# A close up of a logo Description generated with very high confidence

# Spotlight on Invisible Disabilities: Youth consultation on changing attitudes

*On November 16, a live webcast was held exploring youth and changing attitudes towards people with non-visible disabilities. The webcast featured four youth panelists representing a broad spectrum of youth with non-visible disabilities. Among the 150 registrants across the country and the United States, many engaging with the panelists and putting forward ideas on how to change attitudes and shift Canadian culture towards a culture of acceptance and understanding.*

*The complexity of disabilities, as well as the need to both recognize individual needs and ensure broad accessibility, was a central part of the conversation. Much of the dialogue returned to the need for individuals to self-advocate while also promoting a culture of understanding within educational institutions and the workplace. What follows are recommendations that emerged from the discussion.*

## Education

As the panelists and participants discussed, successful education programs are key to ensuring attitudinal change. Education means understanding non-visible disabilities, as well as ensuring people have the ability and space to talk about challenges associated with their disability. A multi-tiered approach is essential, as one single program cannot educate across all sectors. In terms of national approaches, the following recommendations emerged:

“People fear the things they don’t know or don’t understand.”

Panelist, Youth Perspectives

* **School education programs:** Start early and invest in childhood programs and education around non-visible disabilities. Attitudes are developed and set when we’re very young. Engage in practices that foster inclusive habits in order to generate a cultural paradigm shift.
  + Example of a success story: Childhood programs in the 1990s around recycling have led to a generation that’s aware of the necessity of recycling, the benefits of recycling, and simply see it as part of everyday life. Taking a similar approach to attitudes towards disabilities could lead to similar results, in which a generation emerges for whom disabilities are understood and accepted.
* **National education program:** If everyone is educated and understands non-visible disabilities, it makes it easier to talk about challenges and accommodations.
  + Example of a success story: Olympian Clara Hughes has become a spokesperson for mental health, leading to much public dialogue. People can talk about mental health more because more people know about it. This education and awareness can also lead to removing barriers and stigma.
    - This example speaks to the power of personal stories. Personal stories are important to breaking down barriers, providing a direct connection leading to deeper understanding. Example: Sickboy podcast out of Halifax, Nova Scotia.
* **Mentorship programs:** Mentorship can give confidence to young people, and help them when they face seemingly insurmountable challenges.
  + Example of a success story: The panelists all spoke to personal experiences of mentors who were central in encouraging them and spurring them onwards. Ensuring all Canadian youth with non-visible disabilities, particularly in rural and remote areas, have access to mentors through a national program would go far in terms of building confidence among these youth.

## Awareness

The panelists talked at great length about the challenges they face in terms of having to advocate for their own needs and explain what accessibility means to them. As they pointed out, it can be hard for those with non-visible disabilities to talk about their disability and needed accommodations with educators and employers. Building on the recommendations around education programs, the panelists and participants recommended:

“Diversity in Canada is a fact, but inclusion is a choice.”

Panelist, Youth Perspectives

* **Disability-aware language:** The federal government should use and promote the use of appropriate language around disabilities. Putting the person first is key to shifting attitudes towards people with non-visible disabilities.
  + For example: “person with bi-polar disorder” rather than “bi-polar person.”
* **Identify essential requirements:** Set out standards that educators and employers can use to identify competencies. For example, SSHRC, NSERC and CIHR can develop graduate student competencies in order to increase accessibility within and cooperation from universities for students with non-visible disabilities.
* **Space for dialogue on disabilities and accommodations:** As an employer, the federal government should create space for employees to share their disabilities, and then actively work towards building change and providing accommodations.
* **Highlight positive choices for inclusion:** As one panelists mentioned, “Diversity in Canada is a fact, but inclusion is a choice.” Highlight where people can make inclusive choices through awareness campaigns.
* **Supplementary advocacy:** Encourage employers and educators to speak to their own experiences in hiring or working with people with non-visible disabilities.

## Accessibility

Building in accessibility to federal services and beyond is a third aspect of how attitudes can be shifted. In terms of accessibility, recommendations include:

* **Proactive approach:** Taking a proactive approach to accessibility—building it in from the start—ensures that the need for this accessibility isn’t questioned.
  + This can work particularly well in web-based platforms: accessibility can easily be built in and part of web-based programs. For example, if closed captioning is build in, it’s not even an issue. It’s just always there, and there’s no need to even request it or other similar accessibility measures.
* **Funding:** Consistent funding for health care and accessibility supports across Canada is essential to ensuring that people with non-visible disabilities can receive the support they need.

**Youth Consultation Panelists**

**Ainsley Latour**, Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA)

**Michaela Burton,** National Educational Association for Disabled Students (NEADS)

**Brittany Johnson**, Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW)

**Martin Bauman**, Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)

**Spotlight on Invisible Disabilities Project Partners**

[Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)](http://www.ldac-acta.ca/);

[National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS)](http://www.neads.ca/);

[Royal Canadian Legion (RCL)](http://www.legion.ca/);

[Canadian Council on Rehabilitation and Work (CCRW)](http://www.ccrw.org/); and

[Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA)](http://www.cmha.ca/).

[Canadian National Society of the Deaf-Blind](http://www.deafblindcanada.ca/);

[Canadian Deafblind Association](http://www.cdbanational.com/);

[Communicaid for Hearing Impaired Persons](http://hearhear.org/);

[The Hearing Foundation of Canada](http://www.hearingfoundation.ca/);

[Canadian Academy of Audiology](https://canadianaudiology.ca/);

[Brain Injury Canada](http://braininjurycanada.ca/);

[ARCH Disability Law Centre](http://www.archdisabilitylaw.ca/);

[Media Access Canada](http://www.mediac.ca/);

[Inclusive Design Research Centre, OCAD University](http://idrc.ocadu.ca/);

[Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion](http://ccdi.ca/);

[Neil Squire Society](https://www.neilsquire.ca/);

[Mental Health Commission of Canada](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/);

[Speech-Language & Audiology Canada (SAC)](http://www.sac-oac.ca/);

[Canadian Hard of Hearing Foundation](http://www.chha.ca/chha/about-foundation.php)