

# VitalFocus®

## SECONDARY PANDEMIC EFFECTS ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The impact of COVID-19 on **people with disabilities** in our community

### The impacts of the pandemic are felt more acutely and have increased effects on people with disabilities.

#### We are all impacted by COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has wide-reaching effects on everyone regardless of their gender, age, sex, race, class, religion, ethnicity, ability, language, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The pandemic also impacts all aspects of our work, family, and social lives. We all experience and cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in our own way. The Vital Focus series examines the impacts of measures in place to control COVID-19 on health and wellbeing in our community.

### What is a disability?

There are many types of disability. A person may have a disability that is physical, mental or intellectual. A disability may affect a person’s mobility or their ability to see, hear, talk, learn, communicate or participate in society.<sup>71,72,744</sup> Statistics Canada groups disabilities into four severity classes (mild, moderate, severe, and very severe) based on intensity and frequency of daily activity limitations.<sup>73</sup> The more intense and frequent the limitation, the more severe the disability.

### Who has a disability in Canada?



**1 in 5**  
(20%)

Canadians over the age of 15 are living with one or more disabilities



**2 in 5**  
(43%)

Canadians with disabilities have a severe or very severe disability<sup>74</sup>

Data on the number of people living with disabilities in Guelph and Wellington County is not currently available. Based on national data, it is likely that more than 18,000 people are living with one or more disabilities in Guelph and Wellington County, and 7,200 of those have a more severe disability.



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### What are the pre-COVID everyday realities of living with a disability?

Statistics Canada data from 2017 shows that:

- **3 in 10** (31%)  
Canadians aged 15 to 24 with a more severe disability were not in school or employed.
- **4 in 10** (41%)  
Canadians aged 25 to 64 with one or more disabilities were not employed.
- **3 in 10** (28%)  
Canadians aged 25 to 64 with a more severe disability were living in poverty.<sup>74</sup>

Compared to people without a disability, people with a disability are more than twice as likely to be living in low income.<sup>75</sup>

## How has COVID-19 impacted people with disabilities?

### Impacts on mental health

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a notable impact on the mental health of all people in Canada, but it has been especially difficult for people with disabilities. Data collected in May 2020 by the Canadian Mental Health Association found that, when compared to the general population, Canadians with a disability were:

**2X**

2 times more likely to have trouble coping since the outbreak of COVID-19<sup>7,39</sup>

**3X**

3 times more likely to have had suicidal thoughts since the outbreak of COVID-19<sup>7,39</sup>

**Local Spotlight:** Information provided by Family Counselling and Support Services for Guelph-Wellington (FCSSGW) noted an increase in depression and anxiety for some people with developmental disabilities since the start of the pandemic.<sup>7,45</sup>

### Job loss and financial issues

Statistics Canada data collected from June to July 2020 showed that since March 2020:

■ **4 in 10** (36%)

Canadians with a long-term condition or disability experienced a temporary or permanent job loss or reduced hours.<sup>7,6</sup>

■ **5 in 10** (45%)

Canadians with a long-term condition or disability received income from non-employment sources only.<sup>7,6</sup>

■ **4 in 10** (40%)

Canadians with a long-term condition or disability experienced difficulty in meeting their food, grocery, and personal protective equipment needs.<sup>7,6</sup>

■ **6 in 10** (61%)

Canadians with a long-term condition or disability experienced difficulty in meeting at least one financial obligation or essential need.<sup>7,6</sup>

Job loss and financial issues are often associated with an increase in family conflict, marital instability, and emotional distress.<sup>7,8</sup>



*Wearing a mask can be difficult for some people with disabilities.*

### Mask usage and exemption policies

Wearing a mask helps stop the spread of COVID-19.<sup>7,16</sup> However, wearing a mask can be difficult for some people with disabilities.<sup>7,17</sup> Even though a mask does not block breathing,<sup>7,18</sup> people on the autism spectrum can feel like they are having trouble breathing due to the change in airflow.<sup>7,19, 7,20, 7,21</sup> For children with disabilities who are prone to epilepsy, wearing a mask can prevent parents from recognizing signs of an epileptic attack.<sup>7,19, 7,20</sup>

In Ontario, an individual is exempt from wearing a mask if they have a medical condition, are unable to put on or remove their mask without help, or are receiving accommodations according to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 or Human Rights Code.<sup>7,22</sup> However, people with disabilities who are unable to wear a mask have experienced harassment and questioning for not wearing a face covering in public.<sup>7,23, 7,24</sup> These incidents can make people feel anxious and embarrassed.

### Access to Education

For some students with disabilities, online learning has led to challenges such as difficulty focusing from home, staying organized and managing time. Taking regular breaks, designating set times to study and staying off television and cell phones can help.<sup>7,46</sup>

For others, the shift to online learning has been positive. For people with physical disabilities, learning from home removes barriers they may have faced when attending in-person classes, like navigating inaccessible buildings or safely and easily getting to school in the winter. Some students have also found a flexible schedule and the decrease in distractions helpful.<sup>7,46, 7,47</sup>

## Access to healthcare, telehealth, community programs and services

Like many countries, Canada has rapidly adopted the use of digital technologies to deliver healthcare services remotely during the pandemic (broadly referred to as telehealth).<sup>7.26</sup> While this change in healthcare delivery has many benefits, it can present new challenges for people with disabilities.<sup>7.15, 7.27</sup> People with disabilities who are living in rural or low-income areas may not have the infrastructure to support the use of telehealth, such as reliable and/or fast internet.<sup>7.14</sup>

In Ontario, for example, this could include rural or low-income Indigenous communities.<sup>7.28</sup> Furthermore, because 3 in 10 Canadians with a disability are living in poverty,<sup>7.4</sup> many will not have the means to purchase the required hardware/software to make use of telehealth opportunities. In addition, due to the rapid adoption of these technologies, telehealth platforms may not have had time to ensure the inclusion of accessibility features to accommodate people with some disabilities, such as people who are Deaf, blind, or cognitively impaired.<sup>7.14</sup>

**Local Spotlight:** Information provided by Guelph Independent Living confirms that many people who access their services do not have computers and/or internet access, thereby limiting their access to virtual meetings for work, school, or personal reasons, as well as limiting their access to essential information about the pandemic.<sup>7.12, 7.29</sup>

Information provided by Family Counselling and Support Services for Guelph-Wellington highlighted challenges some people with developmental disabilities face using a smartphone or navigating online banking to pay bills. At periods in the pandemic when banks were not open this challenge was heightened.<sup>7.45</sup>



*Online learning has been challenging for some students with disabilities and positive for others.*

## Changes in services or activities

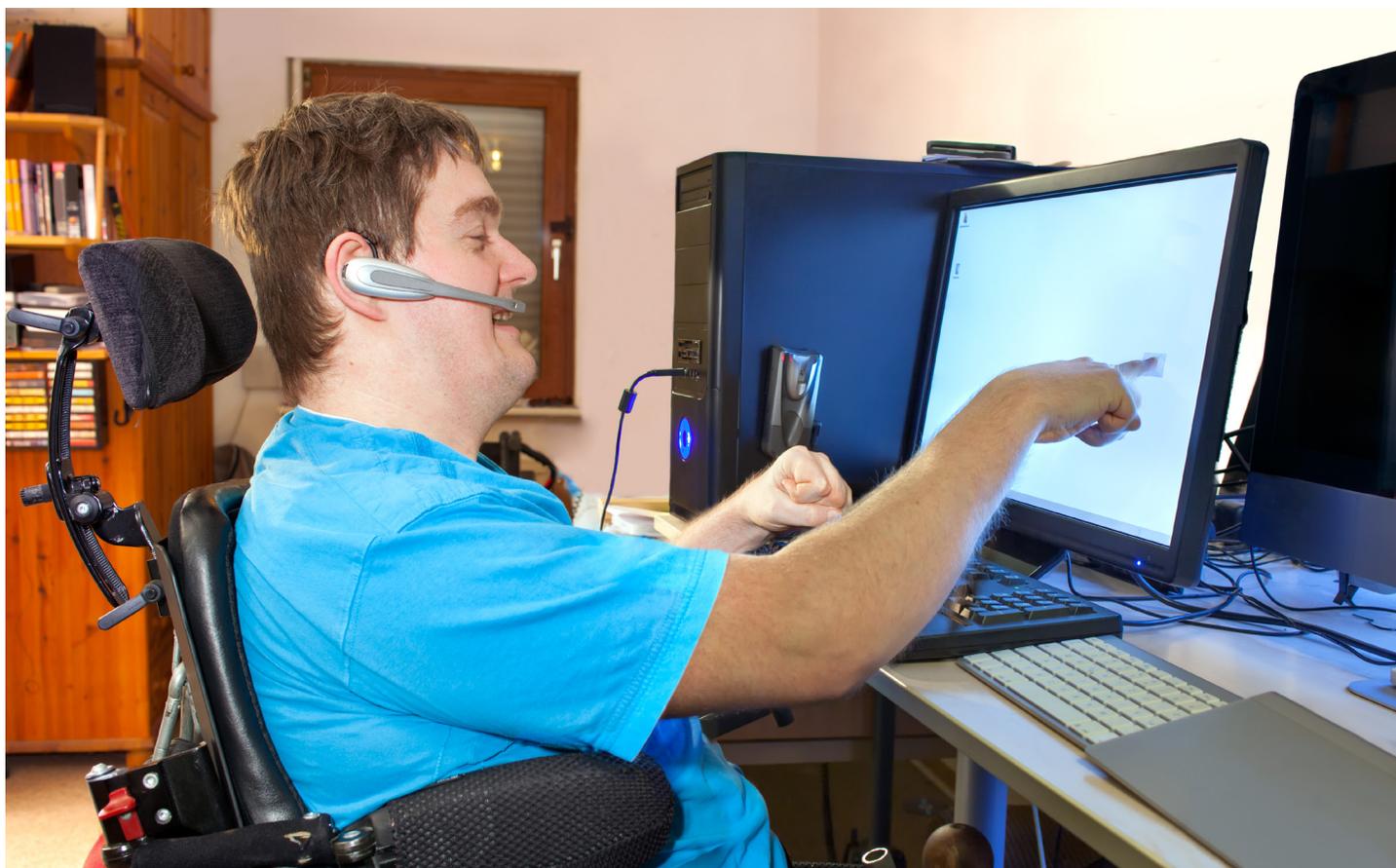
One of the most significant secondary health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is limited access to, or temporary closure of, services or activities that people with disabilities depend on. For some people the change in routine can be difficult to understand and/or cope with. For example, people on the autism spectrum who benefit from routines can experience emotional and/or behavioural challenges resulting from the disruption in services.<sup>7.30</sup>

Caregiver burnout in the absence of respite is another concern.<sup>7.31, 7.32</sup> In addition, organized activities are some people's only opportunity to spend time with friends, family, or romantic partners.<sup>7.33</sup> Some people with disabilities for example, require support to pursue social, romantic, or sexual activities, but these supports have been largely scaled back limiting these opportunities.<sup>7.33</sup>

**Local Spotlight:** Information provided by Guelph Independent Living lists the shortage of personal support workers as their biggest challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7.29</sup> Guelph Independent Living was experiencing shortages of workers prior to the pandemic, but these challenges were exacerbated by COVID-19 with personal support workers who chose to go on pandemic-related leave for personal or work-related reasons. Ontario's Single-Employer Emergency Order prevented personal support workers from working for more than one Health Service Provider.<sup>7.34</sup> Consequently, Guelph Independent Living lost 30% of their front-line workforce.<sup>7.29</sup>

Information provided by FCSSGW identified that it was hard on people with developmental disabilities and their families when day programs closed for in person services and went virtual—additionally residential respite options were limited. Families identified the following challenges:

- Difficulty with the change in routine.
- Difficulty supporting individuals with higher needs in accessing programs virtually.
- The lack of access to programming for some led to isolation.
- Disruptions or changes in the way services were offered created stress and strain, especially for those families with aging parents.<sup>7.45</sup>



*While physical distancing has led to an increase in the use of online services to stay connected to family and friends, the internet may present challenges for people with disabilities.*

## **Housing and homelessness challenges**

When the long-term care industry experienced mass outbreaks in the early months of the pandemic, people with disabilities living in supported group living facilities were largely forgotten, even though they face the same risks as seniors in long-term care.<sup>7.37</sup>

Even before COVID-19, housing insecurity and long waitlists for entering supportive housing left people with disabilities living in unsuitable accommodations.<sup>7.35, 7.36</sup> For some people, COVID-19 has increased the desperation to find adequate housing, and for others it has meant eviction and/or homelessness.<sup>7.36</sup>

**Local Spotlight:** Information provided by FCSSGW shone a light on the challenges faced by people with developmental disabilities who are homeless, in part because they may struggle to understand and/or follow the new and changing rules related to the pandemic (such as, the need to wear masks and physical distance). This can make it difficult for people to maintain their housing. They also noted the lack of affordable housing in Guelph and Wellington as an ongoing challenge.<sup>7.45</sup>

## **Working from home and physical distancing**

Statistics Canada data collected from June to July 2020 shows that since March 2020:

### ■ **6 in 10** (58%)

Canadians with a long-term condition or disability were working at home instead of their usual workplace.<sup>7.6</sup>

Working from home and physical distancing can have negative effects on people with disabilities. For example, personal care assistants or family members may not be able to provide direct support to people with disabilities who require it, and disruptions in these care networks can lead to increased stress.<sup>7.9, 7.10, 7.11, 7.12</sup>

In addition, while physical distancing has led to an increase in the use of online services to stay connected to family and friends, the internet may present challenges for people with disabilities. Internet usage rates among people with disabilities are typically much lower than the general public due to operational challenges, lack of access, or financial and/or communication barriers.<sup>7.13, 7.14, 7.15</sup> Without ways to stay connected, people with disabilities can experience feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

## Recommendations

- 1. Ensure** the needs of people with disabilities are considered in all stages of the COVID-19 response and recovery, with targeted and measurable actions.<sup>7,43</sup>
- 2. Ensure** that information, facilities, services and programs are accessible for people with disabilities.<sup>7,43</sup>
- 3. Consult** with, and provide opportunities for people with disabilities and their representative organizations to participate in decisions about how to respond to and recover from COVID-19.<sup>7,35, 7,43</sup>
- 4. Provide** better financial support for personal support workers, such as equal pay and hours, regardless if working in hospitals, long-term care, or community healthcare.<sup>7,29</sup>
- 5. Collect, and make available**, local and meaningful data on people with disabilities. It is currently unknown how many people with disabilities are living in Guelph and Wellington County without using provincial or national data to calculate a local estimate.
- 6. Review and update** eligibility criteria for federal and provincial support programs to ensure people with disabilities can benefit from these supports.<sup>7,35</sup>

## Resources

- For **children's** developmental services and supports in Guelph and Wellington County, Please contact [Access Information and Referral \(AIR\)](#)
- For **adult** developmental services and supports in Guelph and Wellington County please contact [Developmental Services Ontario \(DSO\)](#)



- **If you or someone you know is struggling, please visit [Toward Common Ground](#) for a list of local supports and services.**
- **If you are in crisis, call Here 24/7 at 1-844-437-3247**  
You are not alone. Supports and services are ready to help you.
- **If you are struggling with your mental health or if you know someone who is struggling, there are mental health supports available to you.**
  - Contact your primary care provider.
  - Visit [Here4Help.ca](#) to access online resources and support during COVID-19.
  - Visit [Here4Hope.ca/framework](#) for education and awareness resources about suicide
  - Call **Family Counselling and Support Services** for Guelph-Wellington:
    - Distress line at 1-888-821-3760 or 519-821-3760
    - Walk-In/Virtual Mental Health clinics at 519-824-2431 or 1-800-307-7078 to make an appointment. No referral required
  - Visit [Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health](#) for additional mental health resources

Footnotes and references are available at [Toward Common Ground](#).

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Note: There are limitations associated with the data and research sources included in this Vital Focus. For more information about sources and citations, please go to [Toward Common Ground](#). If you know of research or data about diverse communities not represented in this Vital Focus, please contact us at [sarahh@towardcommonground.ca](mailto:sarahh@towardcommonground.ca)

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