



DSO

Disability Screen Office

All-Access Pass

**A Roadmap for Festival & Screen
Industry Event Accessibility**



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PART 1:

Introduction

Welcome to ***All-Access Pass: A Roadmap for Festival & Screen Industry Event Accessibility***, a Disability Screen Office publication.

Film festivals and other screen industry events like conferences, markets, awards shows, pitch forums and networking events are cornerstones of the Canadian screen industry. These events are hubs where professionals connect, relationships flourish, deals are made, and audiences passionately engage with content and filmmakers. But what happens when these events aren't accessible to 27% of the Canadian population: the 8 million Canadian adults who live with one or more disabilities?¹ For disabled producers, writers, and directors, it may mean facing higher barriers to pitch their projects or make connections that can lead to new work. For disabled talent, it may mean fewer opportunities to see their work presented at a large scale. And for disabled audience members, it may mean fewer chances to engage with exciting new work in the film and television sector.

It is critical on a variety of levels that festivals and screen industry events become more accessible. In the Disability Screen Office's recent research

¹ Statistics Canada . New Data on Disability in Canada, 2022, 2023. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-627-m/11-627-m2023063-eng.htm>.

on the representation of people with disabilities in the Canadian screen industry at the employment level, we found that those who are neurodivergent or have mental health disabilities commonly experience barriers to access when attempting to advance their career through networking, while those who experience chronic pain, have mobility disabilities, or other chronic conditions commonly experience barriers to getting a job in the industry in the first place or to advancing their career as a result of their disability(/ies). Festival and screen industry event organizers have an opportunity to positively contribute to the career advancement of thousands of disabled creatives across the country by making their events more accessible.

There is also a business case for improving accessibility at film festivals and screen industry events: disabled people have immense purchasing power, and in Canada, disabled people spend \$25 billion on goods and services annually.² Hosting more accessible film festivals and screen industry events has the potential to drive increased event revenue from disabled patrons.

Furthermore, in many jurisdictions across Canada, making film festivals and events accessible isn't just the right thing to do or something that should be done to take advantage of the business case for inclusion—it's the law. 8 provinces across Canada have provincial accessibility legislation that governs accessible customer service and service delivery, and providing inaccessible experiences at your film festival or industry event may also contravene human rights legislation.

Reviewing this guide is an excellent starting point to creating accessible, inclusive in-person, hybrid, and/or virtual events in the screen industry. This guide will help the reader integrate accessibility practices into the way they design, launch and evaluate events in the screen industry, remove barriers that exist in these events, and make it easier for disabled stakeholders at all levels (including patrons, artists, volunteers, and staff members) to meaningfully take part and access the accommodations they need.

² Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work. *Unlocking the Consumer Potential: Insights from CCRW's Trends Report*. January 2, 2025. <https://ccrw.org/unlocking-the-consumer-potential-insights-from-ccrws-trends-report/>.

About the Disability Screen Office

The Disability Screen Office (DSO) is a national, bilingual, disability-led and disability-staffed not-for-profit organization whose mission is to develop opportunities for disabled creatives and advocate for a more accessible Canadian screen industry. Through our partnerships and programs, we're setting a new national standard for inclusive screen-based storytelling.

The DSO has four key focus areas:

1. Build relationships with and foster connections among disabled creatives working and aspiring to work in the screen industry.

2. Influence those working in every stage of content production to remove barriers and create opportunities for disabled creatives.

3. Advocate for policies that support disabled creatives in the screen industry.

4. Ensure the long-term success of the Disability Screen Office for disabled creatives.

The DSO was originally incubated at Accessible Media Inc. (AMI), responding to the long-standing barriers in accessibility, employment, and meaningful disability representation in Canada's screen industry. In September 2022, the DSO became an independent, autonomous organization, marking a historic moment where disabled creatives finally have an entity dedicated to amplifying their voices and advocating for their rights within the Canadian screen sector.

DSO's key programs are designed to address the challenges facing disabled creatives and foster a more inclusive Canadian screen industry. We're conducting research, gathering data across the sector to provide resources to break down systemic barriers, and offering clear guidance on making accessibility an integral part of industry practices and procedures. Together, we're building an inclusive and accessible culture where disabled creatives can fully participate, contribute, and thrive.

Introduction to the Screen Festival Accessibility Program (SFAP) and Methodology

All-Access Pass: A Roadmap for Festival & Screen Industry Event Accessibility is a publication created as part of the DSO's Screen Festival Accessibility Program (SFAP), a multi-year initiative designed to establish accessibility standards for Canadian screen industry festivals and events, created thanks to the generous support of Telefilm.

This program was created after DSO Executive Director Winnie Luk spent much of her first year at the DSO (2023-24) travelling to film festivals across Canada and internationally. During these visits, she met with disabled creatives in each festival location, and was surprised to learn that many of the disabled creatives she spoke with were not attending the very film festivals she was there to participate in, largely due to accessibility barriers. Winnie shared this feedback with festival organizers, and through conversations with festivals about accessibility, the SFAP was born.

Through the SFAP, from the 2024-25 fiscal year to the 2026-27 fiscal year, the DSO partnered with four festivals of varying sizes, locations, and audiences across Canada, including festivals that directly represented, highlighted and included work from specific equity-deserving communities and festivals that had already made a meaningful commitment to advancing accessibility. They are:

Vancouver International
Film Festival (VIFF)

Banff World Media Festival
(BANFF)

Reelworld Film Festival
(Reelworld)

Toronto Reel Asian International
Film Festival (Reel Asian)

Together with the DSO, these festivals conducted comprehensive 360-degree accessibility audits examining programming, patron services, staffing, volunteer practices, and artist services and worked collaboratively with the

DSO to implement accessibility initiatives. Throughout the program, the DSO helped the partner festivals identify opportunities for improving accessibility before, during, and after their events. Rather than following a single approach, festivals implemented accessibility measures that reflected their size, resources, audiences, and operational realities.

Each partner festival received funding from Telefilm for their participation in the program. This funding was to be used exclusively for implementing access measures and increasing overall event accessibility. These funds were used for measures such as CART captioning, the hiring of sign language interpreters, creating low-sensory spaces, and more.

Each partner festival was at a different stage in their accessibility journey, and brought unique strengths, experiences, and perspectives to their accessibility work. Their collective learning and progress became the foundation for the development of this guide, providing practical examples for festivals seeking to become more accessibility confident.

Accessibility support and consultation

Support for each partner festival varied depending on each festival's needs, goals, and existing accessibility knowledge and accessibility practices.

Examples of support provided by the DSO included:

- Consulting sessions with department heads and staff to educate, answer questions, review processes and work flows, and help set goals;
- Review of visuals, maps, signage, and webpages;
- Sharing contacts and facilitating relationship building with community partners and access providers;
- Ad-hoc knowledge sharing and advising; and
- Panel appearances and/or presentations at the festival.

Auditing and creating this guide

An on-the-ground accessibility audit was completed at BANFF and VIFF, the two larger festival SFAP participants. These audits were conducted by Winnie Luk, with assistance from accessibility consultant Stephen O'Keefe for VIFF. The DSO was given a site tour at the beginning of the festival, and ongoing feedback was collected during public and industry programming

events throughout the festival. Additionally, disabled and non-disabled attendees shared feedback with Winnie to be included in the audit. When the DSO brought delegations of disabled creatives to these festivals through our [Industry Events Access Program](#), the feedback they gave about their experience was also integrated into the audit. An audit report based on the findings was then written and shared with each festival, with further discussion about the findings happening via email and in virtual meetings.

The partner festivals' progress, challenges, and learnings that occurred during SFAP have been distilled here, combined with the industry knowledge and festival and accessibility experience of the authors of this guide and the SFAP Advisory Committee to create this resource for festivals and event organizers embarking on their own accessibility journey.

How to use this guide

This guide is for Canadian screen industry event organizers who are looking to create more accessible events. This guide is intended to be an actionable roadmap that you can follow to chart a course from no or limited event accessibility to hosting an access-confident event. It will explain how you can:

Support disabled patrons by making your public and industry programming equitably accessible;

Create systems that support disabled creatives in attending your event, allowing for greater opportunities in networking and relationship building; and

Apply a disability-inclusive lens to your artistic processes, including the programming process.

If you are just learning about accessibility for the first time, continue on to [Part 2](#) to prime yourself on key disability concepts used throughout this guide, including the DSO's definition of disability, models of disability, and different kinds of barriers to accessibility.

This guide was designed to help festival and events leaders make a multi-year, strategic, organization-wide commitment to increased accessibility. [Part 3](#) of this guide walks you through different approaches to improve organizational accessibility, as well as general accessibility best practices at a high level. [Part 4](#) introduces different access measures common in screen industry event accessibility that organizers may use to make their events more accessible. [Part 5](#) provides a framework to improve event accessibility, beginning with no-cost and low-cost initiatives and scaling year-over-year.

This is not an accessibility checklist—this guide is *one* approach to making a more accessible event (a process that should be a collaborative one with your staff, your artists, your patrons, and your local community of disabled people). As such, as you read this guide, you may find that your organization has already taken steps towards accessibility in a different order than what the DSO has suggested. That’s perfectly alright: we encourage you to adapt our framework freely based on what works best for your organization.



Photo use courtesy of Reelworld.

PART 2:

Key accessibility concepts

What is disability?

The DSO's definition of disability

The DSO has a mission to *develop opportunities for disabled creatives and advocate for a more accessible Canadian screen industry*, including accessible screen industry events. But who do we consider to be disabled?

The DSO considers anyone who meets the DSO's definition of disability to be disabled, which is as follows:

Disabled people or people with disabilities with actual or perceived impairments that may be physical, mental or learning conditions that have long-term, temporary, chronic, episodic or fluctuating effects. These impairments may be apparent or nonapparent.

Some common experiences of disability are listed below. It's important to remember that disabled people or people with disabilities may identify with one or more of the categories below, may identify as having an invisible



or non-apparent disability, may identify as having mixed abilities, or may experience an episodic disability.

- Pain-related (pain due to a long-term or chronic condition that has lasted or expected to last 6 months or more)
- Chronic condition, or health issue
- Flexibility (difficulty bending down, reaching objects)
- Mobility (difficulty walking, using stairs, using hands/fingers or doing other physical activities)
- Mental health-related (for example, anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder or eating disorder)
- Hearing (d/Deaf or hard of hearing, difficulty hearing even if using a hearing aid)
- Seeing (blind, low-vision or partially-sighted, difficulty seeing even if wearing glasses or contact lenses)
- Learning (for example, dyslexia or dysgraphia)
- Dexterity (difficulty picking up objects, and/or grasping objects with fingers)
- Memory (ongoing memory problems or periods of confusion that limit your daily activities)
- Developmental (for example, Down syndrome or fetal alcohol spectrum disorder)
- Neurodivergence (for example, autism or attention deficit disorders like ADHD)
- Dwarfism
- Amputee, limb or facial difference
- Other (condition or health problem that has lasted or expected to last six months or more)

When you interact with someone with a disability, it is important to ask if they prefer identity-first or person-first language.

Best practice for language about disability

There are two common types of language used to talk about disability:

Person-first language (e.g. *people with disabilities, person with Down syndrome, person with cerebral palsy*). Some people prefer this way of talking about their disability because it can remind the person that they are speaking to that they are more than their disability.

Identity-first language (e.g. *disabled people, wheelchair user, blind person*). Some people prefer this way of talking about their disability because it shows the person that they are speaking to that disability is a key part of their identity and nothing to be ashamed of.

Both types of language are correct, and are influenced by cultural and historical differences due to the evolution of the disability rights movements across Europe and North America.

The DSO believes that each individual should feel free to choose the language that feels the best for them. When you interact with someone with a disability, it is important to ask if they prefer identity-first or person-first language. The DSO uses both person-first and identity-first language to refer to the disabled creatives we work with, based on their preferences. In this guide, the DSO will primarily use “disabled” (i.e. identity-first language) to refer to all d/Deaf, hard of hearing, neurodivergent and Mad umbrella.³

The DSO recognizes that not everyone may feel included by the term “disabled,” including those who are culturally Deaf and those who are

³ Mad and Deaf are capitalized, as per standard practice within the Canadian Deaf and disability arts community. “Mad arts are created by people who live with Madness and are an expression of Mad Pride. The term “Mad” has been reclaimed by people who identify as living with mental illness or psychiatric disabilities and symbolizes pride, collective identity and community building. Within this context, mental illness is not framed as pathology, but rather as integral to identity and experiences shaped by social determinants of health such as income, social status, employment, working conditions, housing and food security.” More information here: Canada Council for the Arts. *Deaf and Disability Arts Practices*. <https://canadacouncil.ca/funding/funding-decisions/decision-making-process/application-assessment/context-briefs/deaf-and-disability-arts-practices>.

neurodivergent and/or Mad. Regardless of whether someone would use the word “disabled” to describe themselves, the DSO works to represent a range of different experiences and supports individuals’ choice to use whatever language feels appropriate for them.

What are the models of disability?

There are different ways to think about disability, and these three specific models are often referenced (although this is not an exhaustive list of all of the different models of disability):

Medical model of disability

Disability is seen as a problem resulting from a condition and often diagnosis. Disability is something that needs to be “fixed” or “cured”, typically by a medical professional, and disability is something that happens to a single person.⁴

Social model of disability

Disability is not a deficit that lies within the individual. Barriers in society, not the medical condition, are what is disabling and limit the access of people with disabilities to fully participate. It is a societal responsibility to remove these barriers to ensure social inclusion for all.⁵

Rights-based model of disability

The human rights-based model of disability builds on the social model. It recognizes that people with disabilities have rights, and asserts that the state and others have a responsibility to respect those rights. The model comes from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This model says that the barriers in society are in fact discriminatory, and gives disabled people routes through which they can assert their rights and complain when they encounter those barriers. The human rights model also acknowledges that disability is a natural part of human diversity and a part of identity, and therefore, they are entitled to the same rights, opportunities,

⁴ George Brown College. “Disability and Variability.” *Universal Design for Learning: Inspiring Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education*. <https://udlontario.georgebrown.ca/engagement/equity-education-and-anti-oppressive-frameworks/disability-and-variability/>.

⁵ *ibid.*

and privileges of persons without disabilities.⁶

This guide is built using the social and rights-based models of disability in order to holistically support the full disability community.

What is accessibility, and what are barriers to accessibility?

Accessibility

Accessibility is a general term for the degree of ease that something (e.g., device, service, physical environment and information) can be accessed, used and enjoyed by persons with disabilities. The term implies conscious planning, design and/or effort to make sure something is barrier-free to persons with disabilities. When something is accessible, it does not have obstacles for people with disabilities – something that can be easily reached or obtained, a facility that can be easily entered, or information that is easy to access.⁷

Barriers to accessibility

Conversely, barriers to accessibility are anything that prevents a person from fully taking part in all aspects of society, including physical, architectural, information or communications, attitudinal, economic and technological barriers, as well as policies or practices.⁸ These are often referred to as just “barriers.”

Physical barriers are obstacles in the built environment. Examples include:

- Steps without ramps or elevators;
- Narrow doorways;

⁶ Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health. “Models of Disability.” *Accessibility & Accommodations Toolkit*. <https://campusmentalhealth.ca/toolkits/accessibility-and-accommodations/disability/models-of-disability/>

⁷ Ontario Human Rights Commission, Appendix 1: Glossary of Human Rights terms, n.d. <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/teaching-human-rights-ontario-guide-ontario-schools/appendix-1-glossary-human-rights-terms>

⁸ Ontario Human Rights Commission, Appendix 1: Glossary of Human Rights terms, n.d. <https://www3.ohrc.on.ca/en/teaching-human-rights-ontario-guide-ontario-schools/appendix-1-glossary-human-rights-terms>



- Inaccessible washrooms;
- Steep pathways;
- Poor lighting;
- Inaccessible stages;
- Limited seating options;
- Crowded networking spaces;
- Registration tables that cannot be approached by wheelchair users; and
- Inadequate [wayfinding](#) measures.

Information or communications barriers are obstacles in content, document formats, or technology that prevent people from accessing information. For many people, these barriers are encountered long before they arrive at an event. Examples include:

- A festival website that cannot be navigated using a keyboard;
- A registration form that does not work with a screen reader;
- A promotional video without captions;
- A schedule published only as an inaccessible PDF;
- Complex language that is difficult to understand;
- Images without alternative text; and
- Poor colour contrast that makes information difficult to read.

Systemic barriers are policies and practices that create obstacles for disabled people, whether this is done intentionally or unintentionally. Systemic barriers are often embedded deep within the culture of an organization or an industry, and because they have existed for a long time, they often become invisible. People may simply accept them as “the way things have always been done.” In the screen industry, examples include:

- Application processes that assume everyone can access information in the same way;
- Networking opportunities that are held in noisy, inaccessible environments;
- Funding programs that do not adequately account for disability-related costs;
- Event schedules that leave little flexibility for people with chronic illness, fatigue or disability-related accommodations;
- Industry events that overlook captioning, interpretation or accessible venues until late in the planning process; and
- Programming decisions that unintentionally exclude disabled creators because accessibility was never considered during the selection process.

Attitudinal barriers are prejudices, stereotypes, and behaviors that make assumptions about what disabled people can and cannot do. Examples include:

- Assuming disabled people are less capable;
- Speaking to a support person instead of the disabled individual;
- Assuming accommodations are burdensome or special treatment rather than essential to equitable participation;
- Believing accessibility is too expensive before exploring practical solutions; and
- Assuming someone with a disability would not be interested in attending an event, applying for a job or pursuing leadership opportunities.

PART 3:

How do we advance accessibility and address accessibility barriers?

At the outset, making your industry event accessible can seem overwhelming. Different disabled people experience different barriers, and need different things in order to have equal access to your venue and programming. How do you know where to start?

Accessibility must be built incrementally through the creation of an **accessibility policy**, the identification of specific goals, and the development of an **accessibility plan** to achieve these goals.

What is an accessibility policy and what is an accessibility plan?

An **accessibility policy** is your organization's foundational statement of commitment and the formal rules for how you will operate inclusively.

An **accessibility plan** is the dynamic, step-by-step roadmap outlining how you will achieve those goals, including specific actions, timelines, and barriers you plan to remove.⁹

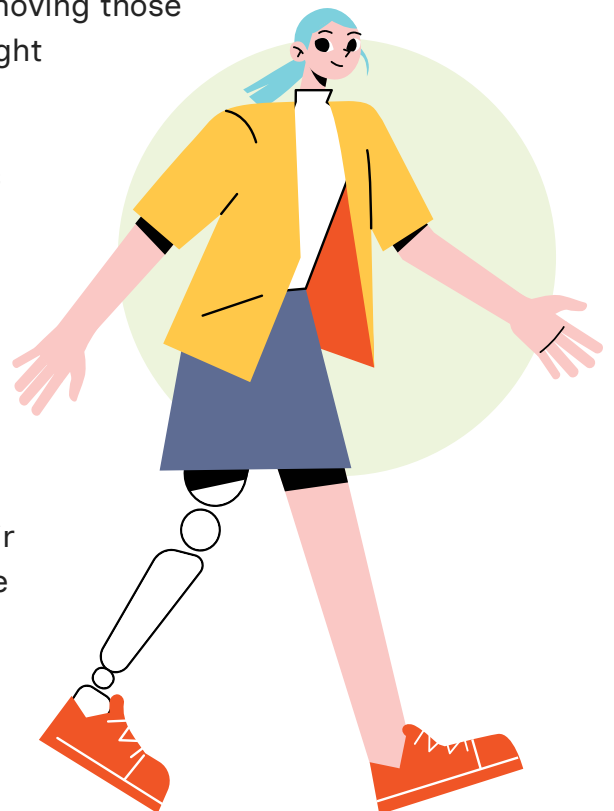
⁹ Government of Ontario. *How to create an accessibility plan and policy*. December 9, 2015. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/how-create-accessibility-plan-and-policy>.

Depending on your jurisdiction and the size of your organization, you may be required under your provincial or territorial accessibility legislation to develop an accessibility policy or plan. You can learn more about accessibility legislation in your jurisdiction [in this section](#). However, even if you are not required by law to develop a multi-year accessibility policy and plan, creating these documents are essential to developing robust accessibility procedures and organizational accessibility knowledge. [Part 5 of this guide will walk you through how to create an accessibility plan holistically](#), and we encourage you to incorporate any applicable legislative standards as you work.

Working with your staff to create your accessibility policy and plan

Many organizations that are just beginning to engage with accessibility work for the first time believe that they have to begin by hiring an accessibility consultant or a dedicated accessibility staff role like an accessibility coordinator or accessibility manager. While consultants and dedicated staff roles are essential in the larger, multi-year scope of making an industry event more accessible, the DSO recommends that you start your accessibility work by convening your senior staff. As you've learned in part 1, disabled people experience many different kinds of barriers. Removing those barriers will require the collaboration and oversight of many different departments. The best way to create an accessible industry event is to ensure that accessibility is not just an accessibility staff member or a single accessibility department's responsibility, but instead adopting a model where accessibility becomes a key consideration for everyone across all areas of the organization.

To get your senior staff to start thinking about how accessibility work intersects with their department and responsibilities, you can engage in an accessibility self-evaluation process. The DSO suggests beginning this process by asking your staff open-ended questions about accessibility, like:



- Who is your current audience?
- Who is missing from that audience?
- Who are the artists, filmmakers, producers, speakers, presenters or artists that are featured in your festival or event's programming? Are disabled people meaningfully represented across these groups?
- If someone with a disability came to one of your screenings or events, would they feel welcome, and would they be able to fully participate in the event?
- What logistical challenges might someone with a disability face when trying to engage with your programming across the entire patron journey?
- How are people from the disability community meant to find out about your events?
- What physical barriers exist at your venues or at your events?
- What informational or communications barriers exist at your venue or at your events?
- Are there attitudinal barriers that exist at your organization? Are you actively working to program and effectively accommodate disabled artists?
- Are there systemic barriers that exist at your organization? How difficult would it be to work or volunteer at your organization as a disabled person?

Ideally, these questions should illuminate where different departments need to make changes, and should lay the groundwork for a model where each department becomes responsible for the aspects of accessibility that intersect with their work. For example, this means that your marketing department will proactively manage the accessibility of your website and social media content, and that your programming department will proactively ask the artists you are working with for their access needs when contracts are issued.

The above questions are not the only questions you can ask your staff when you are conducting a self-assessment of your organizational accessibility,

and there are a variety of resources available to go deeper when you are conducting a self-assessment:

- The UK's Independent Cinema Office has developed a reference guide for independent cinemas to improve access in venues for their disabled visitors, and as a part of this reference guide, [has created a self-assessment for visitor accessibility](#).¹⁰
- The US's Open Door Arts [has created a fully-digital self-assessment tool](#)¹¹ designed to review an organization's accessibility across 5 key areas (their organizational approach to access, their physical space, their access services, their communication, and their programming). It contains 290 multiple choice questions to help an organization reflect on their current practices.
- [The Accessibility Scorecard](#)¹² was created by FWD-Doc, the Film Event Accessibility Working Group, the Film Festival Alliance, and the IIN4 Coalition to capture attendee experiences of screen industry events through an accessibility lens. Review the scorecard to see some of the metrics your event can be evaluated against from an audience perspective. This is also a good resource to share with your attendees to get their perspective on your accessibility progress and contribute to international festival accessibility data collection.

At this self-assessment stage, your staff may identify many different practices and procedures within your organization that should change in order to enable greater access. This is great: this means you are creating an organizational culture of access where each staff member is invested in pushing your accessibility goals forward. However, at this stage, it is important to be realistic about how quickly your organization can move towards greater accessibility, evaluating your organization's competencies, resources, and internal capacity for change. Accessibility is an ongoing process, and no organization will ever be fully accessible. Pace yourself, and don't aim too high too fast.

¹⁰ Independent Cinema Office. *Conduct a self-assessment of your cinema*.

<https://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/advice-support/how-do-i-make-my-cinema-inclusive-and-accessible/conduct-a-self-assessment-of-your-cinema/>

¹¹ Open Door Arts. *The Arts and Culture Accessibility Self-Assessment*. <https://artsaccesshub.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Arts-Culture-Self-Assessment-Guide.pdf>

¹² Film Festival Alliance. *The Accessibility Scorecard*. <https://filmfestivalalliance.org/advocacy/accessibility-scorecard>

Consulting your audience, creating advisory committees and hiring disabled staff members and consultants

Consulting your local disability community

Having identified key barriers to access within your organization, how do you decide what to tackle first? It's at this stage that you should begin to consult your local disability community. Because 27% of all Canadian adults live with at least one disability, there are likely disabled people in your community of stakeholders (patrons, volunteers, and artists). Providing your stakeholders with an accessibility survey (including as part of any regular event registration and feedback you collect) is a great way to understand how your existing audience is able to interact with your event.



REEL ASIAN X TMU

There are lots of ways to engage your local disability community. For the 2025 edition of the Reel Asian, the festival partnered with a cohort of students who identified as disabled from Toronto Metropolitan University's School of Disability Studies to review their accessibility practices. Supported by a team of researchers and field experts at the university, the students engaged in a comprehensive audit and proposed an individualized organizational accessibility plan centering cultural accessibility. The partnership was offered at no cost and was mutually beneficial!

Accessibility questions that you can ask your audience include:

- Do you feel you are able to fully participate in our programming or to the level that you would like to?
- What areas of the festival experience do you require assistance with? This can be a write-in or multiple choice selection (e.g. purchasing tickets, finding information on the website, getting to my seat, etc.).

- What do you need to attend and fully participate in our event that is currently available and impactful for you? This can be a write-in or multiple choice selection.
- What do you need to attend and fully participate in our event that is currently missing? This can be a write-in or multiple choice selection.
- Do you feel that your access needs are met when you attend our events?
- Do you know where to find information about accessibility for our festival?
- What time of day is best to attend festival programming?
- What is the ideal duration for an event?
- What is the impact of our venue location and your journey from your home to our venue? Are these pathways barrier-free and accessible?

Ideally, the answers to some of these questions should identify which accessibility barriers are affecting the greatest number of people in your existing community of stakeholders, and therefore which barriers need to be prioritized for removal first. This will inform the creation and sequencing of your accessibility plan.

However, in cases where you receive limited accessibility feedback from your audience, or in cases where your first steps toward greater accessibility remain unclear, your organization may benefit from convening an accessibility advisory committee or hiring an accessibility consultant.

Creating an accessibility advisory committee

Many organizations build an accessibility advisory committee by reaching out to local disability organizations, including disability-specific service agencies, self-advocacy non-profits, or other community groups, including accessibility committees put together by your municipal government. Your accessibility advisory committee should be made up of people with lived experience of disability, and should ideally be composed of a range of individuals with different experiences of disability. Your advisory committee can guide your accessibility journey, providing input on which accessibility measures to activate first, how to conduct effective outreach to the disability community, and how to program inclusively to draw the disability community in.

When creating an accessibility committee, your organization should budget

for a stipend or honorarium to compensate these disabled individuals for their time and expertise, as well as budget for any necessary accommodations these individuals may require to participate on the committee (e.g. ASL interpretation, accessible transportation in the case of in-person meetings or site visits, expense reimbursement for personal support worker hours incurred).

NOTE: it is important to ask your advisory committee participants whether their income is affected by any government disability support programs. Many disability support programs cap the amount of money that an individual can earn or have at any given time, and if they pass this threshold, their government support will be clawed back or withdrawn. If your participants are in this situation, it is important to come up with a compensation plan that does not affect their support eligibility.

Working with an accessibility advisory committee will ideally provide you with a better sense of what your local disability community's needs are in order to better access your event. However, it's important to remember that while the disabled people who will sit on your accessibility advisory committee can be experts on their own experiences, this does not necessarily make these individuals experts on accessibility in general or on the implementation of access measures. In order to access that expertise, you may need to hire an accessibility consultant: an expert that has both professional and lived experience with disability and accessibility.

Ensuring disability representation on the festival team and engaging a professional accessibility consultant

Ensuring that there are disabled team members on the festival team at all levels of the organization from volunteer through to senior leadership is vitally important, as they bring lived experience and accessibility knowledge to all aspects of your work. Check out the [general best practices for hiring, promoting and accommodating disabled team members](#) for more information and guidance. However, disabled team members are not automatically experts on all aspects of accessibility, so it is important to engage professional accessibility consultants in your work.

Professional accessibility consultants will be able to take recommendations

from your staff, your audience, and your accessibility advisory committee and synthesize them, providing particular expertise on how to sequence your accessibility work and how to find solutions for access needs that may overlap for different parts of the disability community (e.g. part of your community finds your screening rooms too hot, while part of your community cannot tolerate air conditioning—what is the solution?).

It is important to note that consultants are advisors and can provide guidance, but they should not be in charge of implementing the accessibility work itself. Making sure your goals and strategies are realized is the work of your staff and volunteers.

In order to prepare your staff and volunteers for accessibility work, you may need to do work at the policy and organizational culture level to make accessibility one of your organization's core values. Accessibility work is most effective if all departments and team members are consulted, if they understand the organization's motivation to become more accessible, if they themselves believe in the importance of accessibility, and if they understand how organizational objectives about accessibility are directly linked to their job and responsibilities. Accessibility goals often go unmet when the organization has fractured buy-in or other priorities that compete with accessibility. [Part 5 of this guide will walk you through the creation of your full multi-year accessibility plan.](#) No matter how your multi-year accessibility plan is structured, you will need to address physical, information and communications, systemic, and attitudinal barriers.

Addressing physical barriers to accessibility

Every organization, including those that produce screen industry events, must think about built environment accessibility, or how people with disabilities navigate their space. Common ways to reduce physical barriers include selecting more accessible venues, auditing your space to identify and respond to physical barriers, and making sure that your venue has an appropriate wayfinding system.

Venue selection

If people encounter accessibility barriers on the way to your event or in your venue, it can stop them from attending your event or ever returning.

When we think of an “accessible venue,” we often think of a venue that is wheelchair accessible, but different people require different things to be able to adequately interact with a venue. This can include a venue being in a central neighbourhood that has parking and public transit options. It also includes what the building can provide during programming, including in terms of lighting, sound levels, and seating.

More accessible spaces:

- Are barrier free with no stairs;
- Have slow gradation ramps;
- Have automatic entrance and exit doors;
- Have dimmable lights;
- Have a quiet space or good noise acoustics;
- Have Bluetooth considerations for hearing aids or provide a hearing loop system;
- Have parking and public transit access;
- Have accessible, gender-neutral bathrooms with grab bars and wide, automatic doors;
- Have wayfinding features like colour contrasts on stair treads, inclines and doors;
- Can host events at various times to attract people with different access needs or schedules;
- Have a variety of food and drink options; and
- Clearly communicate ahead of time any barriers present in the venue.

Venue accessibility audits

For event organizers who do not own/manage their own venue, consider asking if the venue has been through an accessibility audit through an organization like the [Rick Hansen Foundation](#) (which has a nationally-recognized [rating system that measures and certifies the level of meaningful access of buildings](#)).

[and sites](#)¹³), and what barriers that accessibility audit uncovered. If the venue has not undergone a formal built environment accessibility audit, some fundamental built environment accessibility to ask include:

Does the venue have steps or stairs at any point, including in areas that are not public-facing?

- Are all doorways or hallways wide enough for mobility aids to pass through?
- Is there tactile tape and high contrast wayfinding where needed?
- Are there a variety of lighting options?
- Are there a variety of seating options, including for people in larger bodies?
- Is the location central with a variety of ways to get there? Is there accessible parking? Where is the closest transit stop? Is the venue served by paratransit?
- What is the safety of the surrounding area?
- What are food and drink options?
 - Can people eat privately?
 - Can people bring their own food?
- Are there a variety of overnight accommodations nearby, including accessible hotel rooms?
- Is there a place for service animals to relieve themselves? Is there enough room for them to sit near their handler in the cinema or event space?
- Are there multiple bathrooms that people with mobility aids could use? Is there enough space for wheelchair users to turn around, grab bars to make transfers, doors that push in, space to roll in under the sink?



The American organization [Film Event Accessibility Working Group](#) has created

¹³ Rick Hansen Foundation. *Get RHF Accessibility Certified*. <https://www.rickhansen.com/become-accessible/rating-certification>

[a robust built environment accessibility checklist](#)¹⁴ that walks you through these and other considerations.

Wayfinding

Wayfinding is the process by which people choose a route to navigate through a space, orient themselves, and recognize when they have arrived at their destination. Key elements of wayfinding include:

- Braille signage mounted at a consistent height;
- Tactile pathways (e.g. textured surfaces that help individuals navigate on a path, identify features like the edges of stair treads, or identify different rooms like a washroom);
- Maps (including tactile or braille maps, and regular maps with high colour contrast);
- Auditory beacons (small Bluetooth devices that repeatedly provide real-time information and detailed navigation instructions to other devices such as smartphones);
- Wayfinding apps like BlindSquare that can provide indoor audio navigation instructions;
- Elevators with buttons with braille, large fonts, and tactile signage, and audible announcements of the direction of travel as well as which floor is being reached;
- Continuous handrails on both sides of any staircase;
- Hallways and pathways free of obstacles;
- Pathways with high colour contrast between the floor, walls, and (if applicable) baseboards, as well as doors that contrast with the surrounding wall(s);
- A consistency of layout and design throughout the building to aid in the creation of mental maps; and
- Using materials that minimize echoes for someone who is using a cane.¹⁵

¹⁴ Film Event Accessibility Working Group. *Film Exhibition Accessibility Checklist*. <https://feaw.org/accessibility-checklist>

¹⁵ Rick Hansen Foundation, Mfamobani, Laetitia. *Wayfinding: Tips to creating a building that all can navigate*. September 15, 2023. <http://rickhansen.com/news-stories/blog/wayfinding-tips-creating-building-all-can-navigate>

Addressing information/communications barriers to accessibility

Not all individuals receive and understand information in the same way. Information and communications barriers happen when information is only provided in a single format. If you work in a jurisdiction with provincial accessibility legislation, you may be familiar with the need to provide information in an alternate format upon request, or presenting an alternative way of presenting text or visual information so that it can be understood by people who do not read print (or cannot access the information in its original format).

Some alternate formats include (but are not limited to):

- Braille;
- Audio recordings of written text;
- Large print (which is typically 18 pt or larger); and
- Easy Read or plain language.

Best practices for accessible communication on social media

It's important to remember that organizations are not merely disseminating information in print anymore. A large portion of what gets communicated to audiences, volunteers, and artists is published online and/or on social media. Your marketing and communications team should work to ensure that all digital content is accessible to everyone, by including:

- Concise and comprehensive image descriptions as alt text (learn how to write them [with this guide](#)¹⁶);
- Captions on all videos, ideally [open captions](#) (i.e. captions that are burned into the video, rather than closed captions, which are captions that someone has to turn on);
- Text transcripts of videos for users who are hard of hearing, or video

¹⁶ Finnegan Shannon and Bojana Coklyat. *Alt-Text as Poetry*. June 2020. <https://alt-text-as-poetry.net/>

descriptions of videos for users who are blind, low-vision, or partially-sighted;

- Using #CamelCase in hashtags, or capitalizing every word in a hashtag (#FilmFestival instead of #filmfestival) to increase legibility; and
- Limiting the number of emojis used in a social media post (and refraining from using them as decoration or bullet points), as those using a screen reader will experience their screen reader reading the full name of each emoji out loud, potentially impeding their comprehension of your post as a whole.

Addressing systemic barriers to accessibility

Since systemic barriers are policies and practices that create obstacles for disabled people, your work at your organization is to create systems where disabled people can access the accommodations and support they need with the least friction possible.

Understanding what accommodations are

The first step to addressing systemic barriers is understanding what **accommodations** are.

An **accommodation** is the process by which organizations remove barriers and provide tailored solutions that ensure individuals with disabilities receive equal access to goods, services, and facilities. The duty to accommodate is protected under federal and provincial human rights legislation.

Although accommodations are often thought of in the context of the workplace, they are also vital in the provision of public services and not just in employment.

The duty to accommodate

Organizations are bound (by provincial and federal human rights legislation, even in provinces where there is no provincial accessibility legislation) by the **duty to accommodate**. This means that organizations have a duty to make changes to how they deliver services and provide access to their facility(/ies) in order to meet the needs of workers (including volunteers), customers, or clients

with disabilities.¹⁷ However, the solution/accommodation may not always be the individual's preferred option—and an individual cannot hold out for their preferred solution. If an individual refuses a reasonable accommodation, the organization can still be found to have met the duty to accommodate.

Typically, the duty to accommodate is triggered when a worker, customer, or client makes an accommodation request. However, an explicit accommodation request is not always required to trigger the duty to accommodate. Organizations can also be bound under the duty to accommodate if the organization ought reasonably to have known that an individual required an accommodation.

It is best practice for organizations to publicize accommodations that have been made for individuals in the past, which allows stakeholders to understand what is available or can be possible at this organization, and how these accommodations may make their experience more accessible and inclusive. Often, organizations publish what accommodations are possible on a dedicated accessibility webpage, but be advised that this information should also be available through a variety of channels (social media, any print media like program guides, and [in alternate formats](#)).

Organizations must implement accommodations unless they would cause the organization **undue hardship**. Undue hardship is a legal term for the point at which it is too unsafe, difficult, or expensive to remove barriers so people can participate in work or other areas of daily life. The point of undue hardship depends on the circumstances of each situation and is not an easy threshold to reach.¹⁸ The threshold for what is considered undue hardship is a matter of case law in different jurisdictions, but typically the following 3 factors are considered:

1. **Financial cost:** Does implementing the accommodation come at such a substantial cost that it would potentially threaten the survival of the organization?

¹⁷ Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. *Principles of Accommodation*. <https://www.aoda.ca/principles-of-accommodation/>

¹⁸ British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. *Glossary term: Undue hardship*. <https://bchumanrights.ca/glossary/undue-hardship/>

2. **Health and safety:** Does implementing the accommodation pose a genuine health and safety risk to others? This health and safety risk must be supported with evidence.
3. **Business operations:** Does implementing the accommodation make it impossible for the organization to proceed with regular business operations?

How to use accommodations to guide your accessibility work

When you receive an accommodation request, you may or may not be able to provide an accommodation in a way that fully removes the barrier being experienced by your disabled worker, customer, or client. However, the accommodations requests you receive (and the solutions proposed by your disabled stakeholders) should be used by your organization as a signal and roadmap for how to re-design your services and offerings to be more inclusive to begin with. We have included some general best practices on [accessible employment](#) and [accessible service delivery](#) at the end of this section.

Addressing Attitudinal Barriers: Inclusive Storytelling to Combat Ableism

The importance of representation

Disabled people are everywhere: they are in our families, in our friend groups, in our workplaces, and in our communities. Media about disability, or media that features disabled people or disabled characters, allows for over a quarter of all Canadians to see themselves reflected in storytelling. Media representations of disability have often been restricted to stereotyped or tragic portrayals, but disability is an incredibly common human experience, and a majority of people will become disabled or experience disability at some point in their lifetime. Screen industry event organizers, then, have the power to change perspectives on disability by including content (e.g. films, panels, presentations) that authentically represent disabled people as part of their events.

The importance of goal-setting on disability representation

In 2023, the UBCP/ACTRA and Geena Davis Institute conducted a study on equity and diversity in the Canadian screen industry. The study analyzed 52

feature films, 303 episodes of TV shows, and 75 TV movies shot in British Columbia in 2018, 2019, and 2021 and found that:

- 3.3% of all feature films, episodes of TV shows, or TV movies had a disabled character;
- The percentage of characters with disabilities decreased from 2018 (4.0%) to 2021 (2.1%) across all production types.¹⁹

This study did not determine whether disabled characters were cast authentically with a disabled performer.

Given that 27% of all Canadian adults are living with at least one disability, this research shows that Canadian consumers do not have regular access to stories about disability or disabled characters when watching TV and movies. Film festivals and related industry events like content markets and industry conferences have a crucial role to play in ensuring that audiences have access to content that represents their lived experience. They can do so through platforming the work of disabled creatives and content that authentically represents disability, and by creating environments where disabled creatives can make deals and advance their careers.

The importance of identifying and shattering stereotypes and tropes

In 2025, the Geena Davis Institute²⁰ conducted another study, which analyzed 350 television shows that originated and aired in the US between 2016 and 2023 on the basis of their disability representation. This study found that several disability tropes emerged regularly, including:

**27% of all
Canadian
adults live with
at least one
disability**

¹⁹ Meyer, Michele, and Meredith Conroy. *Representation and Inclusion in Film and Television Produced in British Columbia*. UBCP/ACTRA and Geena Davis Institute. 2023. https://ubcpactra.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/From-Real-to-Reel_Representation-and-Inclusion-in-Film-and-Television-Produced-in-British-Columbia.pdf.

²⁰ In partnership with The Ruderman Family Foundation

Inspiration porn: This trope is when characters with disabilities are portrayed as extraordinary or heroic, serving as inspiration for nondisabled viewers or characters within the story, typically framed in a way that suggests their heroicness is because they “overcame” their disability. In these cases, individuals with disabilities serve as mere symbols intended to evoke pity or admiration. It can also be implied that “overcoming disability” is an achievement in and of itself. Or that it is solely a matter of personal determination, ignoring the broader systemic barriers that affect people with disabilities.

Disabled villains: This trope is when disability is used to make villains appear frightening. These stories also tend to link physical or mental disabilities to a character’s malevolence. This harmful trope suggests that disability is either the cause or a reflection of their violent behavior or even a punishment for evil actions, reinforcing the idea that disability is something to be feared. These portrayals dehumanize individuals with disabilities by weaponizing disability as a source of spite or ill repute.

Disability as a Superpower: This trope gives characters with disabilities abilities that either compensate for or stem from their disability, often in a supernatural or exaggerated way. For example, a blind character might have their other senses heightened to a superhuman degree, or a character with a neurological difference might possess mystical insight. While seemingly empowering, this trope can be problematic when it suggests that a disability must be offset by extraordinary powers instead of the story portraying disabled individuals as capable without such embellishments or powers.

Magical Healing Fantasy: This trope follows a character with a disability and their journey to “cure” or eliminate that disability. It reinforces the harmful notion that disabilities are flaws that need to be corrected for a person to live a fulfilling life or conform to societal norms. By suggesting that disabled individuals are incomplete or deviant until they are “fixed,” this trope perpetuates the stigma that disability is something inherently negative, or abnormal.

In addition to these tropes, this study also found that disabled characters were often portrayed as a burden to their loved ones and that characters were shown to resent being disabled (rather than resenting barriers to access).²¹

Inclusive program design and film selection

With great power comes great responsibility, and curators and film and industry programmers hold great power in the screen industry ecosystem. Festivals, markets and conferences serve many purposes in the lifecycle of a film: content is pitched, shown, and purchased in these spaces, and the people responsible for selecting films to be included or projects to be showcased in industry settings can have great influence on audience perceptions of disability and the forward momentum of disabled creatives' careers.

Many people think they don't know any disabled people (although that is statistically unlikely to be true!), and therefore build their entire understanding of what it is like to live with a disability through the media they consume. As mentioned above, the general state of disability representation in film and TV leaves much to be desired. This is largely to do with the fact that stories about disabled people or featuring the disability community have been historically told by non-disabled people. Furthermore, the screen industry often runs on inaccessible practices that make it difficult for disabled people to advance their careers. Therefore, disabled people are not often depicted in media, the pieces of media that do depict disabled people often reinforce ableist misconceptions, disabled people are excluded from opportunities in the screen industry due to those misconceptions about what disabled people can and cannot do, and the cycle of exclusion continues.

Beyond the cycle described above, media representation plays a vital role in identity formation. When disabled people are continually shown the same harmful, inauthentic portrayals of what it's like to live with a disability, this can contribute to something called **internalized ableism**. Internalized ableism is when a person believes that they are less worthy because of their disability. Internalized ableism is a burden many disabled people carry because they live

²¹ Conroy, M., C. Espinoza, and A. Romero Walker. *The State of Disability Representation on Television: An Analysis of Scripted TV Series from 2016 to 2023*. Ruderman Family Foundation and Geena Davis Institute. 2024. <https://rudermanfoundation.org/white-papers/the-state-of-disability-representation-on-television-an-analysis-of-scripted-tv-series-from-2016-2023/>.

in a society that is continually feeding them messages that say that disabled people are less than, a burden, or “other.” Even a person who is surrounded by support and love can still be susceptible to internalized ableism because of the representations of disability in the media that they have access to, and the society they live in that is informed by those same representations.

As programmers, curators, and industry organizers, you have the capability and power to interrupt the cycle of poor disability representation. Showcasing the work of disabled creatives, including works with authentic disability representation, and platforming diverse storytelling allows disabled attendees to see themselves in a meaningful and real way. Disability is a part of the human experience, and the intersectional nature of disability means that stories about disability don’t just look one way: there are disabled creatives who are creating across all different genres, styles, and narratives. Furthermore, there is something to the phrase “you have to see it to be it”: when disabled people see themselves in industry spaces on panels, selling their films, or on screen, it becomes an attainable goal for others in the community.

Considerations when looking at material

As a programmer of any kind, whether film or industry, there are many questions you should ask yourself when putting together your programme. You can integrate disability into your reflection and decision making, starting with the following:

- Are there disabled characters or subjects in the film?
- Is anyone of the creative team disabled, especially in above the line positions?
- If a film features disabled characters, are they played by disabled actors?
- If a film features disabled characters, subjects, or narratives around disability, were there disabled creatives involved in telling that story?
- Were there disabled people in the writers room, on the creative team, or working on set?
- Do disabled characters or subjects fall into any of the [harmful disability tropes](#)?

- Was this film made collaboratively with the community it is representing?
- Are disabled perspectives represented on the panel of speakers or presenters?

It is important to note that often, the answer may be “no” to one or more of these questions, but that does not necessarily mean this film or project should be discounted or not programmed. With the current state of pronounced disability underrepresentation and the need for greater awareness of disabled stories, there is a constant weighing needed for all of these questions. Continue to ask yourself: will programming this content or this panel do more harm than good for your local disability community?

Another element to consider is that films and projects by disabled creatives will not always look like what you may be used to. Disability cinema and television is still an emerging art form. While there are many disabled creatives who have worked in the industry as we currently know it, many more disabled creatives are currently being empowered and afforded opportunities to make films and pitch projects in new ways and evolve the art form. Many contemporary disability cinema and television projects use a form grounded in difference, and one which may not align with traditional ideas of structure, process, or aesthetics. This does not devalue the work.

A programming team must be made up of diverse perspectives, and it is vitally important to include disabled perspectives on your programming team. A diverse programming team that includes disabled perspectives redistributes decision making power, and provides a unique perspective to not only films featuring disability in some way, but films of all kinds.

In the absence of staffing your programming team with disabled perspectives, it is worthwhile to bring on programming consultants. A programming consultant can be contracted to look at films that are by disabled creatives, feature disabled talent, or include any type of disability representation. Depending on what the consultant’s area of expertise is, they may be able to not only look at material and advise on programming choices, but once the programme has been locked, they may also be able to share considerations for hosting disabled talent, such as scheduling and venue considerations, advising on Q&A material, and audience considerations for the selected films, like community organizations to reach out to or targeted promotion.

Considerations when putting together a programme

Disability should be represented in your programming in the content you select, the delegations you invite, the speakers you have on panels, and the talent present at your festival. Here is a non-exhaustive list of things to think about when putting together a festival and/or industry program:

- Is disability represented onscreen?
- Are any of the selected filmmakers disabled?
- Are we showing a diversity of disability experiences? (i.e. not all stories only featuring d/Deaf people or wheelchair users, chronic illness, etc.)
- Is the disability perspective represented on panel(s)?
- Is there programming around issues facing equity-deserving communities, and are disabled people included in that programming?
- Have disability focused organizations been invited to participate in discussions?
- Have disabled creatives been invited and supported as delegates?

General best practices to create a more accessible organization

Integrating principles of universal design and inclusive design into your work

There is a difference between creating an accessible environment in response to requests for accommodation and creating an environment that is accessible at the baseline. This guide is intended to help you create environments that are more accessible at the baseline so that fewer requests for accommodation are made (since many disabled individuals, especially those with non-apparent or “invisible” disabilities, may be uncomfortable making a request for accommodation). Accessibility, then, should be a core tenet of your festival or event experience, and baked into your organization without someone having to ask about access.

This can be done by integrating universal design or inclusive design principles into your work. Both universal design and inclusive design are design methodologies that strive to make the world more accessible, but they each have slightly different approaches:

Universal design is “the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”²² An example of universal design is the curb cut: designed to help people using mobility devices navigate sidewalks and crossing the road, the lowered curbs on corners also help people with luggage or with a stroller. By considering the diverse needs and abilities of all throughout the design process, universal design creates a single digital or built environment, service and/or system that meets all peoples’ needs.

²² Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. *About Universal Design*. <https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design>

Inclusive design is design that “considers the full range of human diversity with respect to ability, language, culture, gender, age and other forms of human difference, and keeps the diversity and uniqueness of each individual in mind.”²³ While universal design creates one overall solution to serve as many people as possible, inclusive design focuses on creating customized solutions for different people with different needs, including those who may be left out of other standardized design processes. Where universal design may ask “how do we design a door that works for everyone?”, inclusive design will ask “who’s struggling with the door today, and what can we do to respond to that specific struggle?”²⁴

²³ Inclusive Design Research Centre. *Philosophy*. <https://idrc.ocadu.ca/about/philosophy/>

²⁴ Humanics Collective. *Inclusive Design vs Universal Design: What’s the Difference?* January 1, 2026. <https://www.humanicscollective.com/post/inclusive-design-vs-universal-design-what-s-the-difference>

“Organizations must always respond respectfully, promptly and collaboratively to individual access requirements. However, inclusive design begins earlier. Instead of asking, “How do we accommodate this person?” Inclusive Design asks, “How do we design this experience so that fewer people encounter barriers in the first place?” This represents an important shift in thinking.”

- Vanessa Pfaff, MDes (Inclusive Design)

Both approaches will help you think holistically about overall accessibility, which makes for robust festivals. It moves beyond a paradigm where individuals need to request accommodations to fit into a current system, and invites more people in from the start. This holistic approach ensures that care is built into your festival or event experience, which will lead to building deeper relationships with disabled people in your community of stakeholders and more consistency in their engagement with your offerings.

General best practices for hiring, accommodating and promoting disabled team members

Creating a more accessible film festival, event, or organization depends on the contributions of the team members bringing the organization’s mission, vision and areas of work to life. Therefore, it is vitally important to ensure:

- a) there is meaningful disabled representation at all levels of the organization, and
- b) you have clear systems, policies and processes in place to ensure that disabled people are hired, promoted, included and valued across your organization.

While by no means exhaustive, the following list includes some actions to consider:

Understanding the employee lifecycle: Map out the employee lifecycle at the organization, conduct regular policy/process audits, identify how the [four principal accessibility barriers](#) might emerge in the lifecycle, and develop responsive strategies. The lifecycle includes job postings, hiring processes, job offers, onboarding, accommodations, leadership, learning, performance reviews, compensation decisions, workplace investigations, surveys and feedback, and departures.

Job postings: Ensure that job postings include an accessibility statement, and that all job responsibilities relate to the role and don't include credentials or criteria that are rooted in attitudinal barriers that keep disabled people out.

Hiring processes: Review the hiring process to ensure it is accessible, inclusive and tied to clear job responsibilities. Ensure that the hiring process is clearly outlined on the job posting or careers page so that candidates understand the possible accessibility barriers that may emerge and request necessary accommodations.

Job offers and onboarding: Ensure that job offers and onboarding processes provide information on accessibility best practices and accommodations new hires can leverage.

Getting accommodations in place: Accommodation processes should be clear, easy to understand, meaningfully resourced, and shared with all employees.

Leadership: Leaders should receive training on accessibility, accommodations, and disability inclusion best practices and should be accountable for inclusive implementation of these best practices.

Performance, Compensation and Promotions: Accessibility work should be threaded into the job descriptions of every employee, and every employee should be assessed on their work advancing accessibility in the organization during annual performance reviews, which are tied to compensation and future promotions. Performance review processes should be regularly reviewed to ensure they are accessible.

Workplace investigations: These processes should be accessible, allowing disabled employees to articulate their accessibility needs, request accommodations, or engage the services of a support person as needed.

Learning and development: There should be regular learning opportunities on accessibility best practices for all employees that are general and role-specific.

Surveys and feedback: Annual employee feedback surveys should include specific questions on accessibility and accommodations. Employees should also be invited to share feedback (either openly or anonymously) with leadership as issues emerge.

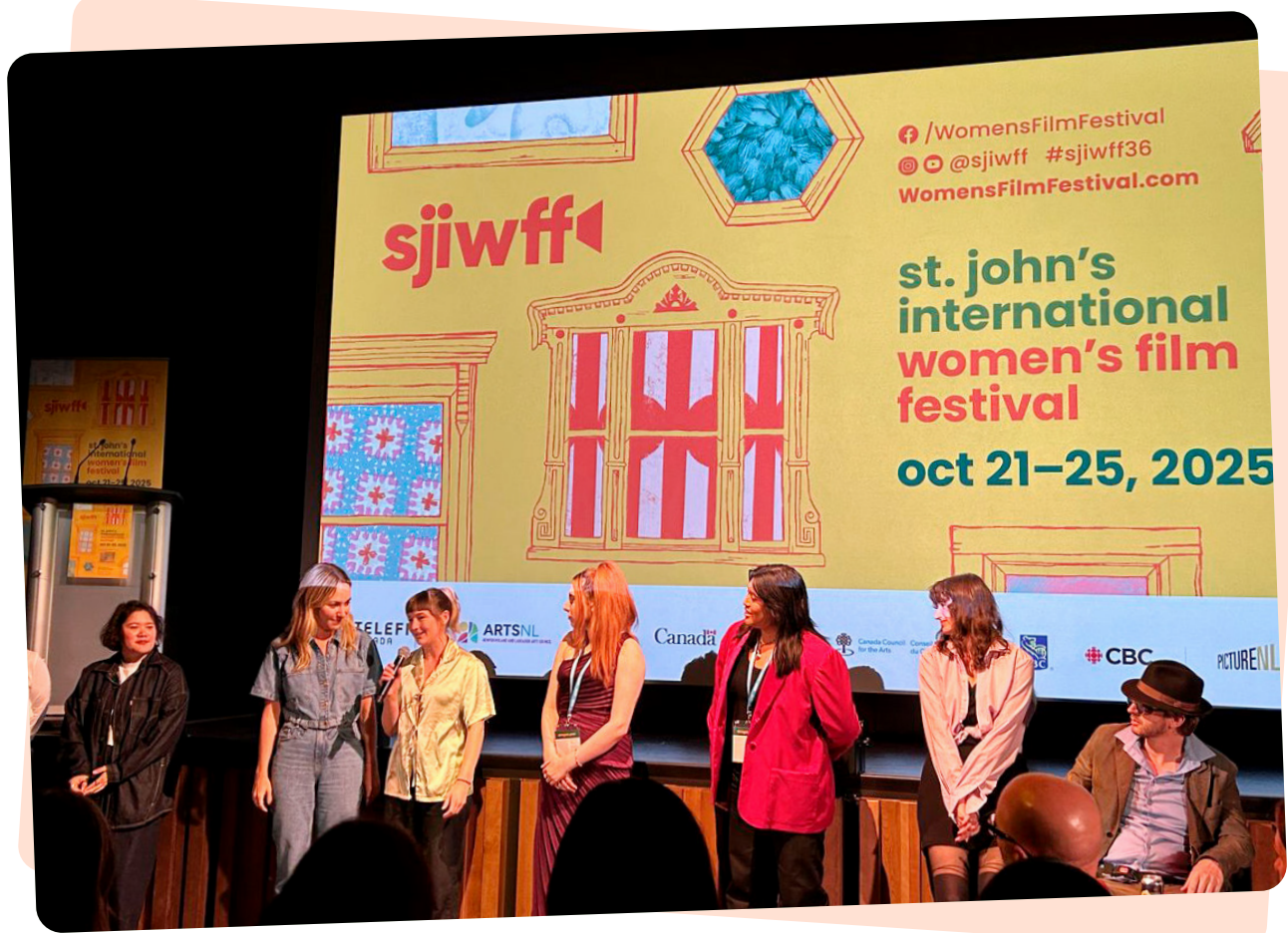
Attrition and departures: Ensure that exit surveys or interviews allow departing employees to share context or provide feedback on accessibility issues.

General tips in service delivery to include disabled audience members, disabled creatives and filmmakers, and disabled speakers and presenters

Disabled audience members, disabled creatives, and disabled speakers and presenters should not be excluded from film festivals and film events. You should ensure that these 3 groups are able to attend and enjoy your festival and year-round programming. Unlike a longer-term relationship that is built with disabled employees working with a festival or film event, you may not have multiple opportunities to grow, evolve and fine-tune your approach to accessibility and disability inclusion with these individuals, who you may only work with or interact with once or a handful of times. Therefore, each interaction a disabled audience member, a disabled creative, or a disabled speaker or presenter has with your organization and your team members can either build, grow, or destroy their trust in your organization.

As such, some best practices to keep in mind for growing your relationship with disabled stakeholders external to your team are:





- Map out the lifecycle and journey for disabled audience members, disabled creatives and filmmakers, and disabled speakers/presenters throughout a film festival or film event. Identify where accessibility barriers might emerge and how you will proactively address these barriers, and/or be responsive to feedback from these 3 groups.
- Design and deliver training and development for year-round staff members and seasonal staff members alike to work with all 3 groups.
- Develop a communications plan to provide information on accessibility and accommodations information to all 3 groups before every event, and consider the different channels you can leverage: website, social media, print, email communications, dedicated FAQ pages, etc. Consider how this information can be tailored for each group.
- Additionally, explore how accessibility and accommodations information can be woven into invitation emails for filmmakers/creatives and speakers/presenters for specific events, screenings and conference sessions.

- In your email communications, provide disabled filmmakers/creatives and speakers/presenters with the specific accessibility features of the venue their films/events will take place in, and the additional services your organization can provide. Find out if they will be leveraging the services of their own interpreters, companions, facilitators or support persons. Provide context on the accessibility services you can provide.
- Develop partnerships with local disability organizations to craft communications and to share messaging with all 3 groups who may have close relationships with these organizations.
- Hire an accessibility expert to work with you to develop, update and advance your accessibility strategy and plan, and have an expert at each location/site during your film festival or film event to support your larger team.
- Establish a [festival scorecard or formal feedback framework](#) to gather festival-specific feedback after each film festival or film event so you can reflect on changes to make in the future.
- Establish a working group on accessibility with other festivals to develop and share best practices and lessons learned. Organize regular meetings on an annual or semi-annual basis to develop sector-wide best practices.

When it comes to providing inclusive services to disabled people across all 3 groups, here are some general tips to keep in mind:

- Take the time to get to know the disabled person's needs and focus on meeting those needs just as you would with anyone else.
- Consider a person's disability and the barriers they might face in a venue or at an event when communicating with them and determining how best to engage and interact in a respectful and inclusive way.
- Ask before you help or jump in. Don't assume the person needs help as a matter of course.

**Don't assume
the person
needs help as
a matter of
course.**

- Speak directly to a disabled person, not to their support person or companion.
- Pay attention and listen carefully. If you're unsure what the person is saying, confirm by summarizing or repeating what was said to you, or politely ask them to repeat it.
- Be patient. People with certain disabilities may take longer to respond or do things.
- Use appropriate language and terminology when referring to disabled people.
- Inform disabled people when accessible facilities or services are temporarily unavailable.
- Consider what a person might require: the services of a support person, assistive devices and service animal.
- Don't make assumptions. Not all disabilities are visible and when people ask questions related to accessibility, articulate their accessibility needs or request accommodations, believe them.
- Respect is essential. Disabled people have agency and deserve respect and consideration just like their non-disabled counterparts.



Photo use courtesy of Reelworld.

General tips in respecting the rights of disabled employees, audience members, filmmakers/creatives, and speakers/presenters

Disabled employees, audience members, filmmakers/creatives, and speakers/presenters must be safe from discrimination, their rights must be respected and protected, and their needs must be acknowledged and accommodated. What does this mean in reality?

- **Don't create new barriers:** Don't make changes to facilities, services, goods, technology, or procedures that reinforce or create new barriers for disabled persons. [Accessibility must be part of your design philosophy.](#)
- [Design inclusively: Make choices that include and work for disabled people.](#)
- **Support inclusion:** Usually, the best accommodations allow disabled people to participate in similar ways to everyone else.
- **Design bespoke solutions:** Different or separate accommodations may be necessary to help people do their jobs or access events, or engage with specific services.
- **Involve those who need accommodations in exploring solutions:** Disabled people often know what works best for them. Make sure the process and solutions meet their needs and promote privacy, dignity, and respect.
- **Spread out accessibility costs:** Disabled people should not face extra costs for the accommodations they need to do their job, access an event, or receive a service. Accessibility should be factored in as part of the overall cost of doing business.
- **Respect privacy and confidentiality:** Do not disclose personal information, someone's disability, someone's accessibility needs, or someone's accommodations. This information is for the disabled person to disclose and share as they wish, and not for others to share or discuss.

PART 4:

Access Measures

In Part 3, you learned about accommodations and the duty to accommodate. Remember that the duty to accommodate is triggered when a worker, customer, or client makes an accommodation request (or if the organization ought reasonably to have known that an individual required accommodation). Event organizers should be prepared for these accommodation requests to come in written form (via email or social media message), over the phone, or in-person and communicated to your event staff or volunteers.

The process of accommodation is accomplished by implementing **access measures**. An access measure is any *specific* policy, physical modification, assistive technology, or accommodation designed to remove barriers and provide equitable opportunities for disabled people. These measures ensure that disabled people can navigate environments, use services, and access information with the same independence and ease as others.

Some of the most common event access measures that film festivals and screen industry events will likely need to employ (depending on the makeup of their local disability community) in making their event more accessible are listed here, in alphabetical order:

Active listeners

Active listeners are a contract facilitator (often a social worker, therapist, counsellor, or life coach) who can provide an empathetic ear to audience members or others that have been triggered by a film or event's content. Active listening helps patrons work through being activated. This service needs a quiet and private space, where people can enter and exit anonymously. It should be noted that active listeners are not providing therapy, but a confidential, safe space to get back to being emotionally regulated. Active listeners may also provide resources for therapy, support groups, or ongoing support.

Captions

There are two types of captions (which are synchronized text descriptions that display dialogue, and describe relevant sounds for audience members to be able to follow the action)²⁵: open captions and closed captions. **Open captions** are “burned in” to a video file and cannot be turned off, while **closed captions** can be toggled on or off by the viewer (and in some cases can also be customized by the viewer, including modifying caption placement, font style, font colour and font size). Like described video, which is provided as its own audio track to be paired with a screening, closed captions are often provided as their own file separate from the film or television show being screened. There are a variety of [file formats for captions](#), and your organization may want to standardize the file type that you expect filmmakers to provide.

While having captions available during a screening will be a familiar experience to most patrons from their home viewing experience, captioning can also be provided for live festival events like panels and presentations through **Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART)**, which is a simultaneous transcription of what is being said at a talk, lecture, panel discussion.²⁶ CART can be provided either as open captions or as closed captions: open CART captioning will have the CART projected so that every

²⁵ ReelAbilities Toronto. *ReelAccess: A Guide to Accessible Film Festivals and Screenings So Everyone Feels Welcome*. 2016. <https://www.peterborough.ca/media/r2tdtyj0/reelaccess-guide-to-accessible-film-festivals-and-screenings.pdf>

²⁶ ReelAbilities Toronto. *ReelAccess: A Guide to Accessible Film Festivals and Screenings So Everyone Feels Welcome*. 2016. <https://www.peterborough.ca/media/r2tdtyj0/reelaccess-guide-to-accessible-film-festivals-and-screenings.pdf>

patron can see the captions, whereas closed CART captioning can be set up so that audience members can scan a QR code or navigate to a web link to access captioning either from a personal smartphone or through rental devices (often tablets) that the organization loans out to patrons temporarily to access the captions.

Open captions provide the most consistent, straightforward accessible experience, and require no additional setup or troubleshooting from the organizer. Closed captioning requires setup, and conscientious monitoring to ensure that captioning devices are continuously working for all audience members. Closed captioning also means that patrons will have a device with them, and may need to “ping-pong” between reading the captions and looking at the screen (in the case of a screening) or the stage (in the case of a panel or presentation). Where closed captioning is provided, organizers should take care to ensure that the screen brightness will not be distracting to other patrons.

NOTE: There is a difference between captions and subtitles. Subtitles translate dialogue only, whereas open and closed captions describe all relevant audio, including sound effects and music.

Described video and integrated described video

Described video provides a narration of important visual details and information about actions, characters, scene changes, and on-screen text, while audio description provides a voice-over description of key elements such as text and graphics that appear on screen during information programming ([CRTC, 2025](#)). As such, festivals and industry events may want to provide audio description for panels and presentations (especially those that are slide or presentation-heavy), and provide described video tracks for screenings.

Described video is traditionally done by a trained audio describer in post-production, who will create a script of all of the visual aspects that are important to the plot and understanding of the film, including time codes in the video where the description should be inserted so that it does not compete

with dialogue and other important auditory elements native to the film.²⁷ The description is then recorded by a voiceover artist. Described video is typically created as a separate audio track from the final audio mix of a film or television episode.²⁸

Accessible Media Inc. (AMI) publishes best practices guides on [the creation of described video from an artistic perspective](#)²⁹, as well as best practices for [handling described video tracks in post-production](#)³⁰.

Depending on the demand for described video in your community, described video can be offered in a variety of ways:

- As a screening where the description track is played at the same time as the audio track for the content being screened, for the benefit of the entire audience
- As a screening where an audience member can listen to the AD track through headset (which requires patrons who need the AD to self-identify in advance, and for headsets to be provided to those patrons)

Described video is not always offered with the standard licensing of films that your festival or event may be programming; it's important to make a request for the DV track early if you plan to offer a described video screening. [Part 5](#) of this guide will discuss how you can build a system where eventually, each of the films you are screening will provide DV as a matter of course.

²⁷ AI Media. *Everything You Need to Know About Audio Description*. <https://www.ai-media.tv/knowledge-hub/insights/audio-description-need-to-knows/>

²⁸ AMI, Robert Pearson. *Best Practices for Post-Production and Emerging Forms of Audio Description*. May 28, 2014.

<https://www.slideshare.net/slideshow/accessible-media-inc-ami-best-practices-for-postproduction-and-emerging-forms-of-audio-description/35134987>

²⁹ Accessible Media Inc. and the Canadian Association of Broadcasters. *Live Described Video Best Practices*. July 2020. https://www.ami.ca/sites/default/files/2020-07/Live_Described_Video_Best%20Practices.pdf

³⁰ Accessible Media Inc. and the Canadian Association of Broadcasters. *Post Production Described Video Best Practices*. July 2020. https://www.ami.ca/sites/default/files/2020-07/PP_Described_Video_Best_Practices_0.pdf

INTEGRATED DESCRIBED VIDEO

Some films may leverage integrated described video rather than Described Video:

IDV is a method of producing television content for blind and partially sighted audiences from the ground up, whereby the identification of key visual elements is incorporated into the pre-production, production and post-production phases, so that traditional DV is not required after the program has been packaged.

For instance, interaction between two characters might include dialogue such as “Come on in to my office and have a seat across from me at my desk.” Of particular note is that the dialogue used to convey the scene is in character and is not awkward or out of place.

IDV is not meant to replace DV. Rather, it is the preferred application for original content where description can be included from the planning stages of the program. It works well with factual programming, documentaries, field production pieces and interstitials.³¹

As a result, content with IDV does not require a separate “accessible” screening, as it is an accessible screening in its original format.

Flexible seating

In an ideal world, your venue would have multiple options for those that need specific seating.

Often, venues will have a limited amount of specified wheelchair spaces that have removable seats. Ideally, all seats are removable (allowing for a greater number of users with mobility aids to enjoy a screening or event), and can be configurable with different seating options (i.e. arms, no arms, different widths), but cinemas are traditionally designed with fixed seats.

Why are different styles of seating important? Chair arms may be needed by some individuals to lift themselves out of their seat, while for others, having

³¹ Accessible Media Inc (AMI). *Integrated Described Video Best Practices*. April 2016. <https://www.ami.ca/sites/default/files/2019-06/Integrated-Described-Video-Best-Practices.pdf>

armrests makes the seat too small for them. Additionally, different amounts of cushioning can provide too much or too little support.

The Bums and Butts on Seats Report and campaign³² and the larger body positive and fat positive movement advocates for stakeholders to be informed about the seating options available in your venue. This can look like publishing information about the:

- Width of chairs;
- Depth of chairs;
- Whether the chairs have armrests;
- Whether the chairs are free-standing or tied to another chair;
- If the chairs have a weight limit; and
- If some chairs are more accessible, how one can request them.

This may also include:

- Putting photos of chairs on the website and venue information page;
- Noting measurements of chairs;
- Noting the material that chairs are upholstered with;
- Giving options to patrons ahead of time (i.e. to bring in a chair from the lobby into the event space); and
- Training staff to navigating seat requests while remaining body positive for all body sizes and not making assumptions.

Providing flexible seating options also includes providing tables at a variety of heights, particularly for cocktail hours and networking events. If all of the tables are at a singular height (e.g. high-top cruiser tables), your event may become inaccessible for various types of people (e.g. wheelchair users, little people, children).

³² Your Fat Friend Film, Jeanie Finlay. *Bums and Butts on Seats*. <https://www.yrfatfriendfilm.com/access>

Lobby pass system

Thoughtful lobby configuration and crowd control are also needed to facilitate accessibility. Festivals and industry events can allow those who need specific seating, who may take longer to get to their seats, who use mobility aids, or who may not be able to stand in lines for extended periods of time to use a **lobby pass system**, where people with these passes are given first access to the venue (either the theatre or a designated waiting area). Lobby passes are often requested during the festival pass or ticket purchase process and assigned in advance. They are typically issued as clearly identifiable badges that enable ushers, the front of house team, and other staff members to recognize the pass holders and direct them to the appropriate venue entrance or designated waiting area.

Recommendations for implementing a lobby pass system include:

- Allow people who need a lobby pass to self identify and not policing the use of a lobby pass based on specific conditions.
- Train ushers and other staff about the lobby access system.
 - Be neutral in explaining the system—it's not a special privilege to go to the front of the line, it is an access need.
 - Training patron services staff to respond proactively to access needs, e.g. seeing a patron arrive using a wheelchair but without a lobby pass, and providing them the opportunity to use the system, even without a pre-booked pass or pre-booked accessible seating.
- Provide chairs where people can sit in lines or other waiting areas. Standing for long periods of time is uncomfortable for most.
- Implement dedicated signage and clear wayfinding for those that are using the lobby pass system, or designated staff an accessibility volunteer captain at each screening location.





Mask-friendly spaces

Providing dedicated mask-mandatory events allows those who are immunocompromised to feel safe to attend. In order to host a mask-mandatory event, information that this event is mask-mandatory should be available on all marketing materials and at point of purchase, and high-quality masks should be made available to attendees for free and distributed by patron services staff to patrons upon arrival.

Networking event accessibility

Networking events are an essential part of festivals and industry events. Opportunities for career advancement and new connections alike are often formed at these events, so it is important to design these networking opportunities with accessibility in mind.

Some elements to consider when designing accessible networking events include:

- Choosing accessible spaces for events;
- Providing seating throughout reception spaces;
- Ensuring quieter conversation areas;
- Providing a variety of table heights for registration and connection (e.g. can a wheelchair user sit comfortably at these tables? are there some tables at cruiser height so that folks can be at a table while standing?)
- Providing a range of refreshments that meet dietary and accessibility needs (e.g. allergies, gluten sensitivities or Celiac disease, etc.);
- Providing choice in the amount of lighting available (i.e. having parts of the room that are more brightly-lit, and parts of the room that are darker);
- Offering captions for any presentations or remarks; and
- Providing networking in different formats, not limited to in-person events. Consider the benefit of offering additional hybrid or virtual networking events for maximum, meaningful and inclusive participation.



Online & hybrid events

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us all that many live events can be made virtual or hybrid. Some in the disability community continue to ask for hybrid or virtual events to continue to allow for better accessibility for those who may not be able to attend in person (due to physical barriers or due to being immunocompromised).

Online events

During an **online event**, an event is broadcast using video conferencing software. Depending on the software you choose to use, you may also be able to leverage additional accessibility features, including built-in captions, picture-in-picture sign language interpretation, and audio description options.

Hybrid

A **hybrid event** means that audiences can choose whether to attend online or in-person. Hybrid programming can easily be leveraged to facilitate more “interactive” events such as talkbacks, discussions, and press events. If programming a hybrid event, make sure that the participation of your at-home audience is also considered (i.e. if there is a Q&A portion, ensure that questions are not just taken from the live audience: equitable access could be achieved by using web conferencing software that has an in-meeting Q&A feature).

Hybrid programming can also leverage videoconferencing features such as polling or the chat function within programming to allow people to share their thoughts non-verbally, and can create an overall more engaged audience experience.

An alternative to providing a simultaneous live-virtual audience experience is to record sessions and allow for asynchronous online viewing and commenting; however, this approach does not allow for the same kind of shared conversation, networking or “buzz” in the same way a synchronous event does.

Pacing

Depending on the nature of their disabilities and the barriers they face in any given situation, disabled people may need more time when attending an event. This can be due to navigating brain fog, pain, limited dexterity or speed of

movement. Building **pacing** into the run of your events can look like:

- Publishing your programming schedule as early as possible;
- Allowing the lobby to open early;
- Giving lots of time for audience members to get out of an event space;
- Lengthening your intermissions or break times between screenings;
- Providing places to rest in lobbies and providing chairs for lines;
- Emailing reminders of important or key information; and
- Having longer deadlines for responses or feedback.

Procurement

Accessibility should also be a key factor in the **procurement** process, or the purchasing and partnership decisions that you make when organizing film festivals and events. When you purchase products or services, accessibility should be a key consideration in your evaluation process. You should always consider working with, contracting, purchasing from, or partnering with disabled vendors or disabled-owned companies. Doing so embeds your organization's accessibility commitment into every area of your work, and allows you to work with vendors and partners that have lived and professional experience in accessibility, and the expertise needed to anticipate and address accessibility barriers long before an event begins.

Relaxed screenings

Relaxed screenings are designed to center those who are neurodivergent or have dementia, autism, or other conditions that include sensory sensitivities. Relaxed screenings are designed to make people feel welcome who may not otherwise feel welcome in a quiet, dark and focused cinema. [UK-based Inclusive Cinema has created a comprehensive guide to programming a relaxed screening.](#)

Relaxed screenings typically:

- Allow patrons to leave the venue if needed;
- Allow patrons to move around in the screening space;

- Allow patrons to use fidget toys or the use of their phone to stim;
- Dampen loud sounds or high frequencies;
- Keep the audience lights up at a dimmed level;
- Allow patrons to quietly talk to fellow patrons to understand something;
- Prepare audiences for the experience of a screening or event through [social or visual stories](#);
- Have a larger volume of trained staff and volunteers to aid audiences attending;
- Are only sold to 75% capacity to avoid audience feeling crowded or overwhelmed; and
- Open the space 30 minutes early to allow people to pick their seats and settle.
 - Allow patrons to avoid needing to prebook specific seats.³³

In addition to general relaxed screening considerations, Inclusive Cinema also produced a [dementia-friendly screening specific guide](#)³⁴, with the following additional considerations:

- Use plain language for signage;
- Use lowercase lettering with a sans serif font;
- Mark glass doors;
- Any signs that are not for the specific event or could cause confusion should be moved or covered up, and visual clutter should be removed;
- Have staff or volunteers in bright shirts at key points in the patron journey to guide patrons;
- Avoid busy and highly reflective patterns in walls or floors; and
- Provide themed mementos for patrons to remember their outings³⁵.

³³ Inclusive Cinema. *Quick tips for running relaxed screenings*. <https://inclusivecinema.org/how-to-guides/quick-tips-for-running-relaxed-screenings/>

³⁴ Inclusive Cinema. *Dementia-friendly screenings*. <https://inclusivecinema.org/how-to-guides/dementia-friendly-screenings/>

³⁵ Inclusive Cinema. *Dementia-friendly screenings*. <https://inclusivecinema.org/how-to-guides/dementia-friendly-screenings/>

Scent-free spaces

Scent-free spaces encourage individuals to not wear scented products (e.g. perfumes, aftershaves, scented deodorants, perfumed shampoos and conditioners, scented hand sanitizer) when attending an event in that space, for the benefit of those who may have scent or chemical sensitivities.

Typically, scent-free spaces are enforced by reminding individuals that the space is scent-free at the point of purchase, and including a reminder on the building's scent-free policy in any pre-event communications.

Sensory kits

When technical elements of sound and light at a screening or event can't be altered (as in a relaxed screening), or people require something to do with their body in order to focus, **sensory kits** can help neurodivergent folks participate. Sensory kits typically include sunglasses, ear plugs and/or over ear protection, and fidget toys.

Sensory or calm rooms

Industry events like film can be loud, crowded and overstimulating. Event organizers can create a dedicated quiet space that has low lighting to allow people to reset if they become overstimulated. These sensory rooms, sometimes known as calm rooms or hush hubs, have soft seating, fidget toys or other devices and activities that allow people to regulate or come back to themselves after contending with crowds, loud noises, and bright lights. Sensory or calm rooms can be advertised as part of your festival's accessibility programming.

The location of the room should be close to the lobby, but out of the way so as not to be used as a thoroughfare. The room should be cozy, but not too small as to impede people from being able to stretch out and have privacy, especially when there is more than one person in the room.

Only low talking should occur in this type of space. It is meant to be a place for a reset rather than connection with others.

Some festivals have a coordinator for these that ensures the space is clean, quiet, and open. This person may also assist people who may be struggling and need another person to regulate their nervous system or debrief a challenging experience. Sometimes, active listening services are provided within the sensory room.

More information about setting up sensory or calm rooms can be found here:

[Inclusive Cinema](#)³⁶

[TicketFairy](#)³⁷

[Live Educate Transform Society](#)³⁸

Sighted guides

A **sighted guide** is someone who can assist someone with sight loss in navigating a space, particularly if that space is unfamiliar, will be crowded, or has unusual obstacles. Many blind, low-vision, or partially-sighted folks will often attend a film festival or event with a companion who will act as their sighted guide, but it is also an inclusive practice for organizations to provide trained volunteer sighted guides, particularly when they are providing programming targeted at the blind, low-vision, or partially-sighted community. This ensures that everyone can attend your event, even without a companion.

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind has published [a step-by-step guide on how to effectively guide someone who is blind, low-vision, or partially sighted](#)³⁹ that can be leveraged to provide staff and volunteer training for your event.

³⁶ Inclusive Cinema. *Autism-friendly screenings*. <https://inclusivecinema.org/how-to-guides/autism-friendly-screenings/>

³⁷ TicketFairy. *Quiet Rooms and Sensory-Friendly Sessions at Festivals*. April 27, 2026. <https://www.ticketfairy.com/blog/quiet-rooms-and-sensory-friendly-sessions-at-festivals>

³⁸ Live Educate Transform Society. *Low Sensory Spaces*. 2024. <https://www.connectwithlets.org/services/low-sensory-spaces/>

³⁹ CNIB. *Step by Step: A how-to manual for guiding someone who is blind or partially sighted*. 2022. https://cnib.ca/sites/default/files/2022-01/Step-By-Step%20Guide_ENG_0.pdf

Sign language interpretation

American Sign Language (ASL) is the predominant language of anglophone Deaf communities in Canada, and Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ) is the predominant language of francophone Deaf communities in Canada. While captions are an excellent accessibility measure that serve many, remember that ASL and LSQ are distinct languages from English and French, and even for Deaf folks who are able to communicate in English or French (written or spoken), it is a more accessible experience for them to communicate in their primary language.

NOTE: Deaf with a capital D refers to people who identify with Deaf culture and use sign language as their primary language.⁴⁰ Many Deaf people believe that Deafness is its own culture, rather than a disability. Small d deaf refers to anyone with any degree of hearing loss, but who does not identify with Deaf culture and who may not use sign language regularly.

As such, it is best practice to provide **sign language interpretation** for live events and patron services staff who can communicate in the appropriate sign language (depending on your region and local community)

Key considerations to remember when hiring sign language interpreters:

- Interpreters are in high demand across the country. Interpreters may need to be booked months in advance to be confirmed, even for virtual events.
- Recognize that in communities where there are fewer sign language interpreters, an interpreter's presence at your event may mean that interpreters are not available to the Deaf community at large that day for other things, such as medical appointments.
 - To mitigate your impact, only use the amount of sign language interpreters that are strictly necessary.
- Book the appropriate amount of interpreters for your event. It's standard for interpreters to work in pairs or a larger team, switching

⁴⁰ Government of Canada, Melanie Sexton. The Our Languages blog. February 7, 2022. <https://our-languages.canada.ca/en/blogue-blog/perte-auditive-terminologie-hearing-loss-terminology-eng>

off every 20 minutes. Interpreter pairs will split the labour, with one verbalizing the sign to the hearing individual and the other signing the verbal conversation to the Deaf individual.

- It is expected the event organizers will obtain interpreters that are certified, and that the organization will publish who the interpreters are as part of their promotional and outreach materials to the Deaf community.
- Different sign language interpreters specialize in different tasks. Public performance interpretation (e.g. getting on a stage for public viewings) is not done by all interpreters. Be clear about what your event needs at the outset.
- Interpretation needs extend beyond the event and are also needed for the networking spaces, lobby, and bar/concessions so patrons can order, confirm their tickets, understand that the screening will start, etc.
 - For larger events, lobby interpreters should be a separate team of interpreters to event interpreters
- Ensure good lighting so that your Deaf audience can see both facial expressions and the interpreter's hands signing. Both are an essential part of sign language grammar and sentence structure.
- Interpreters may request a script for the event, particularly for events that use technical or industry-specific language. This script should be provided no later than 48 hours in advance of the event.



Photo use courtesy of BANFF.

Trigger warnings

Content Related

Content-related trigger warnings are equivalent to “viewer discretion is advised” warnings. They can help an audience make an informed decision about when to leave a screening or event based on the presence of certain content. They are typically provided as a written or verbal list of contents, including (but not limited to):

- Sexual assault;
- Abuse;
- Child abuse, paedophilia and incest;
- Animal cruelty and animal death;
- Self-harm;
- Suicide;
- Eating disorders, body hatred and fatphobia;
- Violence and weapons;
- Pornographic content;
- Kidnapping and abduction;
- Death and dying;
- Pregnancy and childbirth;
- Miscarriages;
- Abortion;
- Blood;
- Mental illness;
- Ableism;
- Racism and racial slurs;
- Sexism and misogyny;
- Classism;
- Torture;
- Islamophobia and anti-Semitism;
- Hateful language directed at religious groups;
- Transphobia and transmisogyny; and
- Homophobia⁴¹.

In addition to written content-related trigger warnings being provided at point of purchase, it can be helpful to have patron services staff trained to know when different kinds of triggering content may occur during a screening should a patron ask for further details (e.g. “there is a depiction of self-harm about 45

⁴¹ The Film and TV Charity. *Trigger warning guidance and sample wording*. 2024. <https://wholepicturetoolkit.org.uk/in-production/work-well-with-vulnerable-contributors-and-sensitive-content/trigger-warning-guidance-and-sample-wording/#>.

minutes into the screening,”) so that individuals can make an informed decision about what portions of the screening they would like to be present for.

Format/Production Related

Format/production-related trigger warnings are not about the subject matter or topics covered in the film or piece of content. Instead, these warnings relate to the visual or auditory style of certain elements of the film that can have an impact on people with specific disabilities or conditions. For instance, photosensitive or visual triggers can provoke medical episodes or specific responses, such as seizures or sensory migraines. According to the Epilepsy Foundation, “for about 3% of people with epilepsy, exposure to flashing lights at certain intensities or to certain visual patterns can trigger seizures.”⁴² There are also format/production related triggers called phonophobia or sound hypersensitivity, where specific sounds or sound patterns or sequences trigger migraines.

Similar to content-related trigger warnings, format/production-related trigger warnings can help an audience make an informed decision about when to leave a screening or event based on the presence of certain visual or auditory elements. These warnings should be published alongside each film title and description. Similar to content-related trigger warnings, it is very helpful to have patron services staff trained to know when different kinds of format/production-related triggers may occur during a screening should a patron ask for further details (e.g. “there are rapid flashing lights about 20 minutes into the screening”) so that individuals can make an informed decision about what portions of the screening they would like to be present for or if they would rather opt for another film instead. Finally, staff should be prepared to assist individuals who leave a screening in

For about 3% of people with epilepsy, exposure to flashing lights at certain intensities or to certain visual patterns can trigger seizures.

⁴² Epilepsy Foundation. *Photosensitivity and Seizures*. <https://www.epilepsy.com/what-is-epilepsy/seizure-triggers/photosensitivity>.

the middle due to a format/production-related trigger and support them to access additional support and medical assistance as needed.

Ticketing accessibility

Patron services staff must consider how to create a purchasing journey for people with disabilities that does not introduce additional friction (i.e. making a purchase of accessible seating without having to go through additional steps). Is it easy to add a companion ticket to an order? Are companion tickets provided free of charge? Is it easy for folks who require accessible seating to sit with more than one friend/companion?

Visual or social stories

[A visual or social story](#) is a document that is accessed ahead of time by a stakeholder, including patrons, volunteers, artists or staff. It details how to access an event or experience, including getting to the venue, to your seat, the bathroom, how to engage with the event, such as etiquette rules, and any access tools available. It is often provided as a combination of photos and words, and can also include voice or videos. Visual or social stories allow neurodivergent individuals to decode a space and ease anxiety about all the hidden curriculum of an event.

“Hidden curriculum” is a term borrowed from the education sector, and means what is not taught but implicitly present in an institution. It is the unspoken rules, socialization and dynamics that are at play. For example, the hidden curriculum for an audience member at a festival is knowing that a good audience member arrives at least 15 minutes early, to be quiet during the film, to not open loud wrappers, and to not use your phone during the event. If these rules are not followed, others will be mad, will make faces and may even say things to you, people may not want to sit with you or talk to you, and you may even be asked to leave. Not knowing the hidden curriculum and being punished for it has adverse impacts on mental health and anxiety, particularly for neurodivergent individuals.

Visual or social stories also help newcomers who may not know rules of the event such as punctuality vs. soft start, or assigned seating vs. general

admission seating. This tool breaks down assumptions that some people may see as common sense, but others don't know, notice or understand.

Visual and social stories are also an excellent place to note where emergency exits are, as well as to provide emergency plans for those using mobility aids or those who may be unavailable to evacuate independently.

Visual and social stories can also be adapted for virtual events, and often take the form of a guide for how to log onto a new platform.

A visual or social story can also be adapted to provide neuroaffirming volunteer onboarding. In this context, a visual or social story may show volunteers where to meet and how to arrive at the meeting spot, or may show them how to access different parts of the venue or go through the sign-in process before the event is underway.

While visual or social stories are provided before an event, proactive neuroaffirming housekeeping measures on-site should also be undertaken by patron services staff, like reminding people where the bathrooms are, if drinks or food are allowed, and how long the film or event will be.

Looking for examples of a visual or social story? [The Segal Center in Montreal has an excellent, comprehensive visual story for their venue⁴³](#), and [Geordie Theatre in Montreal has created an excellent visual story for La Maison Theatre⁴⁴](#), while [The ASERT Collaborative has put together a general social story for moviegoing⁴⁵](#).



⁴³ The Segal Centre. *Visual Story for Visitors of the Segal Centre*. May 2024. <https://indd.adobe.com/view/18f3518a-7ccb-41da-a22d-1b1c1061e80e>

⁴⁴ Geordie Theatre. *Visual Story: La Maison Theatre*. September 2023. <https://geordie.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Visual-Story-La-Maison-Theatre.pdf>

⁴⁵ The ASERT Collaborative. *Attending a Movie Social Story*. February 2025. <https://paautism.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Attending-a-Movie-Social-Story.pdf>

PART 5:

Making a Plan, Checking it Twice: Multi-Year Accessibility Plan

Now that you've learned about key accessibility concepts, you've begun thinking strategically about accessibility at the organizational level, and you are familiar with the key access measures that increase accessibility at screen industry events, it's time to jump in to making *your* industry event more accessible.

This section lays out a road map to hosting an access-confident event. This roadmap assumes that you and your organization have only just begun to think about accessibility for the very first time, and will guide you all the way to a place where you and your staff are confident in accessibility knowledge, in the accessible services you will offer, in the disability representation at your event, and that you are prepared to share your knowledge and support others in their access journey.

We know that not everyone who consults this guide will be starting from the same place in their accessibility work. When you do the initial status check on your event's accessibility, you may find that you align with some of the things we suggest accomplishing in Year 3 in some fields but some of the things we suggest accomplishing in Year 1 in others. That's okay, and that's not a bad thing! Identify where your event has room to grow, and adjust your accessibility plan accordingly. The information that we share in this section can also be scaled up or down, depending on the size of your festival, your staff capacity, and the needs of your stakeholders.

In publishing this guide, the DSO has opted to design a guide that scales accessibility for all, rather than focusing on serving specific parts of the disability community at a time (i.e. improving your access for d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing patrons first, then improving access for blind, low-vision, and partially-sighted patrons next, then improving access for neurodivergent patrons next, etc.). There is merit to that model, but as the DSO serves the entire disability community, we believe it is best to begin thinking about accessibility holistically over trying to serve one portion of the disability community at a time.

Please keep in mind: **this is an accessibility guide, not an accessibility checklist.** Following all of our suggestions to the letter does not mean that your organization will never receive another access complaint or that your organization cannot deepen its accessibility practice further. There is no such thing as a perfectly accessible festival. A festival that is totally accessible for a d/Deaf person may be an access nightmare for a blind person, and vice versa. The nature of conflicting access needs paired with the constant evolution of accessibility best practices and technology that can enable access means that the goalposts for what is considered adequate access will continue to keep shifting. Don't let that scare you—as you build an access-confident team, you will be ready to respond to changes as they come.

This framework is multi-year. Why?

- Accessibility is constantly evolving, and your approach to accessibility is something that will need to be monitored. Adjustments to how you do accessibility work will need to be made both on the fly during your event and year-over-year, as technology that enables accessibility and accessibility best practices alike will continue to evolve.
- Accessibility takes time and planning, and there is a lot of learning involved in building competency in this field. Mistakes will happen. It can be difficult and overwhelming to add several new and different access measures at once. Give yourself the time to be thorough and thoughtful in your rollout.

- This approach allows you to build more capacity year over year. **This plan is cumulative.**
- It takes time to build community trust within the disability community. If someone has never felt welcome in your space before, it will likely take multiple offerings of an access measure, as well as good feedback from others in their community before they feel comfortable using it.
- This long-tail approach allows you to build institutional knowledge of accessibility that is shared between staff members, so that you are confident that if one specific staff member is no longer with the organization, your accessibility work can continue. It also allows for evaluative and iterative feedback to be incorporated, allowing all stakeholders to give feedback year after year as they assess both your changes and your approach to accessibility overall. It also allows you to progressively modify your organizational culture, shifting everything from your programming to your procedures to be more accessible.

Structure

For ease of your own planning, each year is broken into 4 categories:

Organizational, or your internal process, practices, planning, and preparation. This includes but is not limited to: your volunteer and staff makeup, personnel training, budgeting, goal setting, and planning.

Communications, or how you get the word out about your festival's programming and access offerings, and how stakeholders (patrons, artists, guests) generally learn about what's going on with your organization and event. This includes but is not limited to: your website, social media, online or printed materials, and/or correspondences.

Access to Events, Offerings and Programming, or how patrons, guests, and artists interact with your event(s)/offerings when they have decided to attend your event. This includes but is not limited to: physical access to spaces, access to programming via captioning or interpreting, and support for engaging with possibly difficult or triggering materials.

Representation, or how included and/or visible disability is in your event(s)/offerings. This includes but is not limited to: programming, guest and/or speaker selection, and delegations.

It is important to note certain categories will have more or less included depending on the year of the plan. For example, in Year 1, there will be more planning and data collection, which fall into **Organization**, as well as the integration of low-cost or no-cost access measures, which often appear under **Communications**. In following years, once you have better identified where your organization has gaps in its accessibility practice, you can start to focus more on diversifying **Representation** and planning for more **Access to Events, Offerings and Programming** at your screenings and events.



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Building Your Plan

Year 1 – Start Where You Are and Incorporate Easy, Low-Cost/No-Cost Changes

Year 1 building your accessibility plan will focus on figuring out where you're at, setting goals, and implementing free access features that help everybody, whether they are disabled or not ([refer back to why universal design is important for a reminder!](#)).

A large part of your first year of accessibility planning will revolve around seeing where your organization and event(s) are at now, accessibility-wise, creating mechanisms to receive feedback, and setting goals that can move you toward where you'd like to be. This phase is about recognizing your current strengths, identifying where there's room for growth, and building a willingness to learn, all of which are critical to realistic goal-setting and sustained enthusiasm for this work.

It's never a bad time to start planning for accessibility, so please don't feel you need to wait for a specific moment, such as a new strategic plan, responding to a major access complaint, or hiring a particular individual to lead the charge. You don't even have to wait until your next budgeting or festival cycle, as many of the access measures we suggest implementing in year 1 are easy, quick, and low-cost or no-cost to implement.

It is important to keep in mind regionality in your planning, or the fact that different regions may have more or less access to certain access measures (for instance, an industry event that takes place in Corner Brook may have access to fewer ASL interpreters than an industry event that takes place in Toronto). It is important to make sure your goals are feasible, but at the same time, your organization's location should not be used as an excuse to not engage in accessibility work. No matter where your festival or event is, never assume a resource will be entirely unavailable or out of reach. A lot of planning for accessibility is engaging in research and problem solving: for instance, an

industry event without access to in-person ASL interpreters can explore having their event live-streamed and interpreted virtually. Every festival, no matter its scale or location, can take steps to be more accessible.

Organizational

1. **Conduct a self-assessment of your event's accessibility.**

Before setting goals, it is important to know the baseline that your festival is starting from. Even if you believe that your festival is starting from a place of no accessibility whatsoever, this is important to do, as you may find that certain things you are already doing are useful for accessibility.

2. **Set goals.**

What are a few key things you would like to achieve in the short- to medium-term (i.e. the length of one strategic plan)? What does a “fully accessible” version of your event look like in the long term (keeping in mind that there is no such thing as a fully accessible event, as per the ongoing and ever-changing nature of disability)?

3. **Draft a calendarized plan to achieve these goals, using the DSO's resources to inform what is realistic.**

4. **Provide disability literacy training to your staff and volunteers.**

This should be in line with whatever is required by your provincial accessibility legislation, but should at minimum include basic disability language training (what to say and what not to say), as well as how to provide accessible customer service in the event context.

Communications

1. **Evaluate your website accessibility.**

Including whether or not there is an accessibility page on your website, whether there is accessibility information about the venue listed (including nearest accessible parking, drop off and pick up area, closest accessible public transit stops, number of accessible washroom facilities, number of steps (if applicable), etc).

2. **Evaluate your purchase journey from an accessibility standpoint.**

Including whether the ticket purchasing process is accessible start to finish without staff member intervention (e.g. can someone buy an accessible ticket without calling your box office?), whether access

information about screenings is easy to find, whether there is a clear person patrons and artists can contact with accessibility questions, and whether you provide free companion tickets.

3. Begin making a commitment to social media accessibility.

Make the following free changes to all your posts moving forward: Use Camel Case on all hashtags, limit use of emojis to respect those who use screenreaders, and turn on automatically-generated captions for any video format posts.

4. Where possible, provide accessible marketing materials.

Provide printed versions of materials (even just a handful) at your venue(s). Additionally, create an accessible marketing document that shares how to get to and from the venue in an accessible manner (including via public transportation). [Resources for creating more accessible designed materials are available in Appendix C.](#)

5. Begin building relationships with local disability organizations.

Reach out to local disability organizations to let them know about the access measures you provide, as well as what you don't provide. Beginning these relationships now will help you with audience development efforts later. Many disabled people are wary of going to new places because they don't want to have a bad experience. Knowing that a space or event is not accessible or not fully accessible is just as important as knowing that it is accessible. For example, the disappointment of finding out ahead of time that there is no wheelchair accessible washroom is far less than showing up, needing to use a bathroom, finding out there isn't one, and having to scramble to find one.

6. Begin collecting baseline accessibility data.

Start baseline data collection (e.g. through surveys, industry registration forms, at point of purchase for tickets) to track the growth of patrons and artists with accessibility at your event. Questions about accessibility should include (but are not limited to): Were your access needs met at the event(s) you attended? What barriers did you encounter? How easy was it to find access information? How could we improve the accessibility of our future events and offerings?

Access to Events, Offerings and Programming

1. **Provide accessible furniture (seating, tables, aisles).**
Mark reserved seats in a variety of locations, as people with different access needs require reserved seating in different locations. Ensure you include caretaker/companion/support worker seating as well. Provide wide aisles and/or multiple aisles to accommodate multiple mobility devices. For events with tables, include low/short options for tables, places to sit, seats with and without armrests and furniture that is easily movable.
2. **Provide [accessible signage](#).**
Create a simple map (high-contrast, easy to understand, and in a size easily viewed by someone with low vision) of the venue with key locations, and ensure that this is available on-site and on your website. Make sure rooms and areas are clearly labeled both on the map and on-site.
3. **Create a [Lobby pass system](#).**
Create a system where ticket holders can have a place to sit and early admission when the house opens if standing/waiting in line is a barrier.
4. **Standardize providing [visual descriptions](#) as part of all introductions (including self-descriptions of speakers at panels and presentations).**
5. **If you have deadcards/a slideshow running before your screening or event, include a slide about all access measures that are available to guests.**
6. **Include a link to the accessibility page on your website and who to talk to on the ground if they have more questions.**
It is important to make this slide stand out, be high contrast, and use simple design.
7. **Anticipate access.**
If you are in a multi-screen/multi-room venue, put any screenings that you anticipate will bring out a crowd with access needs into the spaces with the most built-in accessibility.

Representation

1. **Think about disability representation in your programming.**
Does your event program include any films that have disabled characters or people on screen? Does your program include disabled

filmmakers or crew members? Investigate the perspective of your programming: if you do have a story about a disabled character, does it fall into damaging tropes or feature negative stereotypes? Was it made with the involvement of the disability community? Begin by being mindful of these things and letting them inform your programming decisions.

2. **During the programming process, if you are trying to choose between two equally good films and one is captioned or has described video available and the other does not, opt for the captioned/DV film.**
3. *If filmmakers are providing these access measures, they can be passed along to your audience at no cost to your festival.*
4. **Be aware of whether your panels or events mention disability at all, and include speakers with disabilities.**

Be aware of these statistics so that you can improve on them for future years. Disabled people make up over 27% of the Canadian population; it is important that disabled people are regularly included as speakers and guests.



Photo use courtesy of TIFF.

Year 2 – Start Small and Diversify

In year 2 of your accessibility plan, accessibility becomes a foundational part of your planning process. You’ve got goals to work towards and it’s time to start adding accessibility offerings.

Year 1 evaluated your event’s current accessibility, identified your baseline, and saw you implementing a pilot program for lobby passes, leverage more accessible wayfinding signage, and begin outreach and connections into your disability community. Year 2 of your access plan sees more planning and intention being put into accessibility. You will begin to include lines in your budget that directly support accessibility, implement a number of disability-specific access measures, and ensure that disability becomes visible in your programming.

Depending on when you put together your multi-year access plan, Year 2 may be the first year where you have a complete fiscal year or festival cycle to work with. As such, access measures that require more time and/or planning can start to be integrated, and easy to fix access shortcomings identified in year 1 can be addressed.

Organizational

- 1. Begin budgeting for accessibility.**

If you budget to include accessibility from the beginning, it will end up planned for in the organizing of your event. Further, access-related costs are often cheaper if they are planned for in advance. This can look like applying for additional funding related to accessibility, or reallocating funds within your existing budget.

- 2. Establish an [accessibility advisory committee](#) or engage in [consulting from a local disability organization](#).**

The “nothing about us without us” maxim of the disability community applies here. While the DSO can provide general accessibility best practices, what is best for your local community may vary. It is in your best interest to collect feedback from those with lived experience of your community and festival.

3. **Where possible, collect staff and volunteer demographic information about disability.**

Over 27% of the Canadian population has a disability, and your staff and volunteer makeup should reflect that. If you find disability is underrepresented on your team, you can enact different outreach and recruitment techniques for staff and volunteers going forward.

4. **Create and include a diversity statement on all job postings encouraging applicants with disabilities to apply.**
5. **Include information about any access measures your organization can regularly provide in staff and volunteer training.**

Communications

1. **Provide your marketing and communications materials in a variety of formats.**

The main accessible formats include: large print, plain language (Easy Read), audio format, and sign language interpreted. Pick one or two. Large print and audio format are often the easiest to create, as you are simply adapting existing materials.

2. **Engage a consultant to conduct an accessibility audit of your website.**

Someone who specializes in web accessibility will tell you how you can make your website more accessible for a variety of different access needs, such as being screenreader friendly or having multiple viewing options (i.e. high contrast, colour blind-friendly, etc.).

3. **Build in longer lead times on any marketing and communications. Often, disabled people cannot just decide to go to an event and show up same-day.**

Depending on the individual's access needs, arrangements must be put in place, transportation or support may need to be booked days or weeks in advance, and their personal energy must be budgeted.

4. **Extend timelines for any application-based programming, industry events, or support programs.**

This includes things like delegation opportunities, labs and incubators, fellowships, jobs, curated pitching opportunities, etc—anything that requires an application to participate in. Depending on a person's access needs, they may need longer to compile their application,

support in writing their application, or assistance in filling out their application. Additionally, you should be prepared to field questions about the application process, to support people in the completion of their application, or be prepared to refer them to individuals/organizations that can support them. There should be a clear contact to reach out to about any access questions regarding the application.

5. Share with the public that you are embarking on this work.

This is key in creating accountability, raising the profile of your efforts, drumming up support for it, and also being transparent that you are in a learning phase. It also says to the disability community that you are committing to this!

6. Create a [visual or social story](#) for your venue(s)/the experience of attending your festival.

7. Leverage your [accessibility advisory committee](#) to see how you can reach more folks in the disability community and engage in more meaningful ways.

8. Review Year 1 feedback and data to make more informed choices, continue collecting feedback and data.

Also note what information you'd still like to find out. You can update or add questions to your feedback questionnaires to improve your data collection.

Access to Events, Offerings and Programming

1. Host a [relaxed screening](#).

2. Host at least one [captioned screening](#).

Open captioning is ideal as it serves not only the d/Deaf community, but also people whose first language is not English, people who are learning to read, and anyone who benefits from having text as well as audio. Closed captioning is a fine backup option, but has many downsides, including unreliable technology in the screening context, potential technology rental fees, and split attention between the captions (which are often cupholder-mounted devices) and the screen.

3. For passholders, introduce a way of indicating disability/additional needs.

It should be up to the passholder whether they want this indication and it does not have to be as obvious as a stand wheelchair icon. You may

choose to use a different colour lanyard, put a unique sticker or pin on their pass, or otherwise. This does not mean they will be treated any differently but it helps staff and volunteers to better anticipate their needs, should they come up.

4. **If your venue has any areas that are inaccessible because of a small number of steps (including stages), rent ramps.**

This could be a single step into the venue from street level, access to a raised platform or stage for guests or moderators, steps up to a concessions area, etc.

5. **Begin offering some [hybrid options](#).**

Include industry sessions, Q&As, and events, as well as films themselves.

6. **Increase/improve [wayfinding signage](#).**

Signage should be made more detailed to include things like washrooms, any access features of a space, stairs, elevators, escalators, seating areas, quiet areas (if applicable), entrances/exits, water refill stations, or any other important landmarks. Have signage in multiple areas, at heights easily viewed by people of short stature or using a wheelchair.

7. **Expand the [lobby pass system](#).**

If you piloted in one venue last year, offer it in multiple venues. Revisit your system. What worked? What didn't? Consider these questions from both the patron and staff/volunteer perspectives.



BANFF LANYARD SYSTEM

When attendees at BANFF World Media Festival visit the registration desk to pick up their industry pass, they are given the option to use a special lanyard that identifies the attendee as disabled or having additional access needs. The lanyard is a different colour from the standard lanyard, but is otherwise not marked in any special way (protecting attendees' privacy for those who do not want to disclose their disability status). Staff know the meanings of these different-coloured lanyards and are prepared to offer assistance should it be requested. This idea is based on the [Hidden Disabilities Sunflower](#)⁴⁶ network that is being adopted in public institutions worldwide.

⁴⁶ Hidden Disabilities. <https://hdsunflower.com/ca/>

Representation

1. Diversify your offerings.

Ensure that disability is a part of your programming either visibly, narratively, or within the production team. Include disabled event organizers, guests, speakers, and/or moderators.

2. Implement a basic tagging system for films and events.

This is useful for internal tracking but also external patron experience as they search through your selections. If you already have a tagging system, create disability-specific tags (sample tags include: disability, d/Deaf, disabled filmmaker, chronic illness, neurodiversity, mental health, diversity, disability representation).

3. Develop strategies to increase representation for future editions.

The plans you make this year will be piloted in year 3. It is important to do the planning in advance of implementation, as it could affect your budget. Strategies can include various modes of incentivization, for example: discounted submission fees for disabled filmmakers; higher screening or artist fees for selected films that come with captions and/or described video, increased promotion of disability-centric films, additional screening slots or a high profile/coveted slot for films with a disabled filmmaker (two screenings instead of one, the Friday night slot), subsidized or increased subsidies for disabled filmmaker/actor travel (hotel covered, extra hotel night, bonus stipend, etc.), quotas for disability representation within the overall programme.



Year 3 – Focus on the Details and Cover More Ground

Year 3 of your accessibility plan will look back on years 1 and 2, taking those learnings to help inform your decisions and direction.

Now that you’ve got some experience planning and implementing access measures into your events and programming, you will make more conscious choices about where to focus more of your resources, you will increase the overall accessibility offerings, and you will make a targeted effort to address any access shortcomings and outreach to disability communities that are still not present in your audience.

Year 3 is for refining your practices and integrating the disability community in a more fulsome way into your processes. As a reminder, our suggested model of scaling accessibility at your festival favours offering a wide range of access measures to reach folks with as many different access needs as possible, rather than catering specifically to the needs of a single part of the disability community. As such, focusing on building strong foundations and continuing to grow your offerings little by little but in a thoughtful and well-executed manner is key in year 3.

Organizational

1. **Expand the accessibility line in your budget so that you can offer more access measures and/or expand your current offerings.**
2. **Bring on a staff member to work specifically on accessibility. Coordinating access is a big job, and this work is cross-departmental.**

Having someone who is tracking this work across all levels of your organization can be very useful for keeping things on track, assisting where needed, troubleshooting, overseeing the training of staff and volunteers, and offering strategic guidance.

3. **Build on existing accessibility training to go deeper, and begin to reference learnings from the past two years in your accessibility training.**

4. **Improve accessibility of volunteer and staff application processes.**
5. *Offer assistance in filling out applications. Provide clear timelines of when applicants can expect communication around next steps and, where appropriate, transparency about the recruitment process. For any interviews, provide questions in advance.*
6. **Share status updates on accessibility initiatives and additions with staff and volunteers.**
This can happen on an ongoing basis and/or at dedicated times, such as training sessions or lunch and learns.

Communications

1. **Focus on the accessibility of all your social media platforms.**
This can be a lot of work depending on how often you post, so either focus your efforts to include a few access measures across all posts, or include all access measures for a particular kind of post (such as all videos or all posts about hybrid events or all events with CC/DV, etc.). This goes beyond the low-cost and no-cost measures from Year 1. Common social media access measures include: alt-text on images, image descriptions in captions, and quality-controlled captions on videos.
2. **Target the disability community with specific messaging and advertising.**
You will have started to develop a track record with your accessibility efforts and you can point to your continued commitment to accessibility as to why you are a reliable event to attend. Create a few videos to live on your website and social media that feature ASL introductions and descriptions of your festival, events, venues, and/or personnel. Given the nature of the content of these videos, some will be evergreen (e.g. “About us”), whereas others will need to be updated each year (“Welcome to this year’s edition of our event”). If this is your first time creating this type of video or if you have limited funds to allocate towards these each year, begin with evergreen content, like organization and venue information.

Access to Events, Offerings and Programming



REELWORLD

At the 2025 edition of Reelworld, all 10 feature films screened as part of the film festival were offered with closed captions. To make this possible, Reelworld increased artist fees to offset the cost of getting the captions made. Sharing the responsibility of getting captions made with filmmakers ensures that they have creative oversight in the process. Open captions can be stylized in many different ways, so it's important for artists to have a say in their appearance to make sure they match aesthetically and are legible throughout the film!

1. **Increase captioning offerings.**

Where applicable, begin creating captions yourself. To echo what was mentioned in Year 2, open captions are preferred. Be intentional about which films you choose to create captions for. Factors that could impact your choices include subject matter, country of origin, potential future screening locations of the film, alumni filmmaker, anticipated audience, impact it will have on the future success and screen-ability of the film, etc. We recommend developing a relationship with a captioning vendor. You may be able to get discounts for commissioning multiple sets of captions on a recurring basis or by referring filmmakers to them. Sponsorship opportunities from the vendor may also be possible by offering in-kind services for promotion at your festival. Always communicate with the filmmaker during this process, as they may have opinions about caption design. Ensure the caption file is given to the filmmaker so they can use it for future screenings.

2. **Pilot [described video offerings](#).**

Now that you have some experience with captioning, you can take on a new access measure: described video. Similar to the gradual introduction of captioning, you will scale your inclusion of DV over the coming years. The same applies as the above point about establishing a relationship with a trusted DV provider.

3. Begin to hire interpreters for your events, intros, and Q&A's.

Depending on how many interpreters your budget will allow, decide how to best place an interpreter into your event schedule. A good place to start is placing them at any screening where the film or talk has d/Deaf subject matter, or, if that doesn't apply, in the largest/most populated screenings.

4. Begin to hire [sighted guides](#).

This person will be available to help any blind or low-vision patrons or artists access the space, whether that is helping with the transfer out of their transportation, accompanying them to their seat, or assisting them at the box office. This can fall under the responsibilities of a dedicated access staff member or volunteer but keep in mind, this person will be providing personal on-site support and cannot be responsible for anything else at the same time.

5. Create a [quiet/low sensory space](#).

This space should include comfortable places to sit, it should be quiet, and you can choose to include sensory items like fidget toys, weighted blankets, etc.

6. Continue to offer hybrid options.

Following your research from last year, make a few films and events available online.

7. If your venue or event offers concessions/food options, include various dietary options.

This is easily done where there is a registration process, such as for industry events, as you will have a mechanism for finding out what dietary needs are present in the room, but when it is a public event or you are not collecting that information, you should cover your bases anyway. This goes beyond just having a vegetarian option to including options that are vegan, gluten free, easy to hold/eat, and do not include common allergens. Food options available at events (e.g. cocktail receptions with passed appetizers) should also be properly labelled with allergen information.

8. If your venue does not already have a designated pick up and drop off area, create one.

Depending on your location, this may involve simply blocking off an area in the parking lot or securing permits from the city to keep an area of the street clear.

9. **Introduce a pay-what-you-wish or other discounted ticketing scheme.**

Keeping in mind that disabled people statistically have a higher cost of living and lower average income, lowering a financial barrier is a big help to getting people from the community into your events. This can be done with a sliding scale model, pay-what-you-wish model, or discounted tickets for people who identify as having a disability. This scheme may also benefit other communities who face a range of financial barriers. Note: The most effective discounted ticketing schemes do not require individuals to “prove” their disability status.

Representation

1. **Allocate a specific number or percentage of program slots to disabled filmmakers or filmmakers with disabled performers or storylines.**
2. **Actively include discussion around disability-related issues on any panels or conversation-style events, even when the film or topic does not seem to be about disability on the surface.**

Disability can and should be a part of every discussion.

3. **Further develop tagging system to include [content or sensitivity warnings](#).**

Sample tags can include ableism, audism, photosensitivity, rapid movement, rapid cutting, loud noises.



Year 4 – Have Multiple Access Needs Met at Multiple Times

As you continue to scale your access offerings, in year 4 of your Access Plan, guests with accessibility needs should have the ability to pick and choose between events.

Year 4 of your accessibility plan will see continued increased scaling of your accessibility offerings and ensuring that accessibility is happening in multiple places at any given time. That is, someone who relies on an ASL interpreter will have a choice between multiple programming options. As you have added access measures to your offerings, it's likely they have been spread out over the course of your programming. Having enough accessibility measures in place to offer concurrent accessible programming is a major milestone and something to be very proud of! Celebrate these wins and reflect on how far you've come.

In the spirit of reflection, as you're firmly in the back half of your 5-year accessibility strategy, you should start thinking about what you want to bring into the next iteration of your multi-year accessibility plan. What has been easier or harder to implement than you expected? How has your festival or organization's relationship with the disability community changed? How can you keep the positive momentum going?

Organizational

1. **Continue to grow the accessibility budget relative to the growth of accessibility measures and programs.**
2. **Create a specialist access volunteer position for the run of your event.**

While you should already have a paid staff member working on the accessibility portfolio, training dedicated accessibility volunteers means that your team will be more easily able to respond to accessibility questions and concerns, especially if there are multiple problems to solve at the same time.



VIFF ACCESSIBILITY VOLUNTEER POSITION

If you attended the Vancouver International Film Festival in 2025, you may have noticed some special volunteers. Wearing a name tag to identify their role, VIFF established an Accessibility Volunteer position devoted specifically to helping attendees with disabilities and general event accessibility. In addition to regular volunteer training, this team attended specialized training sessions to level up their access knowledge. They were spread out across many of the festival's venues and were there to ensure folks requiring accommodations received any help that they needed.

Communications

1. **Implement proposed changes from website accessibility audit.**
2. **Standardize access measures being offered across all social media platforms and posts.**

Access to Events, Offerings and Programming

1. **Put quotas or goalposts in place for the number of screenings and events with captions.**

This can be done in a variety of ways. Examples: all films in a particular program, all films from Canada, all films playing in a specific venue (ideally your largest capacity venue!), a specific percentage, all industry events taking place on a “main” stage etc.

2. **Grow described video offerings.**

Similar to how you will have scaled your captioned options, so too should you scale your DV offerings, offering an increased amount of DV options each year. It is currently less common for a film to be submitted with or already have DV, so the expansion of your DV offerings may rely on you commissioning DV tracks.

3. **Continue to expand hybrid options, including increasing the access measures that are offered online (i.e. DV and captioning available online as well).**
4. **Offer recordings of live events.**
5. **Explore [synchronous options](#) for industry programming and live events.**

6. Develop a delegation program or subsidized industry access scheme.

It is important to have people with disabilities in industry spaces. Festivals and industry gatherings are key spaces for inclusion as they are where decisions are made, relationships are built, and ideas are shared. Visibility in these spaces is key, and the cycle of exclusion (there are no disabled people in the space > their perspectives are not prioritized > they continue to be left out) needs to be broken. Providing targeted and subsidized opportunities to participate in these spaces is key. In order of importance, this would be much earlier in an organizational access plan. However, it is no good to invite disabled people into a space that they a) cannot access and b) cannot actively participate in, so it is important that the rollout of this opportunity comes once you are familiar with accommodating different needs.

7. Increase the proportion of your events with sign language interpretation offered.

8. Expand your discounted ticket scheme.

Here are a few ways how: Offer this opportunity to everyone, not just people with disabilities; if you did time/date/site-specific offerings last year, expand to include more or all screenings; allocate a certain number of free tickets to be shared with the community via partnerships with organizations.

Representation

1. Work towards putting in place a quota for disability inclusion across all film and event programming.

2. Highlight disability programming through scheduling it in popular slots, bringing in filmmakers/talent for conversations or panels, feature disability content in communications campaigns, or develop a designated disability programme.

3. If you haven't already, include disabled moderators in your film presentations and industry programming.

A diverse stage party is important, but it's also important to see disabled presenters or leading the conversation as a figure of authority.

Year 5 – Have it All!

Accessibility is part of the fabric of your organization. People see themselves in power, have decision-making roles, and are dynamically represented in programming of all kinds.

You've reached year 5 of your accessibility plan, and you are now confident in your knowledge of accessibility, your problem solving abilities, and in what your festival has to offer to the disability community. You should continue scaling your accessibility offerings, and accessibility should be integrated into your organization's structure. Disabled people should see themselves in all decisions your organization makes, including staffing, planning, and curation.

Keep in mind, you may not have achieved all the goals you set out to when you created your plan in Year 1. This does not mean you've failed, only that those goals should be explored in future editions of your accessibility plan. We've said it before and we'll say it again: accessibility is a journey, not a destination! Completing your first 5-year accessibility plan is just the beginning of a larger move towards a more accessible event and society. You've learned a lot and you're ready for the next chapter in your accessibility journey. Congratulations!

Organizational

1. **Embark on the creation of your organization's next access plan.**

How can you build on what you have accomplished? What areas would you like to invest further attention and resources into? What goals did you fall short on and why? How can goals that you did not accomplish be integrated into your next edition?

2. **Look for trends in the data and feedback you have collected over the years.**

Ask questions about why certain patterns emerge. Are there things consistently being commented on (for better or worse)? What are the patterns of uptake and usage of certain access measures or programs? What do you still not know about the audience/artist/guest experience?

3. **Engage in consultations with a diverse sample of people from across the disability community to let their wants and needs inform your next plan and set of goals.**
4. **Become a resource to others.**
This includes sharing the information you've collected through trial and error with others, sharing your solutions to common problems, and sharing resources, funding opportunities, and community partnership opportunities.
5. **Encourage other organizations to become more accessible.**
6. **Diversify your sources of funding for access measures.**
Depending on one funder or set of funders for accessibility can mean that your access measures are tied to someone else's budget. Wherever possible, try to include a budget line for accessibility across all of your funding asks.

Communications

1. **Publish a report to the public about the work you've put into accessibility.**
This is both an accountability document and a resume of the work you have done. It can be referenced in future funding applications and partnership proposals. This should be a point of pride for your organization to pat yourselves on the back for the work you've done and a launching point for your next plan.

Access to Events, Offerings and Programming

1. **Continue scaling caption and DV offerings in line with your established quotas and goalposts. As you reach your quotas, you should adjust them upwards.**
2. **When soliciting pre-show assets that are created external to your organization (trailers, sponsor messages, ads, etc.), request that they be captioned and/or described by the provider.**
3. **Be selective about venues/spaces - if they are not accessible or cannot accommodate various needs, physical, tech or otherwise, find a different space to use!**
If you are tied to a venue, ensure ramps and/or assistance is available

at every potential barrier space (steps, non-automatic doors, raised ticket counters, etc.).

4. **Offer [sensory kits](#) at your venues.**

These can include single use items or items you would like returned after a screening. Sample items include fidget toys, ear plugs, over-ear noise cancelling headphones, cushions, small weighted bean bags, and visors or sunglasses.

5. **Continue to increase hybrid options to expand remote participation.**

Representation

Ideally by this point, disability representation is built into your policies, your goal-setting, and your programming. Ideally, the disability community can see some aspect of disability representation within the content you select and the panels and conversations you program, and your festival showcases a variety of disability perspectives that make audiences question ableist notions of what is “good art.”



What Next? Year 6 and Beyond – Keep Growing, Keep Current, and Keep Checking In

Accessibility work never ends, and a perfectly accessible event does not exist, so it is important that you keep working towards accessibility and responding to existing and emerging community needs.

In Year 6 and beyond, you should continue scaling your accessibility efforts, keep current on innovations in accessibility offerings and schools of thought within the broader disability arts movement, and ensure that your organization and events model what an inclusive space can look like. Your long-term plan should strive for having accessibility integrated into every facet of your organization, communications, event planning, and programming. You should be working towards having access measures at 100% of your programming and events and have accessibility be such a core part of your organization's DNA that it's not even a consideration, it is a given.

Ongoing scaling of access measures

A film festival that takes place in an accessible utopia would have captions, DV, and interpreters available at every single screening and event, and welcome an engaged, caring, and diverse group of attendees and guests. This will take longer than 6 years to accomplish, but if you take it one year at a time, you can move in the right direction. This should always be the ultimate goal.

Ongoing accessibility planning

The only way to have access is to plan for it, and this applies to every aspect of accessibility. You will not have a staff where disability is part of diversity if you do not create an environment where disabled employees can have their needs met and their perspectives appreciated. You will not have a diverse audience if you do not continue to offer a variety of access measures. You will not be considered a welcoming environment if disabled people can't see themselves in your personnel, in your event design, and in your programming.

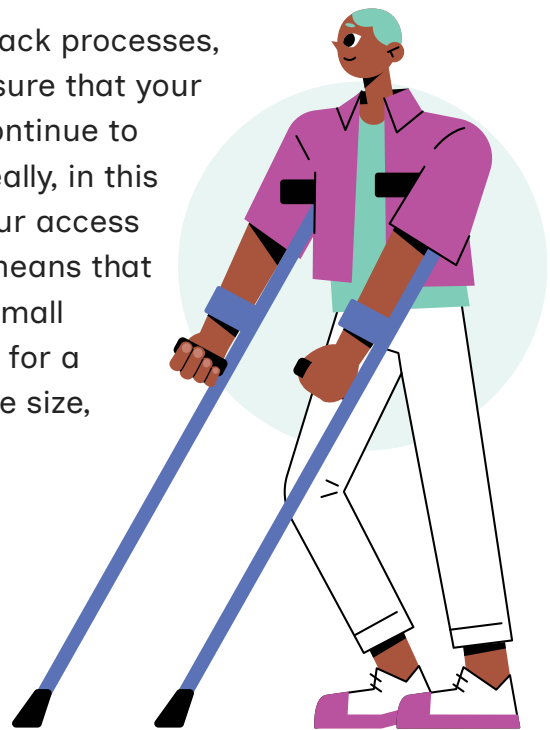
Keeping the community involved requires constant planning, commitment, action, and engagement.

Societal attitudes towards disability as well as perspectives on inclusion within the disability community itself change on a near-constant basis, and it is important to keep on top of these changes so that you can reflect them in your planning and programming. What was celebrated as inclusion 10 years ago is no longer on the cutting edge because the bar has subsequently been raised. This is why it is important to constantly assess and reassess how you incorporate disability inclusion in all aspects of your festival.

Furthermore, keep on top of technological innovations. Accessible technology is rapidly evolving and that often looks like access measures becoming easier and/or less expensive to integrate. At the time of this writing, many devices and tools that are used to help folks with disabilities at festivals and screenings, such as auto-captioning of live events, DV headsets, or individual closed captioning devices are very unreliable. However, the advancement of technologies in other fields across even the past 2-3 years have seen it become significantly easier to caption videos quickly, create alt-text, and source accessibility service providers.

Ongoing feedback

Make sure to continue to evaluate your feedback processes, and continue to bring in new voices to make sure that your initiatives don't become stale, and that you continue to best serve your audience of stakeholders. Ideally, in this work, the amount of people who are using your access measures will increase year-over-year. This means that what could have worked well for a relatively small group of people in 2026 may not work as well for a larger group of people (or a group of the same size, but who have different needs) in 2030.



PART 6:

Conclusion: A Way Forward

All-Access Pass: A Roadmap for Festival & Screen Industry Event Accessibility is the culmination of the SFAP, a multi-year initiative designed to establish accessibility standards for Canadian screen industry festivals and events, created thanks to the generous support of Telefilm. However, this document is a starting point to the work and not the end-goal. As festival and event organizers across Canada undertake or continue the vital work of embedding accessibility best practices into their work and into all aspects of their events, leaning into the action-oriented nature of this guide's title is vitally important.

Accessibility is not static, nor is there a point that an organization can reach that denotes that the work is complete. Accessibility must be treated as alive, a continuous practice, and work that is responsive to the needs of audiences, artists, and disabled community members everywhere. As evolutions in technology, communications, and physical spaces continue to grow, so too must our understanding of what it means to include and innovate as opposed to exclude and excuse. Change in the pursuit of legislative compliance is a thing of the past.

The question now becomes: where do we go from here? The DSO proposes a few ideas for your consideration:

Review and Reflect: Review and reflect on the concepts, ideas and principles outlined in this guide. Give serious consideration to how to pursue the multi-year accessibility plan in your own organization. There is something meaningful in this guide for every organization and festival, regardless of size, scope and budget, so get to the work of bringing these commitments to life!

All About the Audit: Undertake process, policy, systems and space audits of your festivals and events to ensure that they are accessible and inclusive.

Looking at the Lifecycle: Map out the employee, audience and filmmaker lifecycles to understand the barriers facing disabled stakeholders in each area.

Starting with Strategy: Develop accessibility strategies to guide your efforts across all dimensions of your programming, both internal and external.

Let's Keep Learning: Develop accessibility and disability inclusion learning and development programming for your year-round team members, board members, festival staff, volunteers, funders, sponsors and partners.

Creating Community: Build roundtables including disabled community members and accessibility experts to ensure that disabled perspectives, expertise, and lived experience inform every aspect of festival and event design and implementation.

Sharing the Story: Share stories of accessibility innovation, success, engagement and change to drive systemic reforms across the screen sector and to inspire other festivals to follow suit and develop responsive measures that drive change in their own communities.

Cultivating Collaboration: Festivals should work together through the creation of collaborative networks and the organization of regular meetings to share resources, best practices, ideas, and innovative approaches. They should work together to ensure that accessibility and disability inclusion are animating approaches across the screen sector. We cannot gatekeep the measures that work. Systemic change happens through collaboration and collective action.

If your organization adopts the SFAP multi-year accessibility framework, we invite you to get in touch with the DSO to share your successes, discuss your challenges, and have the DSO amplify your work with the community.

The DSO remains committed to this work and to the realization of accessibility best practices across the Canadian screen sector including all screen industry festivals and events. To bring these ideas to life, we will continue to work with our partners and funders to create frameworks, toolkits, guides and approaches that bring accessibility and disability inclusion to life.

To that end, we encourage festival organizers and filmmakers alike to refer not only to this guide as they build their accessibility practice, but also to [Reframing Access: A Best Practices Guide on Disability Inclusion in Canada's Screen Industry](#), our best practices guide on accessibility in production, which offers practical, step-by-step guidance on building accessibility into every stage of a production workflow. *Reframing Access* can provide filmmakers with the knowledge that they need to make their content more accessible ahead of submitting their work for a festival or event.

The DSO also hosts the [Industry Resource Hub](#), a searchable online database of accessibility and disability-related resources. Whether you're looking for venues with accessibility features (either to host a screening or to shoot a project in production), service providers (like sign language interpreters, CART captioners, audio describers, and accessibility consultants), or further resource guides collected from the global disability arts movement, the Hub brings everything together in one place. Users can filter listings by region, disability category, industry role, service type, language, and more, making it easier than ever to find the resources you need to achieve your multi-year accessibility goals from the start.

This guide and the DSO's associated resources are just the beginning, and our hope is that the SFAP multi-year framework for scaling accessibility will be adapted beyond festivals into the broader screen ecosystem and will also impact the design and delivery of conferences, markets, awards shows, pitch forums and more.

In an industry fuelled by artists and creatives imagining a bold, inclusive, equitable and accessible world through their stories and projects, it is essential that festivals and all types of screen industry events bring that spirit of creativity and innovation to accessibility work.

Thank you & contributors

Thank you to our funder

Thank you to Telefilm for your generous multi-year support of this project.



Thank you.

We would like to thank the staff and board members of the Screen Festival Accessibility Program partner festivals at Vancouver International Film Festival, Banff World Media Festival, Reelworld Film Festival and Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival. Thank you for making a multi-year commitment to accessibility. We would also like to thank our Screen Festival Accessibility Program Advisory Committee, Hanna Banian, Jonathan Fournier, Michael Feehan, Michael Marlatt, and Sarah Von Gertzen whose diligent work helped shape this resource. Thank you as well to Vanessa Pfaff for her diligent review and contributions.

SUGGESTED CITATION

How to cite this guide: Disability Screen Office, Elspeth Arbow, Alethea Bakogeorge, Brooke Leifso, and Prasanna Ranganathan. *All-Access Pass: A Roadmap for Festival & Screen Industry Event Accessibility*. Disability Screen Office. 2026.



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APPENDIX A:

Being Flexible: Troubleshooting and Acting on Feedback

When you are striving to create a more accessible event, it can feel embarrassing to acknowledge the parts of your event that remain inaccessible. As important as it is to communicate all of the access measures that you have in place, it is equally as important to communicate when something is not accessible. Communication of inaccessibility can help people manage their own expectations, can prevent stakeholder disappointment, and can help avoid wasting people's time.

Communicating about inaccessibility when inaccessibility is known ahead of time

If something is not accessible and you know about it in advance, be upfront and transparent with your attendees. Perhaps one of your venues is a historic building and a reception is taking place in a space only accessible by stairs. Communicate this lack of accessibility by stating this fact anywhere that attendees will be getting information about the event (on the website, in the ticket purchasing journey, in any printed programs about the event, etc.). In addition to noting the current level of inaccessibility, note that you are striving to produce more accessible events in the future while being candid about your limitations.

Communicating about inaccessibility when inaccessibility occurs mid-event

No live event has ever gone exactly as planned. In a screen industry event setting, any number of details can change at a moment's notice, and these changes can present new challenges for disabled stakeholders. For instance, if you are meant to be screening a film with open captions and upon checking the film pre-screening, have found out the captions are not working, use a variety of methods (e-blast, on social media, posted notices in a variety of formats, volunteers stationed outside/inside the screening room) to notify ticket holders as soon as possible. It is also important to share this notification with your general audience, so any last minute attendees are not caught unaware.

On the ground, it's important to have a designated person that attendees can bring accessibility concerns to. Sometimes, that's a dedicated accessibility volunteer, sometimes, that's a dedicated accessibility staff member. This role is important because in many cases, organizers will not know something is not working or has become inaccessible until someone brings a concern forward. Ensure that this dedicated person is someone who is well-informed and well-trained on accessibility, and who will be able to rectify the issue and follow up with that stakeholder.

What to do when you receive complaints

When engaging in accessibility work, you will not receive uniformly positive feedback. There may be stakeholders in your community who are upset that the accessibility work is not moving quickly enough, that your event's access measures do not meet their particular needs, or who are upset because they have had a negative experience at your event (either presently or in the past). It is important to know how to respond to these individuals to maintain a strong relationship with them, as well as how to turn their feedback into action.

Using the HEARD framework in order to bear witness and respond to complaints

Remember that many disabled people encounter many barriers every day, and that the effect of consistently encountering barriers can be incredibly exhausting. It can also be incredibly emotionally taxing to feel that one has to educate everyone around them on what they need in order to have a more

accessible experience. Therefore, your staff and volunteers may encounter disabled people who are frustrated and/or angry when providing access feedback. Ensure that staff do not dismiss accessibility complaints on the basis of tone. Complaints and critiques will provide your organization with valuable information if your staff takes the time to parse out the suggestions being made behind the feelings.

In many cases, patrons who have accessibility complaints or feedback want to come away from their interaction with your staff or volunteer feeling as if their perspective has been appropriately acknowledged and that the organization will take appropriate action. Your organization may find it helpful to leverage the HEARD framework in order to ensure that outcome:

- **Hear:** Give the individual uninterrupted space to fully express their complaint and frustration.
- **Empathize:** Show genuine understanding of how the individual feels, not just what happened.
- **Apologize:** Offer a sincere apology that acknowledges the negative experience the individual had.
- **Resolve:** Deliver a clear, specific solution with realistic timelines and concrete next steps.
- **Diagnose:** Investigate the root cause of the issue internally so the same problem does not happen again.⁴⁷

It's important to note that all elements of the HEARD framework (particularly Resolve and Diagnose) do not need to be delivered at once, especially in scenarios that will require further staff input and brainstorming in order to arrive at an appropriate solution/resolution. In that case, your staff and volunteers should take the contact information of the stakeholder with the complaint and commit to a timeline for further follow-up.

In lieu of providing a concrete resolution, staff may want to provide reasoning instead as an explanation (not as an excuse): For example, having a networking event in the lobby in between screenings is to maximize the amount of people

⁴⁷ Adaptist Consulting. *HEARD Framework: A Structured Method to Handle Customer Complaints Professionally*. April 21, 2026. <https://adaptistconsulting.com/blog/heard-framework-is/>

who can attend; however, it does make the lobby crowded. What changes would they recommend that would make it easier for them to attend?

If that question is asked, the stakeholder in question may want to offer their own potential solutions. These recommendations may not be possible to implement (especially in cases where the solution prioritizes one person's experience over accessibility for a greater number of individuals), but it remains important to listen in full to the suggestion being offered. A wealth of suggestions taken in aggregate (i.e. at the end of your industry event) may provide excellent information that informs the growth of your multi-year accessibility plan.

Transforming individual insights into systemic change

Often, individual accommodations requests or pieces of feedback around accessibility are treated as isolated incidents that require isolated responses. However, these data points provide invaluable context clues as to the ways in which the [4 principal accessibility barriers](#) are manifesting across your organization, festival, event or program.

The next time someone requests a specific accommodation or provides a piece of feedback, don't just consider how to respond to create an inclusive, accessible experience for this person in the moment, but consider how their request or feedback might allow you to engage in systemic reform or redesign. Accommodation requests highlight how seemingly neutral policies, systems, frameworks, approaches, and spaces are full of barriers. Under the [social model of disability and the rights-based model of disability](#), identifying these barriers gives rise to an institutional responsibility and a responsibility for non-disabled people to remove these barriers and advance accessibility. Some questions to consider include:

- Are we receiving repeated pieces of feedback when it comes to the accessibility of our film festival or film event?
- Are the formal and informal accommodation requests from employees, attendees, filmmakers/creatives, and panelists/speakers highlighting consistent barriers that we should address in a more systemic way?
- What do these requests tell us? Are there systemic ways for us to respond?
- What insights do these requests provide us when it comes to systemic reform or event redesign?
- How can we meaningfully consult people who have made accommodations requests or provided feedback to ensure that our systemic reforms address their needs and don't have other unintended consequences?
- Who should be involved in the translation of these individual insights into systemic changes?
- How do we ensure that we respect the privacy and dignity of the disabled people who made the accommodations requests or provided feedback?

This work requires you to be responsive to the range of requests coming in and adept at exploring how these requests might give you insights into systemic transformation opportunities that are in front of you. Failing to do so means that accessibility barriers persist, accommodations requests continue without addressing design factors, and disabled communities are kept out of the rich opportunities film festivals and film events have to offer.

APPENDIX B: Quick Reference Access Levels

Consider this a quick reference sheet to think about accessibility and assess where your organization is at at a glance. This metric is adopted from the Colbourne Institute's Momentum assessment tool for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility (EDIA) organizational change.

As this guide states, accessibility is a journey that takes years. It's possible to be at a Level 1 with one community group but at a Level 3 with another. Progress through these steps may not be linear, and organizations may see their progress go backwards on occasion in response to unanticipated factors (e.g. budget cuts, a champion of access leaves the organization, etc).

Levels	Name	Explanation	Example
0	non-compliant	Little to no awareness of the law regarding accessibility. Not yet thinking or learning about access. There may be a severe lack of capacity.	Venues bathrooms do not meet provincial accessibility legislation (if applicable), and despite this, the event venue does not change as “that’s how it’s always been”
1	compliant	Access is the bare minimum to avoid breaking the law.	Event organizers choose a venue that has minimal stairs. HR says to call them if you need any accommodations. There are no systems in place for comprehensive access.
2	spontaneous	One off access measures met, often due to a single individual request. Event staff does what they can but structure and investment in wider accessibility is not in place	An audience member asks for a larger chair and receives one.
3	developing	Some access needs are being offered regularly for event audiences, or volunteers who have requested it.	There is a regular relaxed screening each year for the one film screening geared toward families and the disability community.
4	systemic	Accessibility and inclusion goals have been set, and there are robust processes for feedback and a growing plan for increasing access throughout the festival.	The website displays a robust accessibility plan that spans the entire organization, and there is a feedback mechanism in place so that accessibility work can scale year over year.
5	integrated	Access or inclusion is fully embedded in the organization at every level and every stage.	There is disability representation in organizational leadership and direction, and disabled creatives are regularly featured at the event in large numbers.

APPENDIX C:

Resources For Creating Accessible Content

DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY TOOLKIT

[Digital Accessibility Toolkit](#)

WCAG GUIDELINES

[WCAG 2 Overview | Web Accessibility Initiative \(WAI\) | W3C](#)

[A Guide to WCAG | Web Accessibility Guidelines Overview](#)

JAWS (SCREEN-READER) COMPLIANT

[10 Things to remember when designing for the Blind - RTF | Rethinking The Future](#)

[WebAIM: Using JAWS to Evaluate Web Accessibility](#)

PLAIN LANGUAGE/EASY READ

[Appendix A: Best Practices for Easy Read](#)

[Easy Read | Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities](#)

[Principles of plain language | Digital.gov](#)

[Accessibility Standards Canada publishes Canada's first Plain Language Standard - Canada.ca](#)

[Inclusive writing – Guidelines and resources – Writing Tips Plus – Writing Tools – Resources of the Language Portal of Canada – Canada.ca](#)

[Easy Read | Style Manual](#)

NEUROAFFIRMING DESIGN

- [Neurodiversity Design System](#)
- [Unlocking Focus: How Color Palettes Can Help Neurodivergent Students Thrive](#)

APPENDIX D:

Accessibility Legislation

Provincial law

Most private businesses and non-profits (i.e. most industry events) in Canada are not governed by the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Accessible Canada Act, but by individual pieces of provincial legislation. Each province and territory has a human rights code, and disability is a protected ground of discrimination across all 13 provinces and territories. The duty to accommodate exists and binds businesses and non-profits in all 13 pieces of human rights legislation in Canada.

Many provinces in Canada also have provincial accessibility legislation. All of the provinces that have adopted accessibility legislation provide accessibility standards in the area of service delivery (i.e. providing goods and service to the public).

To read your province's accessibility legislation and to ensure that your industry event follows provincial accessibility standards:

- [Quebec](#)⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Legis Québec. Act to Secure Handicapped Persons in the Exercise of Their Rights. 2004. <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/document/lc/E-20.1>.

- [Ontario](#)⁴⁹
- [Manitoba](#)⁵⁰
- [Nova Scotia](#)⁵¹
- [British Columbia](#)⁵²
- [Newfoundland and Labrador](#)⁵³
- [Saskatchewan](#)⁵⁴
- [New Brunswick](#)⁵⁵

At the time of writing, Alberta, Prince Edward Island, the Northwest Territories, Yukon, and Nunavut do not have provincial accessibility legislation.

⁴⁹ Government of Ontario. *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*. 2005. <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05a11>.

⁵⁰ The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. *The Accessibility for Manitobans Act*. 2013. <https://web2.gov.mb.ca/bills/40-2/b026e.php>.

⁵¹ Nova Scotia Legislature. *Accessibility Act*. 2017. https://nslegislature.ca/legc/bills/62nd_3rd/3rd_read/b059.htm.

⁵² British Columbia Legislature. *Accessible British Columbia Act*. 2021. <https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/21019>.

⁵³ NL Assembly. *Accessibility Act*. 2021. <https://www.assembly.nl.ca/Legislation/sr/statutes/a01-001.htm>.

⁵⁴ Government of Saskatchewan. *The Accessible Saskatchewan Act*. 2023. <https://publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/121340>

⁵⁵ Government of New Brunswick. *Accessibility Act*. 2024. <https://laws.gnb.ca/en/document/cs/2024,%20c.27>.



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