

Expanding the Arts

Deaf and Disability Arts, Access and Equality Strategy

Executive Summary

THE STRATEGY

In keeping with its commitment to equity, diversity and inclusive policies, the Canada Council for the Arts has identified that developing and implementing a strategy to promote equality in the arts for Deaf Canadians and Canadians with disabilities is an institution-wide responsibility. In addition, the Canada Council recognizes that Deaf and disability arts are important evolving sectors and art practices in the Canadian arts ecology, to be supported, promoted and advanced. This strategy is intended to be used primarily for Canada Council staff, but will be shared with stakeholders and the wider arts community. It provides definitions, background and context, including Canadian and international legislation, and information about the Canada Council's consultation process. It also provides direction, including key focus areas, goals, strategies and priorities.

DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

This strategy has been developed in consideration of the work already achieved by the Canada Council in this area. The Equity Office has worked in collaboration with an external working group made up of Deaf and disability arts scholars and practitioners as well as a diverse Canada Council staff working group. The purpose of these working groups is to provide regular feedback on all aspects of the strategy.

BACKGROUND 1990-2010

The Canada Council has had evolving experiences supporting and learning about Deaf and disability arts. Highlights include the following:

- Disability arts projects were funded through the Explorations program in the early 1990's, and through regular programs. \$313,390 was awarded to disability arts organizations through the disciplinary sections (Audience and Market Development, Dance, Inter-Arts, Media Arts, Music, Theatre, Visual Arts, or Writing and Publishing) between 2006 to 2010.
- In *Moving Forward: Strategic Plan 2008-11*, disability was named as a new area of exploration within Direction 3: Equity.
- The Research and Evaluation Section, in collaboration with The Department of Canadian Heritage, supported a research project entitled [*Focus on Disability and Deaf Arts in Canada*](#).
- The Canada Council created a term position of Disability Arts Officer. This position is responsible for researching and writing this strategy and providing expertise to Canada Council staff across divisions.
- The Equity Office conducted a series of consultations with artists with disabilities and Deaf artists through the organization of three focus groups (one conducted in English, one in French and one with an Aboriginal focus).
- Artists with disabilities participate in peer assessment committees and advisory committees.

SAMPLE OF CHALLENGES INDENTIFIED BY FOCUS GROUPS

While focus groups highlighted many barriers and challenges, the following is a small sample of their summarized feedback:

Systemic discrimination and attitudinal barriers in the arts ecology

- Lack of specialized and accessible professional arts training opportunities;
- Lack of specialized arts professionals and arts organizations to work with – participants reported experiences of discrimination, exploitation and manipulation from non-disabled arts professionals;
- Arts spaces such as studios, stages, editing suites and venues are not physically accessible thus, artists face barriers making and presenting their work.

Barriers to arts funding

- Artists have to take on the job of convincing and educating funders about disability arts/Deaf culture and arts;
- Artists fear that their work will not be assessed fairly, as standard notions of artistic excellence categorically and historically have excluded artists with disabilities and disability arts.

PRECEDENCE AND LEGISLATION

Increasingly, as human rights challenges have been brought forward, the federal court has made clear the responsibility to uphold these rights. Recent challenges include the requirement to provide and pay for professional sign language interpretation upon request whenever deaf or hard of hearing persons receive services from or participate in government programs, as well as to ensure that federal websites are accessible to blind Canadians. Furthermore as Ontario moves forward in the implementation of the Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the arts ecology in this province will need to respond and change to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities. Ultimately, this means that public institutions must address barriers and discrimination faced by Canadians who are Deaf or who have disabilities as this is both a moral and legal responsibility.

Key Canadian and international legislation

- Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- Canadian Human Rights Act
- Accessibility for Ontarians With Disabilities Act (AODA)
- United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

DEFINITIONS AND UNDERSTANDING

Disability is complex, diverse, and a significant part of Canadian culture, history and identity. Defining disability is also complex. In contemporary discourse, understandings of disability have shifted from a medical or individual understanding towards social and cultural frameworks.

This strategy defines and elaborates on understandings of the following:

- Impairment and disability
- Culturally Deaf and hearing loss
- Access
- Deaf and disability arts
- Artistic tradition and Artistic excellence in these sectors

Key Definitions and Understandings include:

1) The Canada Council for the Arts’ understanding of impairment and disability

Impairments are physical, mental or learning conditions that may be evident or not, and have long term, temporary, or fluctuating effects. The degree to which impairment affects people's lives is extremely diverse.

Disability is an experience of exclusion or disadvantage. People with actual or perceived impairments experience disability when they are disadvantaged as a direct result of that impairment, or due to social, policy or environmental barriers, including discrimination and prejudicial attitudes.

2) The Canada Council for the Arts’ understanding of Deaf culture and hearing loss

While people with disabilities and Deaf people share similar and often overlapping histories in experiencing systemic barriers, these groups are different from each other. Many Deaf people identify themselves as “culturally Deaf” because they share distinct sign languages, traditions, values, histories, aesthetics and norms. Sign languages are regionally and culturally specific visual languages with unique syntax and grammar that are distinct from written and spoken languages.

There is a broad spectrum of hearing loss, including hard-of-hearing, oral-deaf, deaf-blind and late-deafened. Individuals may not have the same degree of participation in Deaf culture, and they may identify as having a disability rather than as being culturally Deaf.

The Canada Council has adapted the convention of using Deaf with a capital “D” to represent a range of experiences: from being culturally Deaf or deaf, to having hearing loss, and using multiple forms of oral and visual languages.

3) The Canada Council for the Arts’ understanding of Deaf and disability arts

Deaf and disability arts are diverse artistic practices, where artists explore the complexities, perspectives, embodiments, histories and lived experiences of disability or Deaf culture, respectively. These practices bring distinct perspectives and ways of being into the arts ecology, shifting perceptions and understanding of human diversity and artistic expression.

PRIORITIES

The barriers that may prevent Deaf Canadians and Canadians with disabilities from equally engaging in the arts are systemic, manifold and diverse. This strategy aims to find ways to strategically strengthen the Deaf and disability arts sector, support artists and promote public engagement in the arts for all Canadians. To do so, the Council has prioritized three main focus areas:

FOCUS AREA 1: Increasing access, support and participation in Canada Council programs

GOALS:

- The Canada Council and its programs are accessible to artists, arts professionals and arts organizations
- Deaf people and people with disabilities participate and are supported throughout the Canada Council, and its staff is comfortable and conversant with access support and protocols

FOCUS AREA 2: Recognizing, supporting and promoting Deaf and disability arts

GOALS:

- The artistic practices of Deaf artists and artists with disabilities are supported and advanced through Canada Council programs
- Increased opportunities to Deaf artists and artists with disabilities in arts organizations
- Knowledge and social discourse are raised on the topics of Canadian Deaf and disability arts.

FOCUS AREA 3: Encouraging the public engagement of Canadians who are Deaf or who have disabilities in arts and culture

GOAL:

- Increased engagement in the arts for Canadians who are Deaf or who have disabilities.

These focus areas have been prioritized into three phases, and implementation will span from 2010 to 2016. As we continue to build upon our existing equity practices, several of these goals have been achieved and the implementation of others is already underway.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT DELIVERABLES

1. Access Support funds that will be available in individual grant programs. These funds will contribute to the additional costs associated with disability-related barriers artists face when carrying out their proposed project.
2. A context paper has been commissioned to inform staff about the types of disability-related barriers faced by artists and examples of the types of accommodations required.
3. [Videos with signed, audio and captioned content](#) about the Canada Council and its programs have been commissioned and created.
4. A discussion panel with program and support staff was held so that they may share their knowledge and experiences with Deaf and disability arts practices, aesthetics, artists and arts organizations in Canada;

5. Strategic outreach to both Deaf and disability arts communities, including meeting with the Deaf Culture Centre, attending Montreal's *Corps Atypik* Dance symposium, providing an information session with Abilities Arts Festival and partnering with the Ontario Arts Council and Arts Gallery of Ontario to present a Deaf and disability arts event.
6. Council's language of invitation has been updated to reinforce our commitment to equity and expanded to include people with disabilities.