

A Disability Justice Pilot Project: Building a Culture of Radical Access at Hamilton Fringe

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Hamilton Fringe is committed to ensuring our festival is accessible to performers and audience members, and is working with the Disability Justice Network of Ontario (DJNO) to develop a pilot project for the 2020 Hamilton Fringe Festival. This pilot project currently consists of a *Disability Justice Category* for disabled people who live in Hamilton and accessibility measures for participants and patrons. This pilot is only a starting point to develop a more accessible Hamilton Fringe in future years. This document provides a summary of the pilot and our work so far.

Who & What is Hamilton Fringe?

Hamilton Fringe is made up of two full-time equivalent staff and one part-time staff who are responsible for producing the Hamilton Fringe Festival, ALERT Education Program, Frost Bites winter festival, and for the first time this Fall it will be launching the Hamilton Theatre Awards to stimulate the growth of professional theatre in Hamilton by recognizing the exceptional achievements of local artists.

Hamilton Fringe creates a platform for independent, emerging, and established theatre artists in Hamilton. By incorporating the Canadian Association of Fringe Festival's guiding principles our annual summer Fringe Festival is an accessible, inclusive, and engaging theatre experience. The five guiding principles are:

1. Participants are selected on a non-juried basis.
2. 100% of box office revenue is returned to participating artists.
3. Fringe producers have no control over artistic content of productions.
4. Festivals must remain affordable for all audiences and artists to participate.
5. Festivals will promote and model inclusivity, diversity and multiculturalism, and will endeavour to incorporate them into all aspects of our organizations.

The Fringe strives to make theatre welcoming and affordable to both theatre makers and audience members (tickets range from \$5-\$12).

Hamilton Fringe creates artistic opportunities for artists with different levels of experience and from a diversity of cultures—offering artists from the local, national, and international theatre scene the opportunity to take creative risks and to access a broader audience.

What is “Disability?”

Hamilton Fringe’s description of “disability” is broad and works off of the “social model of disability,” it recognizes that being disabled is an evolving experience, and the experience of disability depends on contextual factors such as financial, attitudinal, informational, and environmental barriers.¹ A “disability” could be present at birth, caused by an accident, developed over time, or episodic. Hamilton Fringe works off the Ontario Human Rights Code’s description of disability:

“Section 10 of the Code defines ‘disability’ as:

1. any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical co-ordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device,
2. a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability,
3. a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language,
4. a mental disorder, or
5. an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997.”²

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act

¹ <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability/2-what-disability>

² <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-ableism-and-discrimination-based-disability/2-what-disability>

“The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA) became law on June 13, 2005. Under this landmark legislation, the government of Ontario developed mandatory accessibility standards that identify, remove and prevent barriers for people with disabilities in key areas of daily living.”³

Hamilton Fringe is working towards and beyond legislation and rights to remove financial, attitudinal, informational, and environmental barriers for disabled performers and audience members. Beyond just thinking of our performers and audience members as “customers,” we are committed to their success and their social inclusion and aim to cultivate a culture of radical access.

What Makes This Year a Pilot?

At our initial consultation this past summer, Hamilton Fringe witnessed community interest and saw the urgency of launching a *Disability Justice Category* this year. However, we opted to call this year a pilot because we recognize limitations in our finances and our human resources.

Hamilton Fringe is currently working with DJNO to build the infrastructure to meaningfully include disabled performers and audience members. We are working off of best practices from [A Guide to Theatre Access](#), [AODA](#), [the Toronto Fringe Festival](#), [Theatre Passe Muraille](#), and [Sins Invalid](#).

However, we recognize that Hamilton has a unique context—it is a smaller city with few accessible performance venues, has the highest proportion of people with disabilities in the province, and is comprised of a different demographic than comparison cities. The Hamilton context likely produces different kinds of barriers to participation and we want to ensure that we better understand these experiences, so that they inform our future programming. Hamilton Fringe will be transparent with performers and audience members when it knows spaces and procedures are not accessible during this pilot process and in the future.

Hamilton Fringe and DJNO will be conducting **three community consultations on November 26th, 2019, May 19th, 2020, and July 21st,**

³ <https://www.aoda.ca>

2020. We will also have online and embedded surveys and alternate ways to provide feedback throughout the year.

What Has Been Done So Far & Our Commitment for 2020 Hamilton Fringe's Disability Justice Pilot Project

The major component of the Disability Justice Pilot Project will be the *Disability Justice Lottery Category*, which is a dedicated category for disabled applicants in Hamilton with a waived application and participation fee and a \$1,000 bursary. This pilot will also work towards making our programming accessible for our general performers and audience members.

General Accessibility for Performers and Audience Members

Hamilton Fringe sees that cultural and artistic events are necessary for social inclusion and recognizes that social isolation is experienced by disabled people as a result of inaccessible spaces, policies, and procedures. Hamilton Fringe is taking the following steps to address the financial, attitudinal, informational, and environmental barriers in our venue, programming, website, and outreach.

Venue

Hamilton Fringe and DJNO conducted a walk-through of Theatre Aquarius, the only fully accessible performance space in Hamilton, to ensure it is fully accessible to performers and audience members during the festival. We assessed the theatre's parking, curb cuts, entrances, lobby, elevators, performance spaces, washrooms and backstage space, and accessibility by public transit.

The space is fully physically accessible by audience members with wheelchairs, mobility devices, and service animals. A map, with alternate and accessible routes to Theatre Aquarius will be available on the website. There will be designated accessible seating and different options for seating will be provided to audience members.

Hamilton Fringe will work with the *Disability Justice Lottery Category* participant to ensure that the backstage is also fully accessible by conducting an initial walk-through with them, anticipating any barriers, and hiring support workers if needed.

Programming

Fringe will develop a webinar with DJNO for all Fringe participants to explain the necessity of accessibility in performance spaces. The webinar will include adaptive measures, such as [ASL interpretation](#), [live audio transcription](#), [relaxed performances](#) and late entry, which performers can include in their shows to make them more accessible.

All participating companies will have the option to offer at least one relaxed performance. A brief announcement before these shows will explain relaxed performances to the audience. Fringe will also alter its policy on late entry, allowing audience members to enter any up to a time specified by the performer.

Fringe and DJNO will conduct an accessibility training with all festival volunteers and staff prior to the festival.

Fringe will hire support workers for audience members with disabilities who request it.

Website

Hamilton Fringe's website is in the process of being redesigned, and will incorporate learnings from this [accessibility course](#) and [checklist](#).

Outreach

The lottery event will be advertised using [accessible social media](#) and [accessible marketing guidelines](#).

Recognizing that theatre programming like Fringe has historically had barriers to participation by disabled performers, Fringe will be making a short, plain-language, captioned video explaining Fringe, and the *Disability*

Justice Lottery Category and its application process to potential participants. Fringe will also conduct targeted outreach to organizations who provide services to disabled people in Hamilton.

Venues that are accessible/inaccessible and performances with/without adaptive measures, will be clearly identified on all promotional material. The Hamilton Fringe website will explain adaptive measures such as ASL interpretation, live audio transcription, and relaxed performances to potential audience members.

The Disability Justice Lottery Category

Meaningful inclusion is about ensuring that those who have had barriers to participation and have had a lack of opportunity believe they can meaningfully participate in our festival. Hamilton Fringe is taking the following steps in our *Disability Justice Lottery Category* to address the financial, attitudinal, informational, and environmental barriers in the application, selection, planning, practice, and performance processes.

Application and Selection Process

Anyone who identifies as disabled applies to this lottery category through an application process hosted by [Eventotron.com](https://www.eventotron.com) website. The \$25 application fee will be waived and if selected, the \$650 participation fee will also be waived. Applicants may also apply to the Hamilton and/or Ontario 60 Minute Lottery categories, in which case, if selected they would be required to pay the \$25 application fee as well as the \$650 participation fee. The Disability Justice Lottery will be drawn first. Applicants who are not drawn and who have opted into the Hamilton and/or Ontario 60 Minute Lotteries will be entered into these lotteries automatically. The Hamilton Fringe will notify applicants if they have been drawn in the Hamilton or Ontario 60 Minutes Lotteries and the full participation fee will be due immediately.

Participants will be selected through a lottery, ensuring equal opportunity.

Recognizing that publicly identifying as disabled may have negative financial, employment, housing, and social consequences, applicants who would prefer to be anonymous must contact Hamilton Fringe for further direction. The *Disability Justice Lottery Category* on Eventotron will include an option to keep their category identity private in marketing material. However, the festival acknowledges that this process is not completely anonymous as there are ways for people with access to the final program to back-check the list of successful applicants with the list of categories.

Planning the Show

A bursary of \$1,000 will be provided to the *Disability Justice Lottery Category* participant.

The Hamilton Fringe will conduct an intake meeting, and a venue walk-through with the selected participant for the *Disability Justice Lottery Category* and construct a personalized accessibility plan. This accessibility plan will incorporate such things as back-up plans, ASL interpretation, captioning, or support workers during the planning stages and the performance.

Meaningful inclusion during the show's planning means helping performers who have had barriers to participation develop the necessary skills to succeed. It is about being attentive to the financial, physical, and social barriers, and proactively putting measures in place before programming begins, so that disabled folks are not teaching themselves new skills, encountering barriers, and advocating for their access needs while simultaneously planning their show. The intake meeting will consult with the participant to identify gaps and coordinate one-on-ones with mentors when needed.

The Hamilton Fringe already provides mentorship and training opportunities to its participants, and it will use universal design principles to make these [presentations](#) and [meetings](#) accessible. It will record and caption these events to be viewed at any time by participants, and include different formats when needed.

Disability Justice Lottery Category participants will have the option to increase the time with the assigned technician beyond the 3-hour basic allotment to run through and troubleshoot their show.

Performance

The Disability Justice Lottery Category will be assigned a 60-minute performance slot. A total of 115 minutes (instead of 85 minutes) will be allocated to the Disability Justice Lottery Category participants for their show, to accommodate any additional time needed for the set up and take down.

The personal accessibility plan, as discussed with the participant, which will include adaptive measures as well as personalized access needs will be carried out on the day of the performance.

Future Steps

The Hamilton Fringe is:

- Currently in the process of applying for grants to hire a dedicated accessibility coordinator, pending funding
- Working with DJNO to create an accessibility policy
- Working with DJNO to review our other policies