

Wednesday, December 16, 2020

The Right Honourable **Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.**
Prime Minister of Canada
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The Honourable **Patty Hajdu, P.C., M.P.**
Minister of Health
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The Honourable **Carla Qualtrough, P.C., M.P.**
Minister of Employment, Workforce
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Dear Prime Minister Trudeau, Minister Hajdu, and Minister Qualtrough,

We at the Canadian Council of the Blind (CCB), Fighting Blindness Canada (FBC), and the International Federation on Ageing (IFA) are writing you today on behalf of over 1.5 million Canadians who are blind, deaf-blind, and partially-sighted and who are experiencing special challenges due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe it is imperative that people living with vision loss be given a priority position, close behind our heroic first responders and vulnerable seniors, with respect to being vaccinated against COVID-19. People living with vision loss are members of a vulnerable community, whose members were known to be living with economic, social, and emotional stress even before this pandemic that research has shown to be over and above that experienced by the sighted community.

Earlier this year, in response to anecdotal reports of the stresses people with vision loss were experiencing as a result of the pandemic, the CCB conducted a survey in which those living with vision loss were asked to report the effect the pandemic was having on their daily lives. On April 30, we released the results in a report entitled *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Canadians Who Are Blind, Deaf-Blind, and Partially-Sighted*.

The results were astounding. Our survey's 572 respondents revealed the existence of a high level of stress, anxiety, fear, and even depression within our vision loss community. The respondents told us that:

- Their current stress levels were high – 40% of respondents said they were experiencing more than moderate stress, with 29% rating their stress level at 7 or higher (on a scale of 1 to 10).
- They were very concerned about social distancing and felt unsafe leaving their homes. They were unable to judge their distance from others and were concerned that others, unaware of their vision loss, tended to come too close.
- They were particularly concerned that the effect of the added stress from the pandemic on their mental health may cause them to become overwhelmed.
- They were anxious about their ability to access a doctor or health care practitioner and were concerned that social distancing and patients-only medical appointments meant that they would be unable to have someone accompany them when keeping necessary appointments with doctors or at clinics or hospitals. This is of particular concern to people with vision loss who require a sighted guide to assist them with their out-of-home activities.
- They were concerned that their inability to keep eye doctor appointments may cause them to incur additional vision loss. This is of particular concern for those having regular injections for the treatment of age-related macular degeneration or diabetic retinopathy.
- They saw shopping as unsafe, often experiencing fear, stress, and anxiety due to their inability to determine distance from others. Additionally, they felt great frustration with being unable to adequately communicate with cashiers, who were usually behind plexiglass screens, making negotiating payment and conversing difficult.
- They were particularly concerned about their ability to meet financial obligations. This is of particular concern since people living with vision loss are economically vulnerable and are generally recognized as being on the lower end of the socioeconomic scale.
- Many (about half) had a personal care worker entering their home, half of whom weren't wearing masks or other proper personal protective equipment.
- Many asked to work from home discovered they didn't have the accessible devices or technology required to do their jobs, and that employers had refused to provide or fund necessary equipment.

Since the major eye diseases causing vision loss are often associated with aging, we are seriously concerned that these individuals are particularly susceptible to the impact of COVID-19, both on account of their vision loss, as described above, and also due to advancing age.

When asked to describe the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic was having on their lives, one of the respondents expressed the difficulties he/she was experiencing as follows:

“What is affecting my mental health is this prolonged and extreme isolation. As a blind person I already live a fairly limited life when referring to freedom of movement and independence and now even that small wedge of my active life has been completely eradicated.”

This community as a whole is reaching out for your help in relieving the additional burdens and stress resulting from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their daily lives. As primary stakeholders to this vulnerable community, we are asking you, as decision-makers, to take the time to understand their situation and to ensure that people living with vision loss be given priority with respect to COVID-19 vaccination. We seek this opportunity to regain that “small wedge of active life” and to minimize the isolation and loneliness that those with vision loss are currently experiencing.

In this time of the pandemic and with its consequential and dramatic impact on the vision loss community, your timely consideration of this most important request will be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

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