

May 15, 2023

Subject: An open letter to deputy ministers to take action to support our transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse colleagues in the federal public service

Dear Deputies,

I am writing to you during an increasingly challenging time for transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse people in the federal public service and society at large. For this reason, the Public Service Pride Network (PSPN) is calling on all deputy ministers, asking you to reflect on how you currently engage with transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse employees in your organization amid these challenges, and that you work with them to help make the federal public service a safer and more inclusive space for **everyone** who chooses to dedicate their career to serving Canada.

Examples of transphobia in society today are widespread and alarming. From a rising number of anti-transgender laws in other countries, to increasing harassment and discrimination here in Canada, transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse people face many barriers in their daily lives. For example, the Canadian Labour Congress cites from a 2022 Justice Trans report that at least 73% of trans individuals surveyed had experienced targeted discrimination and harassment.

Transphobia is painful and unfair. Moreover, it is often physically dangerous, and, sadly, at times deadly. It also severely affects the mental health of colleagues.

Some barriers faced by these vulnerable communities are found in the federal public service, and are compounded by the impacts of racism, misogyny, homophobia, ableism and other forms of discrimination. Many members of the Public Service Pride Network have reported to us – often in confidence, and sometimes in tears – that they regularly experience harassment and discrimination as well as unsafe work environments within their respective organizations.

Results from the [Public Service Employee Survey](#) underscore these experiences. For example, in 2019, 723 public servants self-identified as gender-diverse compared to only 320 in 2020. Responses to question 55 showed that gender-diverse people were twice as likely as other employees to have been the victim of harassment in the workplace.

The availability of inclusive washrooms and facilities is another area of concern. Some of these are now found in a small number of departments and agencies, giving choices to people in those organizations. This welcome progress responds to the [Clerk's Call to Action on Anti-Racism, Equity and Inclusion in the Federal Public Service](#) to foster a more diverse and inclusive public service.

However, this progress is slow in the majority of federal organizations, and completely absent in others. **Access to safe and inclusive washrooms across the GC cannot wait.** Ongoing indifference to the needs of transgender, gender-diverse and non-binary colleagues is neither inclusive nor respectful.

Adapting the GC's IT system and related processes to enable employees to choose names and pronouns is another important step forward towards a diverse and inclusive public service. As with inclusive washrooms, there has been positive, measurable progress made; however, it is not nearly enough.



Significant inconsistencies remain across departments and agencies, leading to frustrations for all involved.

As members of the communities navigate their careers in many organizations, they are forced to abide by the rules of their current department or agency. Colleagues often spend months trying to change their name and gender, all while advocating for themselves before these changes are made – and in some cases, having to do it all over when changing departments. Having to constantly explain that the name on your email, pay cheque, building pass and security forms is incorrect is humiliating and inconvenient. And in many cases, it is also a safety risk and a triggering event for colleagues who continue to face judgment and violence within the workplace, and society at large.

A broader, and perhaps more entrenched, challenge is found in career development. One PSPN member was recently told that they “were not executive material” specifically because of their gender identity. In other words, variances to rigid gender norms are considered unprofessional. This is demoralizing. **It also goes against everything the public service stands for in serving Canada’s increasingly diverse society.** How can we collectively build an inclusive and resilient public service when an entire community of our colleagues are being held back simply because they are transgender, non-binary or gender-diverse?

We can do better, and in our view we must do better. Without inclusive talent development and promotional opportunities, the number of transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse executives will never grow, and the GC will lose talented employees to positions outside of the government. By contrast, safe and welcoming environments and inclusive mindsets will enhance GC’s retention and attraction.

The theme of Public Service Pride Week this year is “**Taking action to create a more inclusive public service.**” The word “action” is very deliberate. Having awareness is helpful. But awareness without accountability or action is only a half measure at best, and fostering diversity and inclusion needs to be much more than ticking a proverbial box.

With this in mind, I respectfully ask that you take the following actions with, and on behalf of, transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse colleagues within your respective organizations:

- **Engage** with these colleagues to hear their perspectives firsthand, and to better understand the dynamics of these people using an intersectional lens.
- **Enhance** training and career development opportunities for transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse colleagues in your organization.
- **Sponsor** at a minimum, one transgender, non-binary or gender-diverse individual in your respective organisations, actively supporting their career progression towards executive positions.
- **Prioritize** the construction (or renovation) of inclusive washrooms to foster a greater sense of belonging among all employees.
- **Accelerate** changes to pronoun, gender markers and name-changing processes so as to reduce, if not eliminate, time-consuming steps that people in this community are forced to take in advocating for themselves.
- **Participate** in Pride events throughout the year, as your leadership will send clear signals that your organization is indeed diverse, equitable and inclusive.



We can support these discussions if you wish, as creating a safe and inclusive space for everyone in the public service is a collaborative challenge and opportunity.

Jason Bett (he | him | lui)

Public Service Pride Champion

