



Re-Write the Rules

The B.C. Human Rights Commissioner, in conjunction with disability organizations, has launched a “Rewrite the Rules” campaign to draw attention to ableism that is often practiced throughout the wider society – often without non-disabled people even realizing it.

A short video announcing the campaign was posted to YouTube to draw attention to the educational endeavor.

Salina Dewar, Assistant with the Disability Law Clinic at the Disability Alliance of B.C., who assisted with research for the video, said the objective of the campaign is to raise awareness about what ableism is – discrimination based on a person’s disability – and how it limits the ability and participation of people with a disability. Often, Dewar said, ableism is so pervasive throughout society that those practicing it don’t even realize they are doing it. Dewar said the project’s focus allows individuals to confront their own biases and suggest alternative ways of looking at disability.

“(The objective is) to start important conversations and learning to change our society,” she said.

Dewar said it is important to start having conversations about this topic so that it becomes less prevalent over time. She said people who aren’t disabled do not understand how much social attitudes, processes and rules limit people with disabilities in making the most impact they can in society.

“They do not realize how many inaccurate assumptions exist about people with disabilities, and, if they consider disability-related barriers at all, this is often limited to barriers in physical space,” Dewar said.

In the video, Kasari Govender, B.C. Human Rights Commissioner, said that one in four people with a disability experienced some type of ableism within the past year. About half of those that said they experienced ableism said it happened at work, while 41 per cent said it happened in a store, restaurant or other public space. Fully 28 per cent said ableism occurred at school. According to the provincial government, in 2017, the last year for which there are statistics, more than 926,000 people aged 15 and older in B.C. identified as having some sort of disability.

Raising awareness of ways that people may practice ableism and then countering that with information is the best way to lessen ableism’s effects, said the commissioner’s office, in an email.

“We know that people with disabilities continue to face discrimination and other barriers to their full participation in our communities. Year after year, human rights complaints based

on disability are the largest share of complaints brought before B.C.'s Human Rights Tribunal," wrote Kamila Suchomel, a spokesperson for the BC Office of the Human Rights Commissioner.

According to the Commissioner's office, over the past decade, complaints regarding disability formed almost half of the human rights tribunal's work.

"There are so many discussions about sexism and racism, but even though disabled people are the largest minority group in the world, ableism is less discussed, less well understood, and in need of action. We launched this campaign to help people see, and then question what are often totally invisible assumptions, attitudes and practices related to disability in our community. If we can surface these 'unwritten rules,' then we have a real shot at re-writing new and better ones."

Some of those unwritten rules include: "If you can't get up the steps, just go somewhere else, right?" "If you need to see the doctor often (because of your disabling condition), you're a difficult patient, right?" In reality, accommodating disability allows everyone the best chance to fully participate in the community, and by implementing changes throughout society, everyone benefits, regardless of one's ability.

Dewar, who identifies as having a disability, said she is not surprised by the amount of ableism experienced by people with a disability.

"There is a very narrow view of what is a 'legitimate' disability (according to able-bodied people)," Dewar said, noting it is often limited to those with visible physical disabilities.