



Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) Ontario 2021 Pre-Budget Submission

**Prepared for the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic
Affairs
January 2022**

Ontarians with sight loss are ready and able to support Ontario's economic recovery

After two years of an unprecedented pandemic, Ontario is facing an acute labour shortage across nearly all sectors of the economy and in communities throughout the province. If large and small employers are unable to find the employees they need, Ontario's much-needed economic growth will stall, or worse – fail to materialize – slowing or severely reducing the province's ability to build back better.

For Ontario to compete amid the current employment crisis, the government needs to empower people who face barriers to entering the workforce to participate in the economic recovery. This includes Ontarians who are willing and able to work but remain marginalized in the labour market. Ontarians living with sight loss represent an important reserve of ambitious, skilled, and capable people who have all the tools necessary to make a greater contribution to the province's economy.

The current labour shortage represents a tremendous opportunity to support many of these individuals in finding purposeful, fulfilling, and well-compensated work, reducing their need for social assistance while contributing positively to the Ontario economy.

What is missing for Ontarians with sight loss is the critical link between these potential employees and the employers who are looking to hire. CNIB's proven **Come to Work program is specifically targeted to support both individuals living with sight loss and prospective employers to bridge the gap to meaningful employment, and help employers better understand how they can successfully accommodate and retain valued employees with sight loss.**

But we can't do it alone. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our program has seen exponential growth, with demand for Come to Work services increasing over 300 percent since March 2020. CNIB urgently needs to scale up our Ontario operations to ensure we can provide the tailored, one-on-one support required. An investment by the Ontario Government, following on the successful approach taken by other governments, will significantly support our efforts to scale up and support many more individuals across the province.

Recommendation

As a critically important step to integrate Ontarians with sight loss into the workforce and support the post-pandemic economic recovery, CNIB is seeking an investment of \$9 million over three years to support and grow our Come to Work program.

The employment landscape for Ontarians with sight loss

There are 681,000 Ontarians living with significant and irreversible sight loss today. This represents nearly half of the total population of 1.5 million Canadians who are blind or partially sighted.



Only 31 percent of working-age Canadian adults with sight loss are employed full time, compared to the national employment rate of 65.5 percent¹. We know that addressing the un-and-under employment of Canadians with sight loss is an untapped opportunity to support Ontario's economy recovery. Ontario is facing an employment crisis, and by enhancing employment supports for Ontarians with sight loss through an investment in CNIB's proven Come to Work program, the Ontario Government will be making a tangible impact in helping employers find the highly capable workers that they need.

The impact of an investment from the Government of Ontario

An investment of \$9 million over three years by the Government of Ontario will scale up CNIB's employment program operations in Ontario to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on talent with sight loss and contribute to the province's economic recovery.

Through this funding, CNIB will be able to continue to support workforce development for people with disabilities and eliminate barriers for Ontarians with sight loss by implementing a series of strategic, short-term activities designed unlock the economic potential of jobseekers who are blind or partially sighted and facilitate economic recovery in a post-pandemic landscape. These key activities include:

- Developing in-demand skills to compete in the COVID-19/post-COVID-19 labour market
- Providing wraparound mental health supports during the employment and skills development journey
- Supporting post-secondary graduates who are blind, partially sighted or Deafblind to transition into the labour market quickly and successfully
- Connecting talent with sight loss to relevant and accessible employment services and avoiding duplication of services by connecting participants with existing vocational providers where appropriate
- Creating networking and hiring opportunities for talent with Ontario-based employers searching for diverse top talent
- Supporting Ontario employers who want to eliminate barriers to hiring talent with sight loss

These activities will help to ensure people with sight loss in Ontario are part of the pandemic recovery and can contribute to the post-pandemic economy. This funding will open more doors to potential employer partners through our extensive outreach campaign to businesses, from small businesses across the province to large corporations with headquarters and offices in Ontario.

This funding is imperative, given the economic and employment situation that the COVID-19 pandemic has created for many Ontarians with sight loss. Furthermore, it supports participation in the economy for people with disabilities, one of the Ontario government's key areas in its cross-government accessibility framework.

¹ CNIB Levels of Employment Study 2021.

About Come to Work

An innovative solution for talent with sight loss

CNIB has developed Come to Work, a program designed to empower workers and job seekers with sight loss who face higher barriers of entry into Ontario's labour market. Simply put, CNIB's Come to Work program connects job seekers who are blind or partially sighted with employers who want to discover the full potential of Ontario's talent.

We work with our talent pool to provide tailored supports and specialized training specifically for workers with sight loss. Employment programs specific to the sight loss community are not available through other vocational providers.

Program Essentials

- CNIB's Come to Work program focuses on skills development for program participants using a proven 5-step scale, which provides technical and employability skills to each participant at a level best suited to their employment journey and adjustment to sight loss.
- CNIB also works with Ontario businesses looking to hire to enhance pathways into meaningful and gainful employment for members of the Talent Pool. Our staff work with partner employers across Ontario to help them break down barriers to hiring talent with sight loss, including physical, technological, and attitudinal barriers.
- We then work with the business to understand their unique talent needs and refer relevant candidates with sight loss. CNIB's Come to Work program does not seek priority hiring from Ontario businesses for members of the talent pool. Rather, we create a clear, straightforward approach to identifying and hiring qualified candidates with disabilities, and work with employers to show them how Ontarians with sight loss can do any job their sighted peers can do, with minor adaptations.

Come to Work currently has over 75 national employer partners with organizations like Apple, Microsoft, and Shopify, and over 100 employer partners in small, regional companies like Waterloo Brewing Company and Marriot Sarnia.

The Need for Increased Capacity

CNIB is currently offering Come to Work programs and services to over 400 Ontarians. Almost one quarter of CNIB's entire Talent Pool is in the Greater Toronto Area.

Sight loss covers a broad spectrum of visual disability, and no one person has the same experience with sight loss. That's why our Come to Work program offers individualized, tailored support to participants, whether they've been blind since birth or are just starting their sight loss journey. This level of individualized support requires the one-on-one attention of one of our Come to Work Program Leads. The need for our services is far outpacing our ability to provide one-on-one support to every participant in Ontario.



Based on best practices from the employment and vocational support industry, we believe the appropriate ratio of participants to staff is about 50:1. CNIB is currently operating at nearly triple best practices, with a participant to staff ratio of 144:1.

Conclusion

By investing in CNIB's Come to Work program, the Government of Ontario will be developing employment skills for Ontarians with sight loss. By developing key skills, individuals living with sight loss become more competitive in the labour market, and more likely to stop receiving social assistance, such as ODSP. Together, we can remove barriers to the world of work, make Ontario open and inclusive for business, and build a stronger community for everyone.

About CNIB

Celebrating 100 years in 2018, CNIB is a non-profit organization driven to change what it is to be blind today. We deliver innovative programs and powerful advocacy that empowers people impacted by blindness to live their dreams and tear down barriers to inclusion. Our work is powered by a network of volunteers, donors and partners from coast to coast to coast.

We have 22 office locations across Ontario to serve people with sight loss in every region of the province. As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic began, CNIB's teams immediately went to work to develop new programs and new outreach that would respond to the needs that the pandemic was creating. Since then, CNIB's employment program has been offered virtually, enabling us to provide service to even more Ontarians in rural and remote regions of the province.