

Creating Connections: The CFDC's 30-Month Journey to Build a National Network

A Narrative Report on the
Canadian Feminist Disability Coalition (CFDC)

Live Work Well Research Centre

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Inspiration

How would Canadian communities transform if women with disabilities were able to participate in, advocate for, and lead the change necessary to ensure their inclusion in health care, employment, public life, childcare, and many other areas?

This question inspired the creation of the [Canadian Feminist Disability Coalition \(CFDC\)](#). Launched in November 2021 by the Live Work Well Research Centre (LWWRC) at the University of Guelph in collaboration with the Disabled Women's Network of Canada (DAWN), this 30-month systems change project culminated in its relaunch as DAWN Canada's Hummingbird Feminist Disability Coalition (HFDC) in March 2024. Systems change projects are dedicated to addressing the root causes of social issues through transformative collaboration, aligned goals, and collective action to achieve systemic, lasting change at local, national, and global levels.



Deborah Stienstra presents at the final hybrid gathering in Montreal in May 2024.

Supported by funding from the federal department of Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) as part of its \$100 million COVID-19 Feminist Response and Recovery Fund, and with in-kind support from LWWRC and DAWN Canada, the CFDC made significant contributions to the national discourse on the inclusion of women and girls with disabilities through engagement and reflection, demonstrating a practical means of effective and accessible collaboration.

The CFDC brought together women from different regions across Canada into regional hubs. Managed by Regional Coordinators (RCs), these regional hubs organized gatherings, facilitated capacity-building workshops, and incorporated reflection and adaptation at every step. The CFDC also collaborated with other civil society organizations, including Indigenous Disability Canada/British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (IDC/BCANDS) and the Disability Justice Network of Ontario (DJNO), to build relationships and enhance knowledge and capacity for inclusive practices.

By starting locally with RCs and expanding nationwide, the CFDC incorporated real-time feedback to address participants' stated needs, as continuous local engagement informed and updated the considerations of the entire network. This approach included adapting to multiple time zones, embedding real-time captioning in both official languages, and offering live French translation services at every meeting and gathering, and sign language interpretation when required. As a result, the CFDC addressed and learned from the unique concerns of women across the country, in various circumstances, and with differing needs.

Regular network-wide meetings and frequent collaboration between the Project Coordinator, Project Manager, and RCs on Microsoft Teams helped plan further programming and opportunities for hub members. The project's reach was extended through feature articles, interviews, and podcasts highlighting the CFDC's work. At the 2024 celebration of the project's completion, the CFDC shared valuable outputs with DAWN members and partners, such as lessons learned and best practices for conducting fully bilingual and accessible events, thereby supporting the national conversation and community of and among women with disabilities in Canada.

This summary provides a brief overview of the CFDC's 30-month journey from 2021 to 2024 and its relaunch as the HFDC, led by DAWN Canada. We highlight the lessons learned and emphasize how this initiative, with its bottom-up, grassroots approach, addresses the question posed above, which is based on the premise of "nothing about us without us."

Over the following pages, we describe the foundations, including laying the groundwork, structuring the network, and providing outreach; opportunities for growth and adaptation; and the five primary lessons learned that will inform the network's future in its new iteration as the HFDC. Finally, we discuss how the CFDC/HFDC continues to support ongoing efforts aimed at assisting a demographic of women historically excluded from many critical conversations, even those concerning their own empowerment.

Foundations

Laying the Groundwork:

In its first year, the CFDC focused on establishing the groundwork for the project's success. The Project Director and Project Manager from LWWRC recruited and engaged key personnel, including a part-time Project Coordinator and four RCs. In line with the project's goals, we hired diverse women living with disabilities for these positions who had experience in the disability community, in disability justice, and/or in human rights advocacy. The CFDC also recruited 48 hub members, all women with disabilities from across Canada.

We established a seven-member Advisory Council to provide strategic direction, guidance, and insights based on their networks and technical expertise. The Council members included representatives from DAWN Canada, Realize Canada, Yukon Right to Learn Coalition, Yukon Status of Women Council, Nunavummi Disabilities Makinnasuaqtiit Society (NDMS), the Regroupement féministe du Nouveau-Brunswick, IDC/BCANDS, and the Neil Squire Society.

Additionally, staff from the LWWRC and DAWN Canada coordinated on the day-to-day operations and strategic goals in what we call the CFDC team. Those involved were Deborah Stienstra (Director), Sharon Findlay (Project Manager), and Siobhan Grant (Project Coordinator) from the LWWRC, and Bonnie Brayton (Partner Representative) and Tamara Medford-Williams and Evelyn Huntjens (Regional Coordinators) from DAWN Canada.

Structure and Ethos:

Starting from the premise of “nothing about us without us,” we aimed to build a network across Canada to connect women with disabilities nationwide. The CFDC team established four regional hubs across Canada: the West Coast (including BC, Yukon, and the Northwest Territories), Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada (including New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and PEI). Each hub was led by an RC from that region, who served as the first point of contact for members. Each RC recruited and managed approximately 12 hub members, totaling 48 hub members nationwide.



From left, Sharon Findlay, Siobhan Grant, and Deborah Stienstra at the May 2024 relaunch as the Hummingbird Feminist Disability Coalition.

With each step, we reflected on our progress and strategies to build on them. The Project Manager, Project Coordinator, and RCs met bi-weekly to plan networking and skills-building opportunities for the hub members, reporting back to the Project Director and Advisory Council. We operated on the principle that these women already possess an abundance of knowledge and gifts to share with the world. They know what they need and what changes they want to see. Therefore, we built a reflective and responsive ethos by continually checking in with hub members to ensure we represented their authentic needs and interests, benefited from their feedback, and updated our goals accordingly.

Once we established the network's structure and built the membership, we held a kickoff meeting with a meet-and-greet style Zoom call. This allowed the CFDC team, RCs, hub members, and Advisory Council to get to know each other, review the project's objectives and phases, discuss collaboration strategies, plan further CFDC hub member recruitment, schedule future meetings, and outline the next steps for the project.

At the meeting, participants engaged in a Mentimeter exercise to articulate their individual hopes and dreams for the CFDC and to identify issues or gaps in services or policies affecting their day-to-day lives that they hoped could be addressed. This exercise allowed hub members to share both anonymously and in group discussions, providing the facilitators with a true sense of the values and wishes of those present.

After the kickoff meeting, the Project Coordinator, in collaboration with the RCs, organized monthly capacity-building meetings and workshops for the members. These sessions were held via Zoom during the third week of each month, with the same program offered twice in the week to accommodate different time zones. This adaptation to both eastern and western time zones not only accommodated different schedules but also provided a second opportunity to participate if hub members missed the first session. Invited speakers would present to the group and then facilitate a discussion on the topic. The speakers covered a range of topics, including disability in war and conflict zones, disability and gender-based violence, Indigenous storytelling, advocacy, and digital storytelling. The introduction to digital storytelling led to a series of three impactful workshops offered to the CFDC membership.

Outreach and Presence:

The CFDC developed an online presence through a regularly updated dedicated Facebook group and increased its visibility by participating in various interviews and blogs.

As the CFDC gained attention, our project director, Deborah Stienstra, was invited to the [*Feminist Shift Podcast*](#), hosted by Jen & Roz at the YWCA Kitchener-Waterloo. This podcast provided an opportunity to discuss strengthening advocacy skills for women and girls with disabilities and to bring an intersectional feminist analysis of social, economic, and community issues to the forefront, fostering reflection and action.

The LWWRC's Notes from the Field blog featured two separate interviews, one with our Project Coordinator, [*Siobhan Grant*](#), and one with two of our RCs, [*Tamara Medford-Williams and Maggie Lyons-MacFarlane*](#). These interviews highlighted some of the personal motivations of our staff in their work within the CFDC network, as well as providing the unique perspectives and insights of the Project Coordinator and RCs into the meaning and impact of the CFDC's work in their local communities. These interviews were also shared with the wider public on the University of Guelph news website.

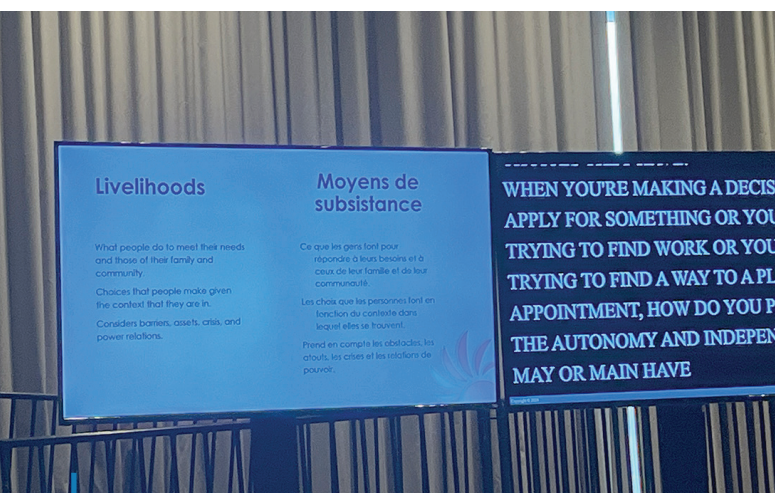
Opportunities for Growth and Adaptation

In addition to navigating the disruptions caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated transitioning all meetings to virtual formats in the first half of the project, the CFDC encountered several other challenges. These included staffing transitions, the logistical complexities of engaging women and girls in remote areas across different time zones, and the need to provide programming in both official languages while addressing a diverse range of needs.

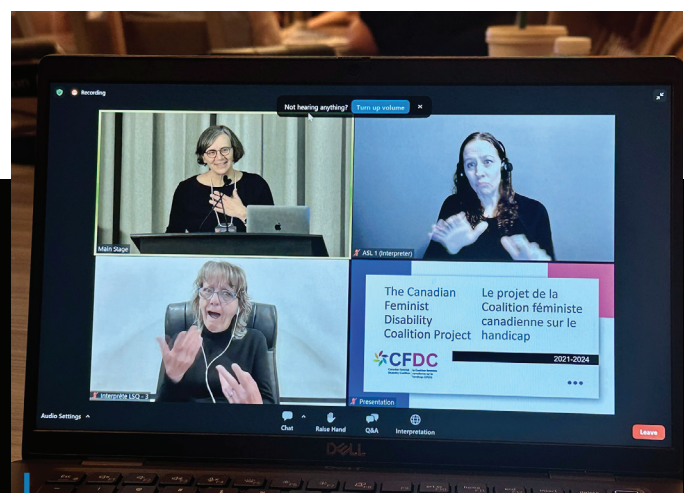
A steadfast commitment to addressing accessibility barriers meant consistently consulting the hub members we aimed to serve. Their feedback was invaluable in guiding improvements and implementing their recommendations to enhance inclusivity and accessibility. For instance, we discovered that attendance was contingent on the timing of meetings. To ensure regular programming was offered at convenient times for participants, particularly women with caregiving or professional obligations, we introduced a dual-scheduling system for our monthly meetings, offering each session twice to accommodate those in different time zones and with different schedules.

Contributing to our growth and adaptation was a recognition of the significant time and costs involved in event planning and in hiring live real-time captioners, ASL interpreters, and French translators. These services are essential for hosting truly accessible events. Highlighting the technical complexities of inclusion underscores how vital these features are for making events accessible to everyone, ensuring no one is excluded from participation.

The CFDC team worked hard to ensure that the culminating bilingual hybrid three-day relaunch event at DAWN Canada in Montreal in March 2024 was as inclusive and accessible as possible. The accommodations included sign language interpretation in American sign language (ASL) and Langue des signes québécoise (LSQ), real-time captioning in both official languages, Braille materials, and live French translation. Additionally, the event ensured wheelchair accessibility, inclusion of personal



Computer monitors displayed slides in English and French as well as live captioning.



ASL and LSQ interpretation was provided on Zoom.

assistants, dietary options, a low-sensory room, and materials in a variety of print and virtual formats. Further accessibility features included dual screens facing the audience on both sides of the presenters' stage providing live captioning in English and French, continuous ASL and LSQ interpretation that participants could access on Zoom, and two dedicated support personnel for Zoom—one online to ensure attendees had access to the chat and other features, and another in the physical room to ensure online participants could contribute and interact with the room.

Delivering this level of accessibility required meticulous planning, extensive technical support, and a highly coordinated team effort. However, challenges and opportunities for improvement emerged. For instance, despite our extensive focus on providing captioning for the audience, we should have also included a stage-facing monitor with captioning for the speakers on stage.

This experience underscored an essential lesson: even with knowledge, best intentions, and significant effort, the results are imperfect and can always be improved upon. One key takeaway from the CFDC is to recognize and address any shortcomings head-on, learn from them, grow, and use these experiences to develop even better best practices. The CFDC's journey has taught us to embrace mistakes as opportunities for growth and to continually strive toward more equitable and inclusive practices.

Our 30-month journey together culminated in the successful relaunch of the network as the HFDC, bringing together communities of women to connect and address issues that deeply impact their lives. On a personal level, the incredible connections fostered during this process have been enduring and profoundly meaningful to both staff organizers and hub members from coast to coast. One of the most touching aspects of our time together was the personal storytelling, facilitated by the University of Guelph's [ReVision Centre](#). Through the art of digital storytelling, these narratives opened up deeper levels of intimacy and opportunities to relate to one another's lived experiences.

Each successful event, gathering, or workshop built upon the successes and insights of the previous ones, leading us forward. The final hybrid gathering in Montreal represented a poignant moment, marking the evolution of the CFDC from an inspired question and vision into a mature network with well-established practices for organic growth.



From left, Maggie Lyons-MacFarlane (Atlantic Regional Coordinator), Bonnie Brayton (DAWN Canada), and Deborah Stienstra (University of Guelph) at the final hybrid gathering in Montreal in May 2024.

Lessons Learned

01. Collaboration is crucial

Our relationships with project partners have been essential to building the Coalition. We leveraged their networks and connections to develop the CFDC and promote its objectives. With the support of our key partners, we successfully identified and recruited Regional Coordinators and Advisory Committee members.

02. Collaboration is challenging

Working in partnership with multiple organizations and people requires clear and regular communication. It also demands an understanding of the different contexts and priorities of each partner. We strengthened our connection with the internal team and RCs by engaging in biweekly meetings and using a shared Teams platform. These served as opportunities to share project updates, exchange ideas, discuss changes, conduct evaluations, and assess activities and resources. We created a weekly email newsletter for hub members to provide updates and information on project developments. This consistent communication strategy not only kept our members informed but also fostered a sense of community and engagement across the network.

03. Telling our stories is key

One of the gifts of the CFDC was the development of short videos by hub members telling their own stories. By the end of three digital storytelling workshops, 25 network members had created their videos, some of which were shared at the final relaunch of the HFDC in March 2024. Other opportunities to tell stories included spotlight interviews with RCs that were shared through the LWWRC blog and newsletter.

04. Women with disabilities are diverse, and that diversity needs to be built in and supported

The CFDC worked to reflect that diversity among its leaders, staff, and members—recognizing not only regional and disability diversity but also the importance of creating space for Indigenous and Black women with disabilities, as well as representing gender and sexual diversity, and different housing and citizenship statuses, among others. We created bilingual tools and resources to enable members to identify their accessibility needs and provide their consent to participate.

05. Creating community is essential to building leadership and capacity

Creating a sense of community that meets people where they are is essential to building leadership and capacity. By fostering strong connections among women with disabilities, the CFDC enabled them to share their experiences and support each other. This collective empowerment enhances their ability to advocate for change and develop leadership skills within an inclusive and supportive network.

Looking Ahead

The CFDC project has united women and girls with disabilities across the country, from coast to coast. Reflecting back, we recognize the dedication of our team, our Advisory Council, and especially our generous hub members, who have shared so much of their lives and insights with us. This project was led *by women with disabilities for women with disabilities*, and it will continue to celebrate our diversity, strength, and mutual support. Many individuals described a sense of isolation prior to joining the CFDC/HFDC but have since voiced a renewed sense of hope and empowerment.

Our most profound wish for the HFDC, as it grows in strength and numbers, is to ensure that Canadian communities recognize how they change and improve when women with disabilities can participate in, advocate for, and lead the necessary changes for their inclusion in healthcare, employment, public life, childcare, and many other areas of society. Together, we are stronger.