



New research reveals how existing office towers and K-12 schools can be retrofitted cost-effectively to improve accessibility

Study provides planners and government with recommendations that can be implemented immediately or over time

February 6, 2024, Traditional territory of the x̣ẉməθkwəỵ ̣əm (Musqueam) First Nation / Richmond, BC – The Rick Hansen Foundation (RHF) and architecture and design firm hcma, have published new research on the costs and strategies to retrofit existing office towers and schools to improve accessibility.

The extensive study estimates that RHF Accessibility Certified Gold can be achieved through upgrades **in an office tower at less than 0.5% of the replacement cost, and in a K-12 school for less than 1.5% of the replacement cost** (all buildings built between 1974-2019). The study outlines strategies that management can take to increase the feasibility of upgrades and to cost-effectively improve accessibility for people of all ages and abilities.

In Canada, almost 50% of adults have experienced a permanent or temporary physical disability or live with someone who has. [Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification™ \(RHFAC\)](#) is a national rating and recognition system that measures and certifies the level of meaningful access of buildings from the perspective of people with varying disabilities.

The new study included 10 RHFAC rated office towers (base building spaces only) and 10 RHFAC rated schools, all built between 1974-2019 in B.C. and Ontario, in or near large urban centres. The researchers then developed prototype buildings based on typical conditions and features of these sites to determine average costs to retrofit.

“Understanding what it takes to retrofit existing buildings and schools is critical to achieving an accessible country for people of all ages and abilities. I encourage building owners, managers, and designers to take a good hard look at this new research which provides helpful data on the costs to recuperate an accessibility retrofit over time. The study also highlights the numerous ways to improve accessibility at no to minimal cost with the goal of more inclusive school and work environments for everyone,” says Doramy Ehling, CEO, Rick Hansen Foundation.

Changes that improve building accessibility at no cost include relocating furniture and waste bins thereby clearing space and ensuring adequate clear widths and turning aisles. Changes that improve accessibility at minimal cost include introducing assistive listening systems at reception desks; adding braille lettering to directory boards and room signage; installing directional signage with prominent colour contrast; and moving washroom accessories and dispensers to accessible heights and locations. Examples of higher cost retrofits include upgrading fire alarm systems and creating accessible kitchens and universal washrooms.

The new research also shares the cost to retrofit to RHFAC Gold as a cost per square foot of gross floor area, calculated at \$1.50 for office buildings and \$9.00 for school buildings. When upgrades are amortized or completed over time periods of five, 10, or 15 years, those costs drop to as low as ten cents

and sixty cents per square foot, respectively.

Darryl Condon, Managing Principal of hcma, says: “The cost to achieve a meaningful level of access is remarkably low when building owners amortize the cost over time. Owners are constantly investing money to maintain and update their buildings. Dedicating cents per square foot to make these buildings more inclusive should be standard and expected.”

The report shows that funding barriers may be overcome through a phased implementation strategy that includes accessibility upgrades as part of planned project and maintenance upgrades, allowing costs to be amortized over time. Of the 99 potential upgrades identified for office buildings and the 167 identified for school buildings, approximately 60% cost \$50,000 or less. The study appendix includes comprehensive lists of all identified upgrades and their associated costs.

Important factors for owners and operators to consider when deciding which accessibility upgrades to undertake to improve meaningful access to their buildings include: life and safety; dignity; overall impact of upgrades; and integration with other currently planned upgrades.

Adds Ehling, “When considering that the core reasons to improve accessibility in our schools and workplaces are the health, safety, and dignity of our youth and community, eliminating barriers is essential. By making accessibility a priority, and planning wisely, we will get there faster.”

Access the [full research report](#) for details or the [summary infographic](#).

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About the Rick Hansen Foundation

The Rick Hansen Foundation (RHF) was established in 1988, following the completion of Rick Hansen’s Man In Motion World Tour. For over 35 years, RHF has worked to raise awareness, change attitudes, and remove barriers for people with disabilities. Visit www.rickhansen.com to learn more.

About hcma

hcma designs buildings, brands, and shared experiences that connect people. Because with collective strength, communities can work together to make a difference to the issues that matter. Collective strength empowers our practice too. Driven by relentless curiosity, we work as one to solve complex problems from every angle. Advocating for inclusive, accessible design that embraces everyone, promotes biodiversity, and minimizes environmental impact. www.hcma.ca

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