What makes a navigation program accessible?

Inclusion Canada

People First of Canada | Personnes D'abord du Canada

UBC THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Canadian Institute for Inclusion and Citizenship

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Glossary of terms & acronyms

We were graciously assisted in creating this glossary by our self-advocate advisors. The purpose of the glossary is to help make the information in the showcases and primer more accessible and easier to understand. The definitions should be considered within the context of service navigation.

Primer: A primer is a document that introduces a topic. It gives readers basic information to help them understand the rest of the material.

Racialized: People or groups who are discriminated against because of racism.

Culturally Responsive: Being aware of and respectful towards the diverse cultural backgrounds of others, and adapting actions, communication, or services to meet their specific cultural needs and values.

Faith-based services: Refers to support and resources provided by organizations that are connected to or guided by religious/spiritual beliefs or principles.

Low-Barrier Support: Services that are easy to access, with few or no eligibility requirements, so that anyone who needs help can receive it without facing strict rules or conditions.

Holistic: Looking at a person's overall needs—physical, emotional, social, and sometimes spiritual—to provide more complete and comprehensive support.

Chronic health disability: A long-term or ongoing health condition that significantly limits a person's ability to perform everyday activities.

DTC: Disability Tax Credit

RDSP: Registered Disability Savings Plan.

Inclusion NB (organization): Inclusion New Brunswick

BCANDS (organization): The British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society

STADD (organization): Services to Adults with Developmental Disabilities

Background

Historical context

Historically, people with disabilities have faced systemic barriers which have limited their ability to fully benefit from programs designed to support them. In particular, federal programs created to support people with disabilities are often complex and difficult to navigate. For example, federal programs like the Disability Tax Credit (DTC) and the Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP) can provide significant financial assistance, but many eligible individuals remain underserved due to a lack of accessible information and support.

There is also a documented lack of participation in programs such as the RDSP and DTC by Indigenous communities, despite an estimated 350,000 Indigenous people in Canada with a disability (RDSP.com).

Why are navigators important?

Service navigators help bridge this gap. For the purposes of this project, we have defined a navigator as a person who helps people access programs and services. They can help people understand what programs and services are available, make informed choices, and apply for programs and services that they want.

Navigators are sometimes called service coordinators, brokers or agent. Their support can include:
- helping people understand their eligibility for certain programs
- connecting them to the right programs and resources that suit their specific needs
- helping with applications and forms

The literature reveals that equity-deserving groups (people who are often left out) and people experiencing a life transition (such as moving from school aged support to adult supports) have an increased need for navigation support.

Background

Introduction to this primer

These showcases were created to share examples of navigator services with the government and organizations that want to learn more. This primer summarizes the key findings from our showcases of five organizations in Canada that offer service navigation to people with disabilities. The organizations selected for this showcase series are:

- BCANDS
- SMILE Canada
- Inclusion NB
- Plan Institute
- STADD

These organizations have been selected to highlight best practices in the field, as well as to identify limitations. We are very thankful to these organizations for agreeing to be included, and for all their contributions. We hope that the findings will be helpful and informative if the government considers creating a federal navigator program, to ensure it is both effective and accessible for all.

How was this information collected?

To create these showcases, we conducted in-depth interviews with multiple organizations, asking questions about service operations, eligibility criteria, unique features, limitations, and accessibility considerations, among other details. From April through September of 2024, these interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed to select a diverse group of organizations, covering various models from government programs to private nonprofits.

Since the information collected came directly from representatives of each organization, it does not include perspectives from the people served themselves. The existence of feedback mechanisms—such as satisfaction surveys — would be a helpful way to enable people to share their experiences with each organization directly. This is discussed later in the primer as well.

Best practices for navigator programs

Multiple communication channels

Providing support through various methods such as phone, email, text, video calls, and in-person meetings is an important way to keep the support accessible and meet people where they're at. Some people might have limited access to technology, so having alternative options for contact (such as fax, mail, or in-person visits) is also helpful to make sure nobody is excluded.

Personalized, person-led support

Supportive navigators tailor their assistance based on each person's specific needs, empowering people to lead the process. Navigators work with the person to get a holistic understanding of what they need, rather than imposing their own opinions. This ensures that the support is relevant and aligned with what matters most to each person.

No strict eligibility requirements

To ensure the support remains low-barrier and accessible to a majority of people, having minimal eligibility requirements can be helpful. Accessible navigators avoid rigid criteria, allowing people to self-identify their needs and status, ensuring that a wide range of individuals can access services without unnecessary barriers.

Flexibility and follow-up

Accessible navigators are adaptable, providing support that evolves as the person's needs change over time. The length of their involvement is flexible, and based on the unique need of each person. The navigator can be re-engaged with easily if the need arises. If resources allow, navigators may also proactively follow up with folks to ensure ongoing support. This is yet another way for navigators to meet people where they're at, making the process of getting support less overwhelming.

Best practices for navigator programs

Connection to resources

Even when they cannot directly provide certain services (such as medical or legal help), navigators are able to connect people to the right resources that would be able to help. The point is not that navigators need to know everything, but that they have the skills to connect folks to somebody that is more skilled in a particular area. This reduces the person's burden of having to navigate additional complex systems on their own.

Language and cultural sensitivity

Some folks may not feel comfortable seeking support due to significant language barriers, which may feel intimidating. Having accessibility measures in place, such as interpretation services or navigators that speak multiple languages, can help the program feel more approachable. Diverse navigators can also help people from different backgrounds feel more culturally comfortable. Regardless of their background, navigators should try their best to be culturally sensitve and respectful.

Navigators with lived experience

Ensuring that service navigators are not only qualified but also bring lived experience with disability can also be helpful. Navigators with this personal connection may better understand the challenges faced by folks and can offer more empathetic and effective support.

Their professional training ensures they have the expertise to provide accurate guidance, while their personal experience allows them to relate to the people they support on a deeper level.

Importance of feedback mechanisms

Evaluations directly from the people being supported are important for determining if navigator programs are meeting their goals and providing the desired outcomes for people with disabilities. Having feedback mechanisms in place (such as satisfaction surveys or regular check-ins) can help these programs determine which parts of their service are working well, as well as if there is anything that needs to be improved upon.

Roadblocks to avoid

Limited funding impacts wait times & staff capacity

Limited funding can result in understaffed navigation services, leading to longer wait times for people seeking support. With many navigators having to support large caseloads, staff also may become overwhelmed, impacting the quality of support they may be able to provide. When the demand for services exceeds staff capacity, it may be difficult for navigators to go above and beyond, even if they'd really like to.

Geographical limitations

Many navigation services are restricted to specific regions, leaving people in remote or rural areas underserved. These geographical limitations mean that individuals living outside the service areas may struggle to access the support they need. While some services try to reach clients virtually, a lack of in-person support in remote areas can make it difficult for navigators to provide the same level of assistance.

Gatekeeping & limiting choices

The need for government-funded navigation programs is heavily supported by the literature. However, we've learned that when navigation services are government-funded and also provided by government agencies, people perceive that the services provided might not give the best support. This concern is supported by research highlighting that some families perceive government-employed navigators to be less likely to advocate for them (Williamson et al., 2016).

To address this potential barrier, navigation services might be more effective when offered through community-based organizations, rather than government facilities (Agranoff, 2013; Cooc & Bui, 2017). Having a clear separation between the funding body and the people providing advice/support may help people and families feel more trust in the process.