income or market-rental housing owned by non-profits or [housing co-operatives \(Co-ops\)](#) . Co-ops are run by a committee of residents, and applicants must apply to each co-op building individually. In Canada, co-ops received considerable investment by the federal government several decades ago to provide housing to fill gaps for people on low incomes and people with disabilities. Because of this, most accessible units are in these housing co-operatives, but were built to older building codes. These units come with some basic accessibility modifications such as lowered counters in the kitchen, elevators, larger bathrooms, and grab bars in the bathroom. Accessible units are usually dedicated for the use of people with disabilities; however, the demand far exceeds the availability of these accessible units. Subsidies for co-ops are becoming rare as government investments are ending.

Private rental housing is offered in apartments or suites within private homes by individual or commercial landlords, and those are governed by the [Residential Tenancy Act of BC](#) . These are not often wheelchair accessible, though there are many that have some partial accessibility. It is against the law for a private landlord to refuse an application for rental specifically because an applicant has a disability; however, they are not legally required to accommodate disability. The applicant may be able to arrange with a potential landlord to make specific non-permanent adaptations to their unit; however, the cost of those adaptations is not usually covered by the landlord.




Finding Wheelchair Accessible Housing


Wheelchair accessible housing in BC is in short supply. People new to BC who need accessible housing should apply to the province of BC subsidized and low-income housing agency, BC Housing as soon as they have an address here, including a supplemental application to document extraordinary needs or circumstances. Community sponsors of newcomers should contact housing providers and disability organizations for assistance in securing accessible housing as soon as possible.

Some accessible forms of housing are part of buildings or developments that are designated for seniors but may still be open to people with disabilities who do not meet the age requirement. It is worth applying to a housing provider even if a newcomer applicant does not meet the age requirements but needs wheelchair accessible housing.

Search for [subsidized housing through the BC Housing website](#) .


[Metro Vancouver Housing](#)  provides safe and affordable rental homes across the Metro Vancouver region. The sites are diverse, mixed-income communities that include families, seniors and people with disabilities.


Spinal Cord Injury BC maintains a vacancy list for accessible housing, email info@sci-bc.ca to receive regular updates about this list as they become available. There are a number of smaller housing providers with separate applications; newcomers with disabilities can contact the SCI BC Infoline to get a list tailored to their situation. Waitlists are long, so they may have to stay with family or rent a place that is not ideal while they wait.

The [Right Fit Project](#)  is a program funded by Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health and the City of Vancouver and run by the Disability Alliance to reduce barriers many people with disabilities face to taking advantage of available accessible housing units in Vancouver and neighbouring communities. This program may be able to secure an accessible

housing unit for a person with a disability while other supports such as home care or accessibility modifications are put in place.

Home Adaptations for Accessibility

[Technology for Independent Living \(TIL\)](#)  works with people with disabilities who require powered devices to enable independence in the home. They can recommend and supply a wide range of devices that allow a person with disability to operate lights, windows, heat and appliances, and also fund the installation of power doors for home entry.

[BC Rebate for Accessible Home Adaptations](#)  (RAHA): If [persons with disabilities](#)  own or rent their home, they may be eligible for this program that provides financial help in the form of rebates to eligible low-income households, to complete home adaptations for independent living. They have to pay out of pocket for these renovations and then receive the repayment. They MUST apply to the program before starting their renovations or they will not receive the rebate.




Money and Finances

Banking is a federally regulated sector of Canada's economy that is required by government to provide accommodations for people with disabilities. Many banks or credit unions offer low or no monthly fee options for their basic bank accounts. Many bank machines now have several language options and accessibility features such as braille, low screens and reachable buttons. Most branches have lowered counters for wheelchair users.

Refugees with disabilities can open a bank account at any financial institution. Some institutions have partnered with settlement organization to help refugees open bank accounts when they arrive in Canada.

Income Support Benefits

The **Persons with Disabilities (PWD)**  benefit is a Province of BC income assistance program for adults who have disabilities that impact daily living and who have no other income. It is possible to have some assets and still qualify.

Applications must be submitted online for PWD; medical documentation is required to demonstrate eligibility.



Disability Tax Credit (DTC) and Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP)

The Disability Tax Credit (DTC) is a federal program that allows eligible individuals to reduce their taxes owed and also opens up eligibility to other government programs.

The purpose of the DTC is to provide greater tax equity by allowing some relief for disability costs, since these are unavoidable additional expenses that other taxpayers don't have to face.

Being eligible for the DTC can open the door to other federal, provincial, or territorial programs such as the Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP), the Canada workers benefit, and the child disability benefit. The maximum disability amount for the year 2021 is \$8,662.

The RDSP is a savings program designed to help people with disabilities have sufficient income for their later years. Any individual who qualifies for the DTC, up to age 49, can open an RDSP and qualify for the government's contributions.

For help to access the RDSP or any questions about setting one up, find out more online: or call **1-844-311-7526**.

Federal and Provincial Fuel Tax Rebate

Some people with disabilities may be eligible to receive a rebate on the fuel tax they pay for transportation in a private vehicle, up to \$500 per year, from the provincial government as part of the **BC Government's Fuel Tax Rebate**. People who are eligible for the provincial fuel tax program can also receive a 25% discount on basic autoplan (vehicle) insurance in BC.

There is a **similar gas tax rebate** through the federal government, though the amount people with disabilities can get back is much less. Eligible applicants must submit their receipts and can submit their claim to both programs at the same time.




Driving a vehicle


People with disabilities may be permitted to drive a vehicle with appropriate adaptive equipment in BC but may need to go through driver rehabilitation assessment to get the necessary equipment and ensure they are physically capable of driving safely. Driver rehab is available through GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre in Vancouver with a physician referral; be aware that there are waitlists for this service.

People can also get driver rehabilitation assessments and lessons through the following private companies:

- [Access Driver Rehab](#) 
- [Access Community Therapists](#) 
- [Community Therapists:](#)  Victoria, Metro Vancouver, Kelowna
- [Meridian Rehabilitation Consulting](#) , Okanagan




People who need an accessible vehicle (hand controls, or a van conversion with a ramp or lift for example) generally have to pay the cost of the modifications and installation themselves. The only possible exception is if a personal vehicle is required to help a person get (with a confirmed job offer) or maintain employment. In that case, people may be able to get partial funding through the [Work BC](#)  Assistive Technology Services program, provided by the Neil Squire Society.


Accessible Parking Permits

Accessible parking spaces are usually located near building entrances. These spaces are wider, have a level pathway to the building, and are signed with the International Symbol of Accessibility. People who need these spaces (whether driver, owner, or passenger) need to get a plastic sign called a placard or permit that indicates need of an accessible parking space. These permits are available through [SPARC BC](#)  and are valid for three years and cost \$23. Parking charges still apply to accessible parking spaces. A doctor's note is required.




Public Transportation and Transit: Train, Bus, Ferry, Air travel, Taxi, Seabus, HandyDART

Most communities in BC have some form of public transit. In the Lower Mainland, [Translink](#)  runs the service and their website provides information on fares, schedules, maps, and accessibility. This service encompasses buses, SkyTrain, and Seabus, all of which are accessible. In the rest of BC, the service is run by [BC Transit](#)  together with regional governments, offering municipal bus and [HandyDART](#)  service within communities and between communities in some areas. In most communities these buses are accessible for people with physical disabilities though hours or schedules may be limited in small communities.

For people who are unable to use conventional transit like buses and trains, HandyDART offers a shared, door-to-door accessible service in many BC communities using small vans or buses that have a wheelchair lift and 2-4 wheelchair spaces, as well as conventional seats for riders without wheelchairs and non-disabled companions. An application is required, and a [doctor's note](#)  may be required to access this service. People with disabilities can use the links above to find the application forms for specific communities or call InfoLine for assistance in finding and filling out forms.

People who qualify for HandyDART may be eligible for TaxiSavers, which provides discounted rates in some communities for taxi use when HandyDART is not available. Again, people with disabilities can check the above links to see if their community participates. Not all communities have wheelchair accessible taxis; InfoLine maintains a list of taxi companies with accessible vehicles in BC.

People who are on [PWD](#)  in BC can either receive a bus pass worth \$52 per month or receive the cash to buy the bus pass on their own or to spend on vehicle or other transportation expenses. Call 1-866-866-0800 to opt into the program.

Ridesharing, car sharing and peer to peer car rental transportation options


BC has several ridesharing and carsharing services, including informal carpool matching apps like PopARide (for organizing ridesharing, usually between communities) and formal carsharing services like Uber and Lyft. Formal car sharing services offer an app that invites independent vehicle owners with the necessary insurance and training to find paying passengers through a central mobile phone app. These drivers don't know about passenger accessibility needs unless indicated when booking. While many of these drivers will pick up a passenger as long as they can get themselves and their mobility device into the vehicle, there is no provincial regulation of passenger rights related to these companies as the passenger has with taxi and public transit.

Formal carsharing and car rental organizations such as Uber exist in some larger communities but do not have or specify their accessibility, nor offer assistance. Passenger rights are defined by the terms and conditions of each service.

Other private bus services such as Island Bus or YVR Skylynx may have accessible options between communities, but passengers should specifically request accessible accommodations and book well in advance.



BC Ferries

BC operates a number of public ferry routes between the mainland of British Columbia, Vancouver Island, the Sunshine Coast, and several other islands and remote locations. These ferries are accessible to varying degrees depending on the ship used for that route. When people with disabilities buy their ticket, they must indicate that they need elevator access to get to the passenger levels of the ferry and should expect to communicate their specific needs to ferry staff as they are boarding in their vehicle. Non-vehicle passengers (called “foot passengers”) board differently depending on the ferry and route. If people with disabilities are traveling without a vehicle and need assistance to get to the ferry from the terminal, they can request it wherever they purchase a ticket but leave at least 30 minutes extra time for this assistance. All large ferries with enclosed decks have an accessible washroom; passengers can ask when they buy their ticket. More details on accessibility for each BC Ferries ship and route can be found on the [BC Ferries accessibility website](#) .

BC residents with disabilities may qualify for a discount on the passenger portion of their fare by having a physician complete the BC Ferries Accessible Fare application form and return to BC Ferries.

Air Travel

Airlines follow federal rules for accessibility. Small passenger planes may not be accessible. Access to most passenger aircraft is via a Washington or aisle chair, a narrow chair used to move passengers with disabilities down the aisle of the aircraft. Most planes do not have accessible washrooms. For more on air travel for people with disabilities, check out Spinal Cord Injury [BC’s Accessible Travel Guide and resources](#) .


Air Canada and Westjet both have [“One Person One Fare” policies](#)  that allow passengers with disabilities to travel with a required attendant without an additional fare (some fees and taxes are still charged). Contact each airline for the specifics of their policy and how to book.



Photo by Lauren Kan on Unsplash

 **PEER TIP**


Most airlines in Canada have a Medical Desk to assist with travel arrangements and eligibility for the One Person One Fare rates.


Train Travel

VIA Rail is the long distance train service in BC and across Canada. Trains have at least one washroom designated as accessible. Trains typically have one or two places where a wheelchair can be secured to allow passengers with disabilities to remain seated in their wheelchair throughout the journey. Passengers with disabilities can also transfer to a seat and have their wheelchair stowed in the luggage compartment. Trains with sleeping cars have at least one wheelchair accessible compartment per train. Large stations have lifts to get wheelchair users onto the trains; however, most smaller stations do not have this option.

People with disabilities travel at regular price on VIA Rail, but attendants travel at no charge. Some trains have narrow doors or very minimal on-board accessibility, especially on the Prince Rupert-Jasper route. Confirm accessibility before buying a ticket.

Health Connections Travel Assistance Program

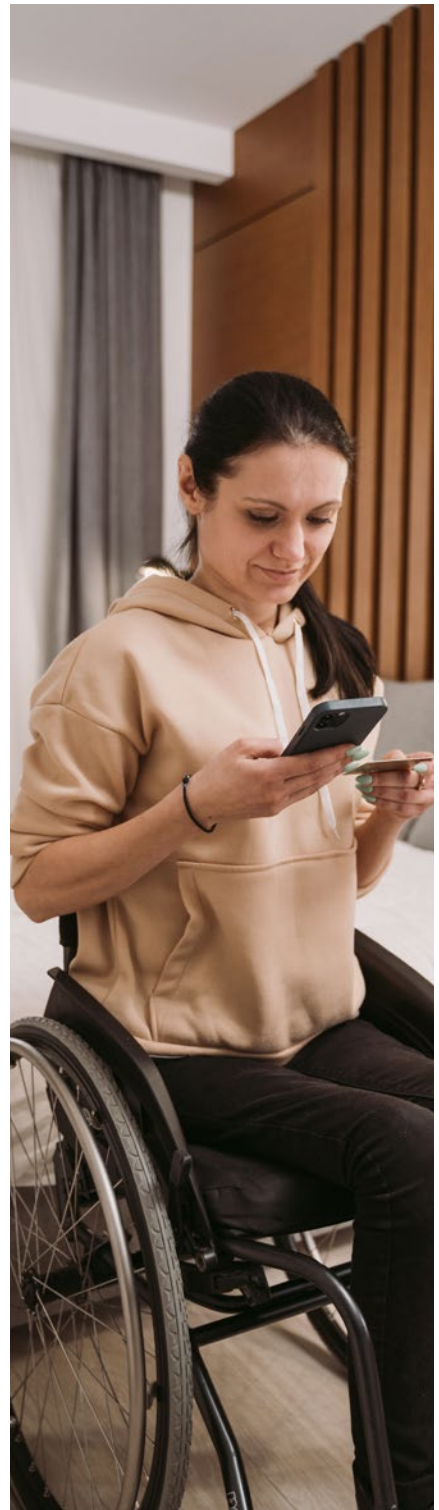
Each health authority in BC has a Travel Assistance Program available for non-emergency medical appointments outside of the person's home community. Individuals accessing the service must be a BC Resident and be enrolled in the Medical Services Plan (MSP). For more information, visit [Health Connections](#) .

Wheelchair users in communities served by Northern Health can ride the [Northern Health Connections bus](#) , even if they are not traveling for medical appointments. This service has a lift, accessible washroom and space for 2-4 passengers using wheelchairs.

APPENDIX:

[BC Ferries Accessible Fare Card](#) 


[SCI BC Accessible Travel Guide](#) 



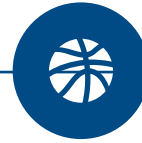
Leisure, Recreation, and Sport


BC offers a variety of adapted sports and recreation opportunities for people with disabilities. Many forms of adapted sport (sometimes called para sport or wheelchair sport) offer opportunities to develop skills, stay fit, and meet people with disabilities and community members.

Program availability varies across the province.

**PEER TIP**

Contact the SCI BC InfoLine for help finding recreation options in other communities.




Spinal Cord Injury BC  offers online and in-person recreational and social activities in the Vancouver area, Surrey, Kelowna, Kamloops, Victoria, Nanaimo, Courtney/Comox, Prince George and Fort St. John.

BC Wheelchair Sports  has rugby, athletics, tennis, and other sports.

BC Wheelchair Basketball 

Sportability  runs sledge hockey programs, boccia, and soccer.

BC Adaptive Snowsports  runs ski programs.

Whistler Adaptive Sports  has a variety of winter and summer programs, including skiing, snowboarding, hiking, biking, yoga, kayaking and more.


BC Mobility Opportunities Society  runs hiking, kayaking and paddleboarding programs.

Adaptive Sailing Association of BC 

Pacific Institute for Sports Excellence  is based in Victoria and provides a range of adaptive programming

OneAbility Victoria 

Recreation Adaptive Society (RAD Adaptive) 

The **Physical Activity Resource Centre**  (PARC) is a purpose-built accessible gym at the Blusson Centre in Vancouver for people with multiple sclerosis and spinal cord injury.

The **Northern Adapted Sports Association**  runs a variety of wheelchair and adapted sports in Prince George, Terrace, Fort St. John, and other northern communities.



PEER TIP

The Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society has guides for adapted recreation options in many regions of the province.











Find the guides for the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley, Vancouver Island, Southern Interior, and Northern Interior here.

Most local recreation centres and pools are owned and operated by the local government, or in partnership with community non-profit organizations. Many communities also offer support programs to enable people with disabilities to access and participate in their recreation programming. People with disabilities can check their local community's website for details on their programs or contact SCI BC's Infoline to be connected to a peer in their community for support in finding accessible recreation and physical activity options.


Gyms generally have accessible entrances and washrooms but may have limited adapted machines. People with disabilities can try municipal, YMCA and University-operated gyms first to see what is available in their area, as they are more likely to be accessible. Some gyms have lower rates for people with disabilities, but terms vary by facility. Many municipalities have a Leisure Access Pass (often called LEAP), which provides lower rates or some free admissions to public recreation facilities in the community. People with disabilities can contact their city government for more information.



I have applied for the following services:

- ☐ **Apply for BCID Card:** It's a reliable piece of government photo ID with the same security features as a B.C. driver's license.
- ☐ **Enrol in BC's Medical Services Plan:** In B.C., public health insurance is called the Medical Services Plan (MSP). It covers the cost of medically necessary insured doctor services. [Apply here](#) 
- ☐ **Register for BC Fair Pharmacare:** This service helps eligible B.C. residents with the cost of some prescription drugs and medical supplies. [Register here](#) 
- ☐ **Find a family physician:** Family doctors identify and treat diseases and injuries in their own primary care clinic, community health centre, nursing home, or hospital. They also look for health risks, address health prevention (immunizations, treatments, etc.) and make referrals to specialist doctors. Family doctors or general practitioners (GPs) offer primary care covered by the provincial government, and are the gatekeeper for access to specialized care and diagnostic testing. Many people are in need of a family doctor in BC. [Look for one in your area](#)  or [register through Pathways to be notified when space in a family practice opens up](#) 
- ☐ **Apply for Persons with Disabilities (PWD) benefits** (if eligible): PWD is a category of income assistance for people with disabilities provided by the BC Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. [For more information](#) 
- ☐ **Social insurance number/card:** To work in Canada or access government programs and benefits such as WorkBC, you need a 9-digit number known as a Social Insurance Number (SIN). [Apply here](#) 
- ☐ **Apply for HandyDART:** HandyDART is an accessible custom transit service offering door-to-door, shared-ride service for people who are unable to use conventional public transit (bus or train) without assistance. [Apply here](#) 
- ☐ [Find a wheelchair repair provider if required](#) 
- ☐ **Apply for accessible housing:** finding wheelchair accessible and affordable housing in BC is very difficult. SCI BC has an [Accessible Housing](#)  listing as well as a Housing list of Vacancies which emails participants when an accessible housing opportunity becomes available. SCI BC's Infoline also offers help with applications to housing providers.
- ☐ [Apply for the Federal Disability Tax Credit](#) 




A version of this page with full text URLs is available at www.sci-bc.ca/newcomers 

Useful Terms (glossary)

Glossary

Accessibility Legislation (Accessible British Columbia Act)

In 2021, BC passed legislation to enhance accessibility and services for people with disabilities in the province. The government and prescribed organizations will be required to create an accessibility plan and consult with the accessibility committee mandated under the legislation, with the goal to identify, remove, and prevent barriers to **persons with disabilities** .

Accessible (in this guide) describes something that is easily used or accessed by people with disabilities or adapted for use by people with disabilities. It is also used to describe something as more or less accessible for people with certain needs. For example: this business has a ramp that makes it more accessible for wheelchair users.

Accessible Canada Act In 2019, Canada passed a new law that requires the development of accessibility standards and regulations to remove barriers for people with disabilities in areas under federal jurisdiction.

Accommodation is a reasonable modification or adjustment to an environment that is related to a disability. A home or a program to provide better access or opportunities for a person with a disability.

Ambulatory refers to medical services performed on an outpatient basis, without admission to a hospital or other facility.

Anti-oppression is the strategy, theory, and action that challenge social and historical inequalities/injustices that have become part of our systems and institutions and allow certain groups to dominate over others.

Anti-racism is the policy or practice of opposing racism and promoting racial tolerance.

Assistive devices are equipment that allow people to perform activities of daily living, work or recreation more easily. These include medical equipment, mobility aids, information technologies, practical aids, and gadgets to suit many different needs.

BC is the abbreviation for British Columbia

Canada Pension Plan Disability (CPP-D) provides a disability pension to Canadians who have paid enough into the system and have a severe physical or mental health disability that prevents them from obtaining any type of gainful employment.

Case Manager this term means different things depending on the industry. For people injured on the job, a case manager helps oversee their progress through rehabilitation and ensures they are receiving the correct supports. In the health system, a case manager assesses a person's eligibility for things like home support or CSIL.

Child Development Centre is specialized services to children with disabilities, including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, equipment, speech language pathology, recreational therapy, and more. Services may be fully or partially covered.

City councillor is an elected representative in a municipality (town or city).

Client is a term typically used by non-medical service providers, such as non-profit organizations or medical professionals (sometimes called clinicians) who practice outside a hospital. For example, a physiotherapist is likely to use "client."

Deductible is the amount a person pays out of pocket for treatment or equipment when they have insurance to cover the rest.

Dental Hygienist is a person who is trained and licensed to clean teeth, take dental x-rays, and provide related dental services and care.

Disability Advocate is a service provider or ally who assists people with disabilities to understand their rights, the programs they might qualify for, and can help with applications. This takes many forms, for example an advocate could offer direct services to individuals, or work to create change in organizations, communities or government.

Disability insurance is an extended health (private) insurance that may help cover the costs of medical equipment and supplies for people with disabilities. Coverage often excludes pre-existing conditions or charges much higher premiums for people who already have a disability. This insurance can be offered through a workplace benefits plan or purchased privately, but private coverage is often prohibitively expensive. The term may also refer to short- and long-term disability pensions for people who develop a new disability.

Discrimination is an action or a decision that treats a person or a group badly for reasons such as their race, age or disability. These reasons, also called grounds, are protected under the Canadian Human Rights Act.


Documentation (also known as a **doctor's note**) is a signed letter from a doctor or medical specialist or other allied healthcare providers such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists or disability case workers may be required for some types of support or funding programs. Some employers or educators may require a doctor's note to excuse absences related to illness or disability

Duty to accommodate is a legal requirement to adjust roles, policies, or practices so that someone in a protected class can participate fully. Protected classes are defined in human rights codes, but in Canada usually include disability, race, color, ancestry, sexual orientation, etc.

Family Doctor, also known as a general practitioner (GP) or primary care physician (PCP). A family doctor is a doctor who does not specialize in any particular area of medicine, but who has a medical practice in which he or she treats all types of illness.

Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) are refugees from the Convention Refugees Abroad Class. The Government of Canada or the Government of Quebec supports their initial resettlement in Canada.

HandyDART is a type of custom public transportation designed for people with disabilities who may not be able to use the regular public transit system. HandyDART uses customized buses with lifts and secured seating for wheelchair users. More on HandyDART on [page 9](#). In some provinces, HandyDART may be known as para transit.

Health Authority In BC, healthcare is delivered by regional government agencies that organize and provide healthcare in and out of hospital to people in each region of BC, and include Northern Health, Vancouver Coastal Health, Island Health, Fraser Health and Interior Health. [Click here for a detailed map of these areas](#) .

Healthcare provider is any trained and licensed professional of a healthcare discipline such as a doctor, dentist, physiotherapist, occupational therapist or dietitian, or nurse.

Home Care or home support is a service where a care aide comes into a home and does personal care tasks for a person with a disability or a senior (bathing, dressing, getting in and out of bed, toileting). In BC, the public service is partially funded (meaning that there is a sliding scale of charges depending on the person's income - services may be free for some individuals). People with disabilities can also hire privately and pay the full cost.

Home and Community Care Clinic in BC, these are clinics run by our regional health authorities. These are clinics offering nursing, wound care, and home health support such as assistance bathing, dressing or cooking. More on Community Health Clinics on [page 23](#).

Individualized Education Plan is a document used in public schools in BC that is developed between the school, parents and other relevant professionals to detail the educational and social goals for a student and how those goals will be addressed, and progress tracked. (Sometimes this is known as an Educational Assistance Plan in other provinces and countries.)

Inpatient is someone currently receiving treatment in hospital or a rehabilitation facility while living there instead of at home

Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC) is a provincial agency providing auto insurance, drivers licensing, and coverage for people injured in a motor vehicle accident.

Long term disability is a disability pension that provides a percentage of a person's previous income, for people with extended health benefits. For people who qualify, it usually kicks in after short term disability and/or EI benefits are used up. Policies differ greatly and coverage may only last for two years.

Mayor is an elected representative who leads a municipality (town or city)

Member of Parliament (MP) is an elected representative who represents local issues in the federal government. [More info](#) ⓘ

Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) is an elected representative who represents local issues in the provincial government. [Find an MLA here](#) ⓘ

Mobility equipment is any equipment the person with a disability uses to enable them to move around. The most common examples are manual wheelchairs, power wheelchairs, mobility scooters, crutches, canes, or a rollator/wheeled walker.

Occupational therapist is a type of health care provider that helps to solve the problems that interfere with a person's ability to do the things that are important to them.

Outpatient is someone currently receiving treatment in hospital or a rehabilitation facility who lives at home.

Paralysis is loss of function and mobility in a part of the body. Paralysis that affects the body below the arms is called paraplegia. Paralysis that affects the body including the arms is called quadriplegia. These words are commonly used with healthcare services or disability services when describing how the nature of their disability affects them.

Patient is a term typically used by doctors or other medical professionals for people they are providing care to.

Persons with Disabilities (PWD) is a provincial designation in BC that provides financial and essential medical equipment and supplies to BC residents with severe physical or mental health diagnoses that impact activities of daily living and who have no other means of financial support.


Physiatrist is a doctor who specializes in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. Physiatrists manage people's medical issues as they move through the rehabilitation process after an injury or disease and can provide follow up care as well.

Physical disability this term results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition or physical difference in the body (eg. spinal cord injury or cerebral palsy), with social and environmental factors like societal attitudes, built environment, and support systems.

Physiotherapist is primary health care professional with a significant role in health promotion and treatment of injury and disease.

Post-Secondary Institutions are any school or program that teaches beyond high school, which can include trades training, college, university, professional schools, or apprenticeships.

Push rims also known as handrims, are the part the wheelchair user grips to propel the wheelchair. They are attached to the wheels by a set of tabs.

Settlement Workers in Schools is a program that helps **newcomer**  students and their families adapt and integrate to Canadian life and education during their initial years in Canada.

Short term disability is a disability pension for people who need to be off work for medical reasons, which generally lasts six months or less and is only available for people with extended health benefits. People may also qualify for medical EI, which is for workers who have paid enough into the Employment Insurance plan to qualify.


Vendor is a business that sells medical equipment to people living out of hospital, in the community. This is one term commonly used for businesses that sell wheelchairs and other medical equipment and supplies.


Wayfinding and Signage Wayfinding is the process of orienting ourselves to a space and how we move through that space to find what we need. Signage provides information, usually in words or pictures, to help people find places or understand things. Signage can be directional, as in wayfinding, but it can also be informational or regulatory in nature.

WorkSafe BC is a provincial agency in BC that promotes safe workplace practices and provides rehabilitation and income replacement for eligible workers who are injured on the job.


Organizations, services described:


BC Association of Child Development and


Intervention (BCACDI)  is a provincial association of agencies that provide child development and therapy services to children with special needs in BC.


BC Housing  is an organization set up by the province of British Columbia to develop and manage housing subsidies and rent supplements, and support affordable housing in BC.

Choice in Supports for Independent Living

(CSIL)  is a self-directed option for eligible home support clients. CSIL clients receive funds directly from their local health authority to purchase their own home support services.

Community Legal Assistance Society (CLAS)  is a non-profit law firm serving people in BC since 1971. They provide legal assistance and work to advance the law to address the critical needs of those who are disadvantaged or face discrimination.


Co-operative (Co-op) Housing  is a form of housing association where residents each have a share of ownership. As co-operative owners, members work together to govern their association and manage shared housing to foster strong communities, providing safe, secure and affordable homes for their members.


GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre  is British Columbia's largest rehabilitation centre. As a freestanding facility, G.F. Strong provides inpatient, outpatient, outreach and clinical support services to clients/patients in four unique programs: Acquired Brain Injury, Spinal Cord Injury, Arthritis and Neuromusculoskeletal.

Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP)

is a program that covers certain health-care benefits for specific groups of people until they become eligible for provincial or territorial health insurance, such as: protected people, including resettled refugees, refugee claimants, and certain other groups.


Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada


(LINC)  is a program that supports language training in English and French to adult newcomers and permanent residents of Canada, or Convention Refugees, or persons in Canada whose application for Permanent Resident status is being processed in Canada and who has been informed by a letter from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. The program helps newcomers integrate into Canada and their communities.

Medical Services Plan (MSP)  is the government-administered single-payer medical insurance provided by the province of British Columbia to BC residents. It covers the cost of medically-necessary health care and services such as medically-necessary inpatient and outpatient procedures, nursing care, basic primary healthcare and emergency healthcare.

Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA)

oversees the coordination and delivery of provincial programs and highly specialized health care services.

Provincial Language Service (PLS)  provides interpreting and translation services to BC health authorities and private physician offices.

Spinal Cord Injury BC (SCI BC)  is a non-profit organization that helps people with spinal cord injuries and related disabilities adjust, adapt and thrive through peer support and information resources