



Supporting Safety of Employees with Disabilities

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SUPPORTING SAFETY OF EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES

Most employers in our industry have a safety plan as a roadmap to a safe workplace. It outlines procedures and practices to prevent accidents and injuries, describes steps to take after incidents, and serves as a decision-making guide for all employees.

This THRC resource offers some additional strategies and tips for employers to ensure their safety practices support the safety of employees with disabilities.

Safety: Employers in trucking and logistics are required to comply with a variety of important safety standards. For transport operations, these include the 16 Standards in the National Safety Code, several provincial / territorial regulations, and more specific requirements such as technical standards for equipment. In addition, each jurisdiction has occupational health and safety regulations that apply to workplaces. Increasingly, there is greater attention to mental health impacts (often referred to as psychological injuries) that result from workplace situations. The tips in this resource are not meant to replace a solid understanding of the legislation and standards that apply to your company. They are designed to complement that knowledge by identifying some considerations that might be particularly relevant to the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Make the connection between safety and disability. An employee who has indicated they have a disability should be encouraged to consider any potential impact on the safety of themselves or others, in various situations. Remember that an employee who does not self-identify as having a disability can nonetheless have a safety concern in some situations. Open, collaborative discussions will improve the workplace for everyone.

Getting Started

Make sure that your company's safety practices consider the situations of persons with disabilities. Some first steps include:

1. **Build awareness, knowledge, and comfort** with various types of disabilities and how they should be reflected within a safety perspective.
 - a. Visible disabilities are generally easy to observe. This may include using a cane or wheelchair, communicating with sign language, or having limited manual dexterity.
 - b. Invisible disabilities are chronic conditions that may limit a person's mobility, stamina, mental health, or cognitive function but are not easily visible. Review THRC's resource [Invisible Disabilities](#) to learn more. Examples include:

- i. Chronic diseases – obesity, sleep apnea, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes
 - ii. Mental health or cognitive conditions – depression, anxiety, PTSD, ADD, ADHD, learning difficulties
 - iii. Chronic pain – often due to previous injuries or a chronic disease
 - c. Episodic disabilities can be either visible or invisible, or both. They can flare up in certain situations or at various times, often unpredictably.
2. **Review your current safety practices.** Integrate well-being and accommodation measures into existing safety measures. To help kick-start your review, consider the following questions about your current safety practices:
 - a. Are your safety posters, updates and training fully accessible for people with disabilities?
 - b. Does your safety focus go beyond minimizing risks of physical injury?
 - c. Is there consideration of mental health impacts before, during, and after an incident?
 - d. Do your practices include measures to reduce the risk of gradual psychological injury, such as by eliminating harassment and bullying?
 - e. Is there a clear process for making accommodations to provide safety to people with various disabilities?
 - f. Ask yourself “what if” questions for various combinations of disabilities and safety scenarios. For example, “If we had to evacuate the upstairs office area with no power to the elevator, how would we support an employee who uses a wheelchair?”
3. **Take a collaborative approach in revising your safety practice.** Invite a diverse group of employees to review the current safety practices and identify gaps together. Remember to consider the full range of work environments – in the truck, in locations on the road, in the shop, in the office. Consider asking questions like:
 - a. *“Are there specific challenges you face while driving or during other work activities?”*
 - b. *“If there was a safety issue that required evacuation, what support would you need?”*
 - c. *“When you are on the road or at customer sites, how confident are you that your specific needs would not compromise your safety?”*

Integrating Wellness and Disability Support into Safety Practices

Integrating well-being measures next to existing safety practices allows all employees to benefit from these supports, while avoiding potential stigma associated with a dedicated “disability” category.

Below are suggestions for wellness practices that can be integrated into your existing safety practice. Many focus on invisible disabilities and mental health challenges:

Building Awareness and Skills

- Integrate disability awareness messages and short skill practice into safety meetings. Consider, for example:
 - Understanding the company’s disability accommodation approaches – how they can help employee safety
 - Speaking up about workers’ different needs
 - Identifying mental health concerns after incidents – what to look for and what to do
 - Recognizing fatigue and minimizing risk factors
 - Investigating safety events and incidents with sensitivity to disability – what to do and what to avoid

What it Looks Like: Addressing Substance Use Disorder

Tom is a loader with a history of cannabis use disorder, and he relapses after a stressful family situation. He remembers reading about the company’s support for substance use disorder and other invisible disabilities. He confides to his supervisor, who encourages him to use the support available through the company’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to access treatment while following safety protocols.

Takeaway: It is important that supervisors understand the appropriate responses to potential substance use disorders. Company policies and supervisor actions should support treatment over punishment and allow employees to recover and maintain employment.

- Refer to the THRC [Connector Tool](#) for organizations that can provide advice and guidance. Many will have user-friendly tools. Some will have advisors who can work with you on specific questions regarding your safety practices and your workers with disabilities.

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- Look for online tools and resources, such as this guide developed by the Government of Canada and available at www.getprepared.gc.ca:
 - [Emergency Preparedness Guide for People with Disabilities/Special Needs](#)
- Ensure that supervisors, coaches and mentors are equipped to connect safety and disabilities:
 - Organize short, focused training sessions. Focus on recognizing signs of invisible disabilities and how to have open, supportive conversations with employees.
 - Encourage supervisors, coaches and mentors to reflect on their own wellbeing and safety and to take advantage of any policies that would benefit them, leading by example.

What it Looks Like: Being Prepared

Ishkode has a severe visual impairment and works on a computer with a screen reader and other assistive equipment. His desk is located in a space within the maintenance shop, on routine days, he can easily access his workspace because he is familiar with the walkways to and from his area and staff consistently keep them clutter-free for general safety. For emergency situations, the safety evacuation plan spells out the procedures for people to use alternate exits when necessary. Ishkode and his supervisor have discussed what might be difficult for him during an unpredictable evacuation involving a lot of staff movement and unfamiliar areas of the shop. As a result, three of Ishkode's colleagues and the members of the Health & Safety Committee have been trained in how to support Ishkode to leave the building safely if required.

Takeaway: Regularly review and refresh the safety plan with the involvement of the employee and other key individuals.

On-the-Road

- Offer 24/7 telehealth options for employee consultations to provide flexible access to support while drivers are on the road. Ensure that your contracted telehealth services can demonstrate solid understanding and good coverage of different disabilities -- the full range of visible, invisible and episodic disabilities. In addition, the service should be responsive to other diversity characteristics that intersect with disability – different communication methods, language options, cultural differences, generation, job type, family responsibilities, gender, and so on. See the THRC tool [It's not just about Disability: Understanding the Whole Person \(Intersectionality\)](#) for some considerations.

What it Looks Like: Supporting Mental Health on the Road

John is a driver who feels overwhelmed by low mood and exhaustion sometimes. Telehealth consultations offered by his company allow him to connect with his therapist while on the road.

Takeaway: Offering telehealth (or helping to connect with telehealth services through benefits) can allow employees to maintain continuity of care while on the road.

- Review your operations to integrate fatigue management strategies, including recognizing the signs of fatigue made worse by disabilities or medical conditions.
- In vehicle maintenance and inspections, include assessment for installation of ergonomic adjustments like seating or steering wheel controls that might benefit drivers with certain disabilities.
- Remember that disabilities can change over time. For vehicles that already have ergonomic adjustments, check in regularly with the driver to be sure the equipment is still optimized for them.

Preventing and Responding to Incidents

- Train personnel on recognizing signs of mental, emotional, and physical distress that might contribute to an incident. Make sure that supporting resources are available.

What it Looks Like: Adjusting Routes

Hamza, a driver, experiences flashbacks triggered by a near-accident a few months ago. His manager is trained to recognize signs of distress and encourages Hamza to report the incident. Hamza is assigned to a different route and no longer drives by the location where the incident occurred. This reduces his stress, and he no longer experiences flashbacks on the job.

Takeaway: Many accommodations have little, or no, cost. Managers that have comprehensive diversity and inclusion training are better equipped to identify mental health struggles among their employees and have the toolkit to identify solutions.

- During incident reviews, consider the potential role of invisible disabilities. Investigate if accommodation can be put in place to prevent further incidents.
- Ensure that incident reviews explicitly consider whether there are trends, risks, or wider implications that require changes to your company's existing practices.

Drug and Alcohol Policy

- Ensure your company's policy considers medications used to manage invisible disabilities (including chronic pain and mental health challenges).
- Communicate clearly that incidents of substance use will be reviewed to determine if the employee involved has a substance use disorder or addiction, which is classified as a disability. In such cases, ensure that support and/or appropriate accommodation is provided. Refer to the THRC resource on [Substance Use Disorder as a Disability in Safety-Sensitive Occupations](#) for more information.

Talking to Employees

- During team meetings emphasize your company's commitment to a safe work environment. Explicitly describe invisible disabilities and other challenges covered by your company's various safety practices. Publicly encourage open communication for accommodation.

What it Looks Like: Ergonomic Adjustments

Mira is a dispatcher with chronic pain; sitting for long hours increases her discomfort. She reviews the new company safety practices and reads about ergonomic accommodations, and now feels comfortable requesting an ergonomic chair and integrating short stretching breaks into her day.

Takeaway: Clearly outlining that ergonomic and other comfort adjustments are safety and well-being tools available to employees who need them can help those with invisible disabilities speak up about their needs.

- Periodically review company practices and policies related to disability accommodation and encourage employee-related updates if needed.
- If an employee has an accommodation plan, highlight the benefits for work performance as well as for safety.
- During one-to-one's, ask open ended questions about how the company can support them without pressuring disclosure of a disability. Example phrasing includes:
 - *“How are you feeling these days? Is there anything the company can do to better support your work-life balance?”*
 - *“We have expanded our safety practice to include practices related to mental health and invisible disabilities – is there anything specific you would like to see changed or implemented in your work day?”*

Safety Communication Tips

- Use clear and concise language in your communication materials.
- Share safety policies, plans, and information in various formats (email, printed posters around the workplace, short conversations, structured team meetings, text messages) to cater to different learning styles and accessibility needs.
- Include clear information on how to request accommodation (e.g., “*Email John Smith if you have any questions or want to request supports to ensure your safety.*”).
- Include clear information reassuring employees their questions and requests will remain private.
- Share sample scenarios to help employees understand how they can benefit from the safety practices that reflect various physical, emotional, cognitive and other challenges.
- Do not require employees with special needs to identify as having a disability. Remember that their characteristics might have safety considerations without affecting their ability to perform their job.

What it looks like: Ensuring that safety information is accessible

ABC Trucking has successfully recruited 2 new employees with intellectual disabilities. Prior to their onboarding, the company has revised its safety materials to be more accessible. They have added more illustrations, clarified the language, and coached the safety trainer on making some adjustments for a tailored briefing to the new hires.

Takeaway: These adjustments will make the information more accessible to all employees, improving safety for everyone.