Canadian Audiologist
The Official Publication of the Canadian Academy of Audiology

Guest Editorial: An Even Better Idea than DEI

Published February 25th, 2026

Christopher T. Sutton, MBA, ICD.D

Accessibility Commissioner of Canada

In the first weeks of my role as Accessibility Commissioner, severe wildfires swept across my home province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

No stranger to extreme weather, the province's emergency preparedness system moved quickly. Alerts were issued across radio, television, and mobile devices. Emergency broadcasts included captioning and ASL interpretation. They had thought of everything.

Well, almost everything.

The ASL interpretation was partially blocked by on-screen sidebars and overlapping information, including weather graphics and news tickers, and the captions were delayed and inaccurate. It meant that, in a time of fear and chaos, a portion of the population was not receiving the critical, life-saving information they needed. What was intended to be inclusive became, in practice, exclusionary.

This kind of oversight is not usually the result of indifference or bad faith. In fact, it often happens in systems where people genuinely believe they are doing the right thing.

Generally speaking, Canada is seen around the world as a leader when it comes to embracing what we call DEI - diversity, equity, and inclusion.

But the truth is, DEI on its own is incomplete.

> "DEI without accessibility is like inviting everyone to the party, but only giving some people the key to get in."

Too often, accessibility is treated as an add-on or an afterthought in equity and inclusion efforts. I have been advocating for years that this approach must change. It is time to put the "A" into DEI. Better yet, it is time to rethink the framework altogether. When diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility are addressed together, they become an IDEA that leads to real, lasting change.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, along with their allies, have long been among the strongest advocates for accessibility in Canada. Our advocacy and human rights cases have led to systemic changes that benefit everyone, such as closed captioning on Canadian television.

From emergency preparedness to new housing construction and infrastructure development, accessibility is still too often treated as optional. In reality, accessibility gives effect to the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Accessibility makes them real and puts them into action. DEI without accessibility is like inviting everyone to the party, but only giving some people the key to get in.

Accessibility is a fundamental human right. In Canada, it is enshrined in the Accessible Canada Act, a law fought hard for over many years. I know this because I was there, alongside disability advocates across the country, helping move the law from concept to reality all those years ago. Today, I am honoured to lead the team in my Office at the Canadian Human Rights Commission, responsible for promoting and regulating the Act and supporting organizations in meeting their obligations.

This work is also deeply personal for me. I grew up in a small, isolated community in Newfoundland and Labrador and was diagnosed with profound hearing loss at the age of seven. And as I have previously written in CanadianAudiologist.ca, from an early age, I became familiar with barriers and labels. I carried these barriers and labels with me for a time, but I never accepted them as limits. And that is what I want for every person with a disability in Canada: to see unlimited possibilities for themselves and to know they are not only included in Canada's future, but essential to the momentum of the change we are beginning to see.

Accessibility is critical infrastructure. As Canada makes major investments today, we cannot continue to build barriers into the future. We need to build a stronger, better Canada where everyone can participate and belong.

> "Accessibility is not someone else's issue. For audiologists and the hearing health sector, it is part of the patient journey and the standard of care."

By 2040, I want accessibility embedded in how Canada thinks, plans, and leads. That means moving beyond fixing barriers after the fact and moving toward a culture of universal access and belonging across every sector of society.

Accessibility is also an economic driver. It strengthens the labour market, boosts productivity, and fuels innovation. Promoting accessibility is not just about meeting legal obligations; it is about creating shared opportunity and long-term resilience.

This work requires collaboration. Accessibility is a human right that should be enjoyed no matter where someone lives. Advancing it demands a collective effort across governments, Indigenous partners, employers, industry, and civil society. Together, we can build a more cohesive, barrier-free Canada.

At a time of real challenge, accessibility will be one of the keys to ensuring Canada emerges stronger and more resilient than before.

So is intentional design. It means no longer treating accessibility as an add-on or an afterthought. Instead, accessibility must be the norm throughout the full lifespan of a public space, a policy, a home, or a system.

Accessible communication is a clear example of what this looks like in practice. Accessible

communication is cross-cutting and underpins nearly every part of an organization, from physical environments to how business is conducted. This includes essentials such as accurate captioning, speech-to-text services, thoughtful acoustic design, and emergency systems that do more than rely on sound alone.

As a person who uses a cochlear implant and a hearing aid to access communication, this matters deeply to me. I know what it feels like to be in a hotel during a fire alarm and be the last person to realize something is wrong, not because I wasn't paying attention, but because there were no visual alerts and I do not sleep with my technology on. I have been told more than once that I was "lucky" it turned out to be a false alarm. But accessibility cannot depend on luck. If systems only work when nothing goes wrong, they are not accessible.

For audiologists and those working across the hearing health, research, and technology sectors, this work is not abstract. Accessibility is already embedded in your practice, your research, and your innovations. You are often the first point of contact for people navigating communication barriers, a role that brings both influence and responsibility. Advancing IDEA means ensuring accessibility is treated as a core part of the patient journey and standard of care, not as someone else's issue or an HR exercise.

> "Accessibility standards are the floor, not the ceiling. Real leadership isn't just about meeting the rules, it means striving beyond compliance to make systemic impacts."

This includes respecting a full range of communication needs and preferences. For some, that means access to sign languages such as ASL and LSQ. For others, it means assistive and inclusive hearing technologies, speech-to-text services, or a combination of approaches. From sign language access to inclusive technologies such as Auracast, the choices made by this sector directly shape how people experience access, dignity, and belonging in their everyday lives.

It is also important to note that the regulations under the Accessible Canada Act set the minimum requirements. They are the floor, not the ceiling. Real leadership isn't just about meeting the rules, it means striving beyond compliance to make systemic impacts.

And why stop with the concept of IDEA? At the Canadian Human Rights Commission, we have been using the term IDEA-AR. The final two letters stand for anti-racism -- because the perspectives and priorities of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized people, too, must be embedded across all our work. It reflects a simple truth: we cannot achieve equity, diversity, and inclusion unless we recognize how intersecting identities shape our experiences as we move forward together.

Finally, we must be willing to acknowledge where our systems fall short and act quickly to correct course. After that wildfire storm, I raised concerns with the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador about the accessibility of emergency alerts and how they failed the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing community. They were quick to act. They corrected the issue. It was one simple change that will have a far-reaching impact.

Because the more firmly we embed accessibility as a core principle in Canada, the stronger Canada will be.

It is an *IDEA* worthy of all of us and an *IDEA* worthy of a strong Canada for all.