



Guidebook *for* Financial Inclusion

By the Inclusive Design Research Centre at OCAD University

Table of contents

About this Guidebook	2
The Case for Financial Inclusion	5
Frameworks for Financial Inclusion	9
Narratives for Financial Inclusion	18
Activities & Worksheets	57
Sources	64
Credits	66

About this **Guidebook**

About this guidebook

While finances may not be something we think about every day, how we live, work, and survive is deeply shaped by our financial situation. This guidebook offers a window into the experiences of people who face barriers when interacting with the financial system and trying to access the resources they need for stability.

It presents tools to help your team expand their understanding of potential clients—especially those often overlooked when financial products and services are designed. Our narratives help build empathy and broaden perspective, while the frameworks support assessment and planning. Each tool can be used on its own or in combination, depending on your team's needs and goals.

We see this as a living, evolving resource—meant to start conversations and inspire your team to build upon what's there as people's needs and contexts continue to shift. We hope the tools in this guidebook spark curiosity, empathy, and a stronger commitment to creating financial systems that are truly inclusive and accessible.

How this came about

The Inclusive Design Research Centre ran a project called Partnerships for Financial Inclusion, focused on understanding the barriers and approaches that diverse people with disabilities had in accessing financial systems.

Through a series of co-design workshops that were led in collaboration with our community partners, the IDRC team engaged with members of five different community groups who generously shared their experiences in navigating financial institutions. This largely includes Disabled and Deaf people, as well as members of other historically marginalized groups.

Our team then synthesized the reports, sought feedback from the community leaders, and published a full in-depth report. This guidebook is meant to frame those research insights in a way that's catered to teams who work on financial services and products.

The Case *for* **Financial Inclusion**

Why are so many people still left out of banking?

As we explore how people interact with financial institutions in Canada, we question

Why are nearly 1 million people—3% of Canadians—unbanked?

That means they have no account at any mainstream financial institution. (Financial Consumer Agency of Canada, 2024)

Why are almost 5 million people—15% of Canadians—underbanked?

They may have a basic bank account, but can't rely on it for day-to-day needs, forcing them to turn to payday lenders, cheque cashers, or informal systems. (ACORN Canada, 2023)

Why are some groups more excluded than others?

73% of people with disabilities say they've faced at least one barrier when interacting with federally regulated organizations like banks (McDiarmid, 2021). People who are low-income, racialized, newcomers, rural residents,

seniors, unhoused, or without ID are far more likely to be unbanked or underbanked. (Chollangi, 2022)

These are the same people who often need safe, affordable, and reliable financial services the most. So why aren't they getting them?

Why this matters

The number of people facing barriers to the financial system—whether due to disability, low digital literacy, unstable housing, limited ID, or nontraditional income—is not small.

They are not outliers. They represent a significant and growing segment of the Canadian population. When banks overlook these customers in their products, programs, and services, they are not just excluding people—they are walking away from a massive underserved market.

Financial institutions that recognize and remove these barriers can:

Expand market reach

Millions remain underserved. Designing with them in mind opens the door to new clients and new forms of value exchange.

Build long-term loyalty

People remember how they're treated—especially in moments of vulnerability. Inclusive service builds trust, retention, and lifetime value.

Reduce risk

Regulators and the public are demanding more social responsibility. Exclusion—whether intentional or systemic—can quickly become a legal and reputational liability.

Foster innovation

Designing for edge cases often leads to better solutions for everyone. Many now-standard features—like curb cuts or voice assistants—originated from disability-led innovation.

Future-proof financial systems

As technology and demographics shift, so do expectations. Institutions that adapt to diverse needs will lead in resilience and relevance.

Building financial systems for everyone

Inclusive design isn't about "fixing" people—it's about fixing systems that weren't built for everyone. Financial services shape daily life, so making them accessible is not optional—it's essential.

This is more than a business opportunity. It's a responsibility. When people are excluded from banking, they lose access to basic tools for stability and participation in society.

Designing for inclusion is an act of dignity. It affirms that everyone deserves a fair chance to build a life of choice, agency, and security. In a world where financial systems define what's possible, equity isn't a bonus, it's justice.

Frameworks *for* **Financial Inclusion**

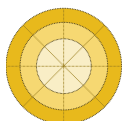
Introducing financial inclusion frameworks

People's financial states are not only products of their individual action, but often influenced by systemic and environmental factors. Because of this, our narratives demonstrate both barriers at an individual level and a systemic level. We use two frameworks to explain this:



Individual level: Hierarchy of needs at Financial Institutions

This framework explores the different needs individuals have when interacting with financial institutions, and the barriers they encounter at each stage.



Systems level: Wheel of Financial stability

The framework zooms out and consider the wider and interconnected environmental and systemic factors that shape and influence financial interactions.

Hierarchy of needs at financial institutions

Inspired by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this framework outlines different layers of financial services people need, starting with basic access and moving toward long-term financial planning. Like a foundation, the bottom layers need to be achieved before people can move upward.

1. Financial touchpoints

Barriers to: Bank branches, ATM's, online banking, banking equipment and artifacts

2. Financial transactions

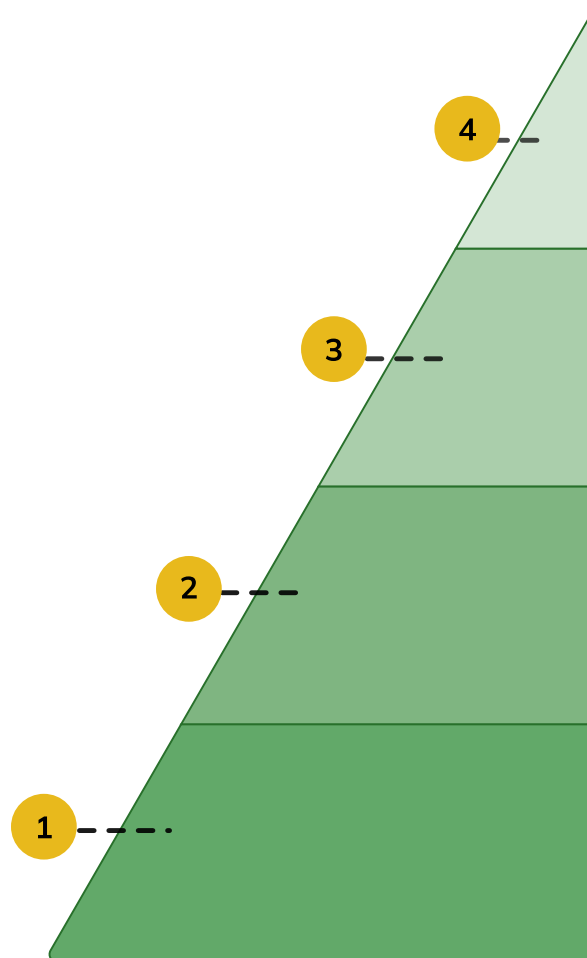
Barriers to: Opening an account, depositing and withdrawing funds, making purchases, POS systems

3. Financial management

Barriers to: Money management, budgeting, using and managing credit

4. Financial advice and planning

Barriers to: Disability-specific financial advising, future planning

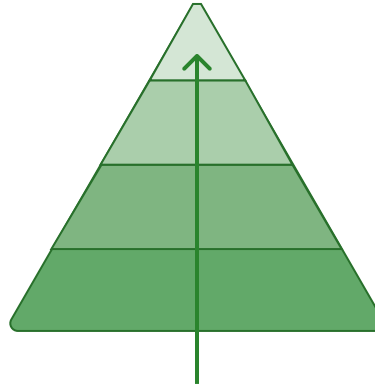


Why this matters

This hierarchy not only offers a framework to outline the barriers people

face with financial services, it also helps financial institutions build stronger relationships with their clients. Before earning someone's trust to plan their financial future, you must first ensure they can open an account or even enter a branch.

1. **Building trust**
2. **Deepening relationship**
3. **Establishing loyalty**



How to use this framework

As an assessment tool

Use the framework to evaluate where your current clients face friction in interacting with your products and services. Identify pain points across different levels of access and engagement.

As a planning tool

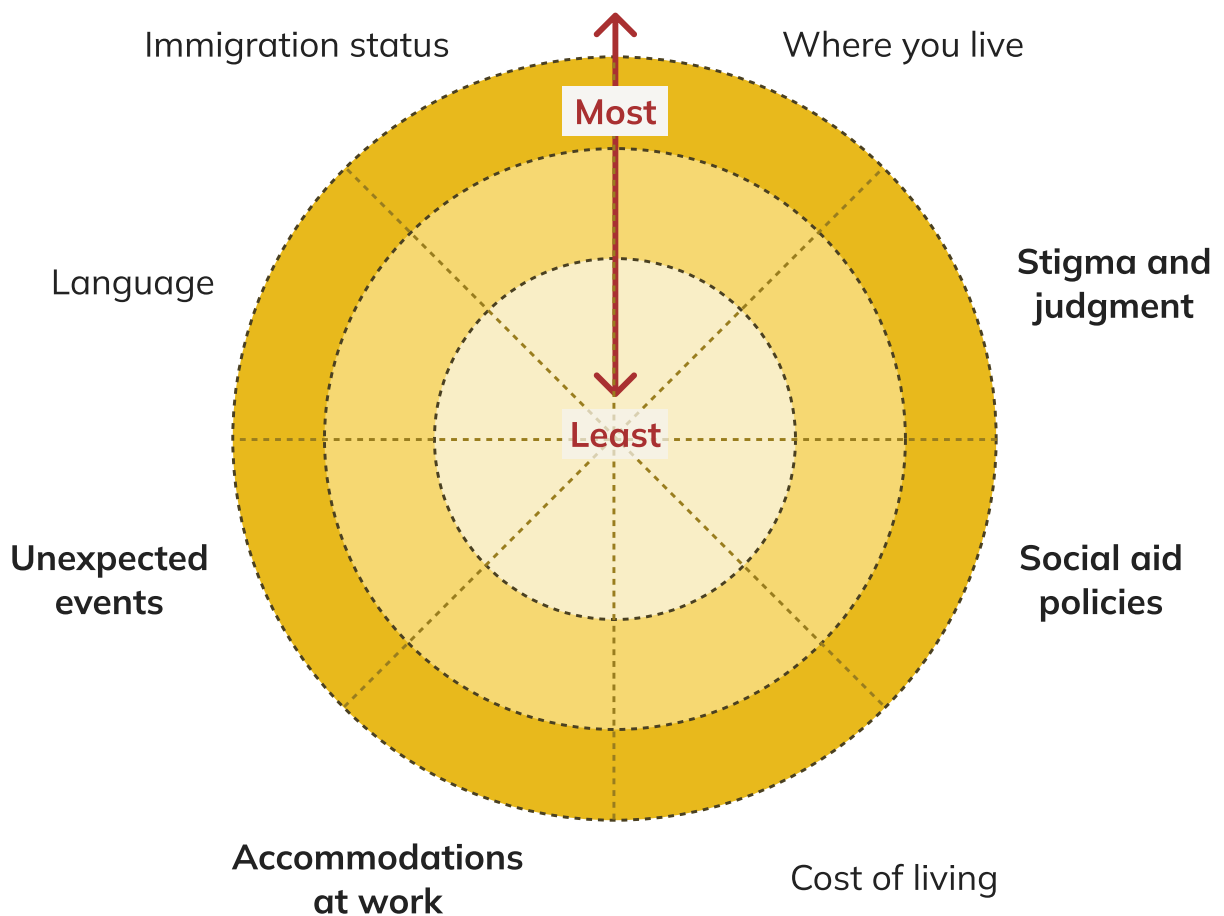
If you're targeting a specific group, use the framework to map their current relationship with your institution. Then, plan how to help them move upward in this model—toward fuller financial inclusion.

Wheel of financial stability

This wheel demonstrates the systemic and environmental factors that impact your customers' ability to achieve financial stability.

Factors

Each factor makes up a “slice” of the wheel. Together, all the slices form the full picture.



- Where you live
- Stigma and judgement
- Social aid policies
- Cost of living
- Accommodations at work
- Unexpected events
- Language

- Immigration status

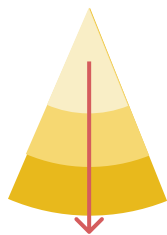
Level of Impact

Each person can be more or less impacted by each factor. The more impacted one is, the more systemic barriers they face to achieving financial stability.

Breakdown of the different factors

Where you live

Where one lives affects their access to essential services, like healthcare and financial services. This also affects their access to affordable essentials, like groceries or household items.



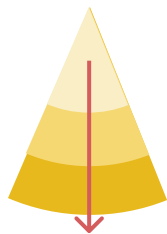
Least impact: Urban, suburban

Some impact: Rural

Most impact: Remote

Stigma and judgment

One's appearance can affect the stigma and judgment others hold toward them, and can result in being more vulnerable to scammed or refused services.



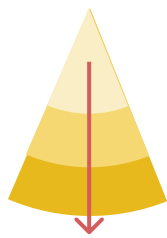
Least impact: Appearing like the majority

Some impact: Appearing visibly different than the majority

Most impact: Appearing homeless, in a mental health crisis, or visibly disabled

Social aid policies

Social aid can have policies that are exclusionary. For example, disability programs limit how much money one can make before they are disqualified. However, this amount is often not enough to meet the cost of living.



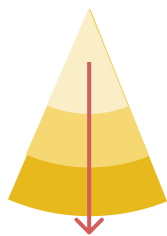
Least impact: Don't need social aid

Some impact: Qualified, but with income capped

Most impact: Don't qualify due to fluctuating income, barriers to applying, or being in a common law relationship

Cost of living

Wages are not keeping up with the cost of living. Depending on how much income one makes, they may be more impacted.



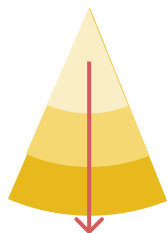
Least impact: Enough income, plus extra

Some impact: Living paycheque to paycheque, no extra savings

Most impact: On social aid, no or limited income

Employment accommodations

One's ability to gain and retain employment is subject to whether their employer accommodates their needs.



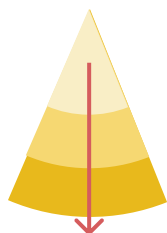
Least impact: Fully accommodated

Some impact: Partially accommodated

Most impact: Not accommodated

Unexpected events

Collective events like the pandemic or a natural disaster, or personal events like a medical emergency can easily throw one off financial stability.



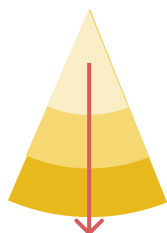
Least impact: Have support, funds or income

Some impact: Some community and family support, emergency fund or income

Most impact: No community, family, and income or emergency fund

Language

One's ability to read and understand the dominant language fluently can affect whether they're able to understand financial information and navigate the financial system.



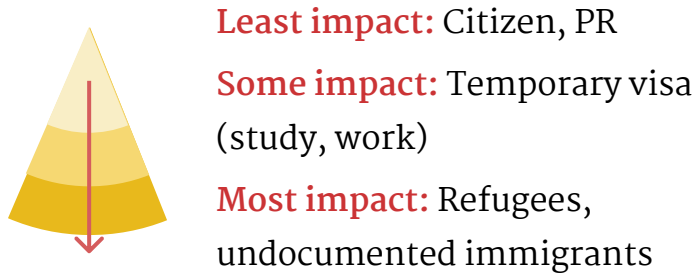
Least impact: Uses English or French fluently

Some impact: Uses English or French partially

Most impact: Doesn't use English or French

Immigration status

One's immigration status can deeply impact their ability to earn money, gain employment, and access capital.



Why this matters

A way of understanding exclusion: This framework helps you understand who is likely to encounter the most barriers when dealing with financial institutions. The more impacted they are, the more they are your “edge users”. Based on Inclusive Design principles, solving for the edge will inevitably meet the needs of those in the middle, leading to more innovative, robust, and future-proof solutions.

How to use this framework

You can use this as a tool to map how well your products and services are serving these different customer groups—and how far you can make it to the edge. These results can then be used to plan future research and accessibility testing initiatives.

Narratives *for* **Financial Inclusion**

Introducing the narratives

The following four narratives are composites, rooted in real lived experiences. They are tools for designers, researchers, and financial product and services teams to better understand the barriers many of their clients face—and the opportunities for change.

Each narrative connects a personal story to the financial frameworks introduced in this guide, showing both systemic and individual-level challenges. The user journey also shows two realities—one current reality that is blocked by existing barriers, and one alternative reality that imagines a future with greater access. Each narrative ends with practical recommendations, and an activity that challenges you to hold in mind the people in each narrative and look for points of friction or exclusion present in your own services and products.

These narratives reflect just a small part of the diverse needs current and future clients may have. Use them as a starting point to ask questions, seek understanding, and ultimately engage with other perspectives not represented here.



Narrative 1

Accessing funds for unhoused people with disabilities

The research

235,000 people in Canada experience homelessness each year. (Dionne *et al.*, 2023)

1 in 10 Canadians have experienced hidden homelessness, which means staying in temporary accommodations—like couch surfing, staying with friends or family, or sleeping in cars. (Ali, 2018)

Having two or more disabilities is strongly correlated with hidden homelessness. (Ali, 2018)

Canadians who use antidepressants and other similar medication were two times more likely to experience hidden homelessness. (Ali, 2018)

People who are unhoused have money—they just can't access it due to barriers with their financial institution. (Hung *et al.*, 2024)

James, 21

Edmonton, Alberta

James lives with chronic depression. While some days he can manage his symptoms, other days it's impossible for him to get out of bed. He's often called lazy or undisciplined by his family, but he finds it extremely difficult to tell them how his depression makes him feel like he can't move or speak. What's even more frustrating is that he wants to get a job and live independently—but he can't, and that sends him deeper into shame.

Unexpected events

James' mother, who was the only family he had who accepted his sexual orientation, had recently passed away. Since he lived with his mom, he had to move out of their rental—and his other family members wouldn't take him in. Moving frequently between temporary accommodations, James struggled to maintain stable housing—which continues to send him deeper into depression.

Stigma and judgment

Life in shelters means inconsistent access to showers and laundry, and his belongings are often stolen. As a result, James sometimes appears disheveled, which leads to visible judgment and discomfort from others—especially in formal settings like banks, where he feels particularly stigmatized.

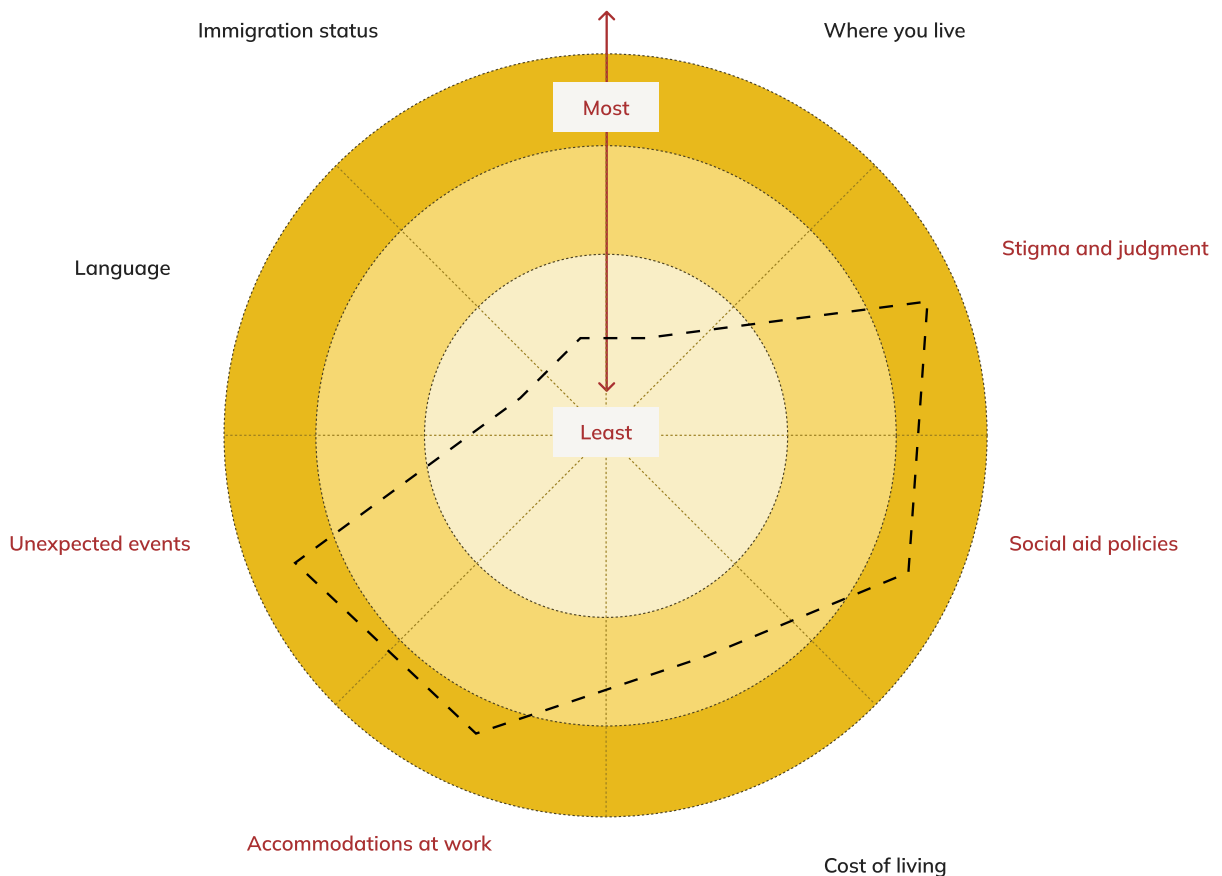
Accommodations at work

Due to his depression flare ups, James has been unable to hold down full time jobs. He's tried taking on seasonal or short-term construction work,

but it often has rigid schedules that he can't follow. Flexible jobs are hard to find, especially ones that understand his mental health needs.

Social aid benefits

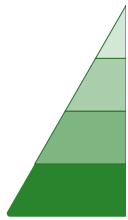
Social services got James on disability benefits. However, when James is able to work, he has to carefully monitor his income to avoid surpassing the earnings threshold that would put his benefits at risk. This low limit discourages him from working more hours, even when he's able to, and makes it nearly impossible to build up any meaningful savings.



Barriers to accessing financial institutions

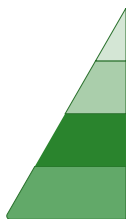
While living in shelters, James had his belongings stolen, including his phone and his wallet, which contained all of his ID, debit card, and credit cards. Without these, he's unable to access the small amount of money he had saved in his bank account whether through an ATM, at a bank branch, or online.

Access to financial touchpoints



- James can't access ATMs without a debit card
- He faces challenges entering bank branches due to stigma related to his appearance, and he lacks ID and a permanent address, both often required for in-person banking
- He can't access online banking because he doesn't have his card number or access to his phone for multi-factor authentication.

Access to basic financial transactions

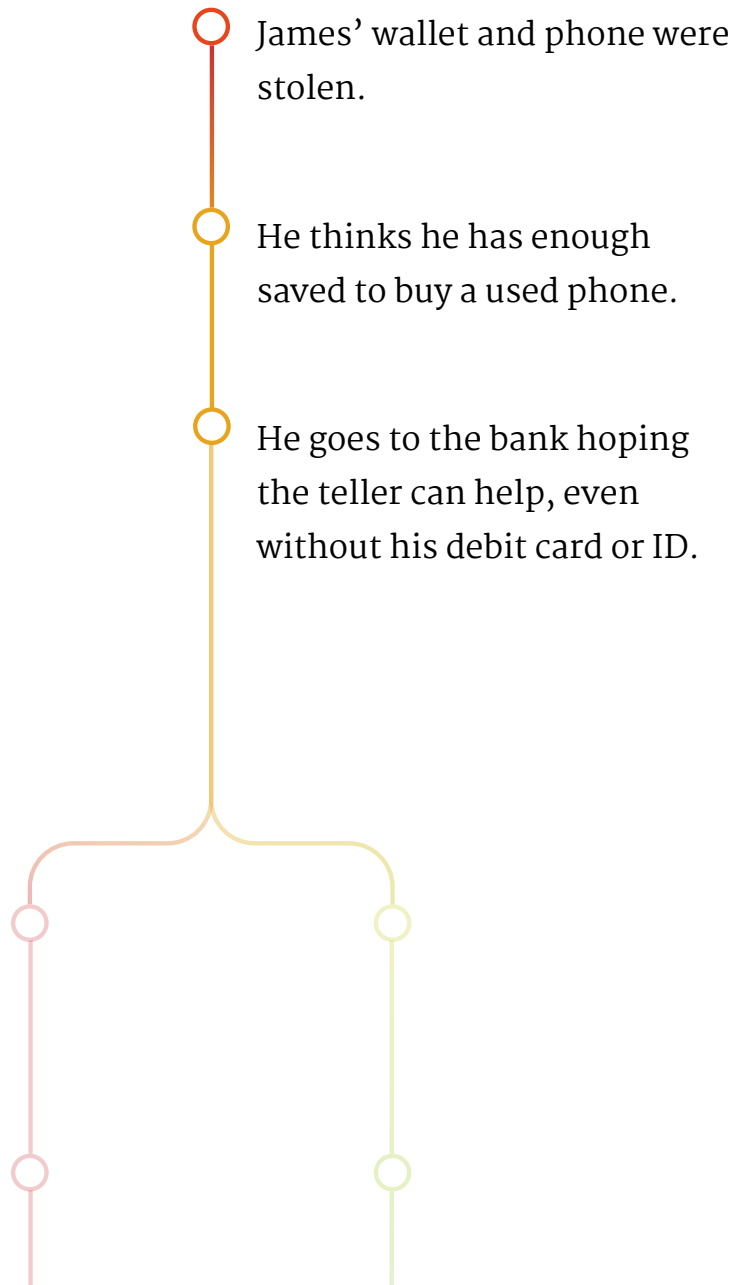


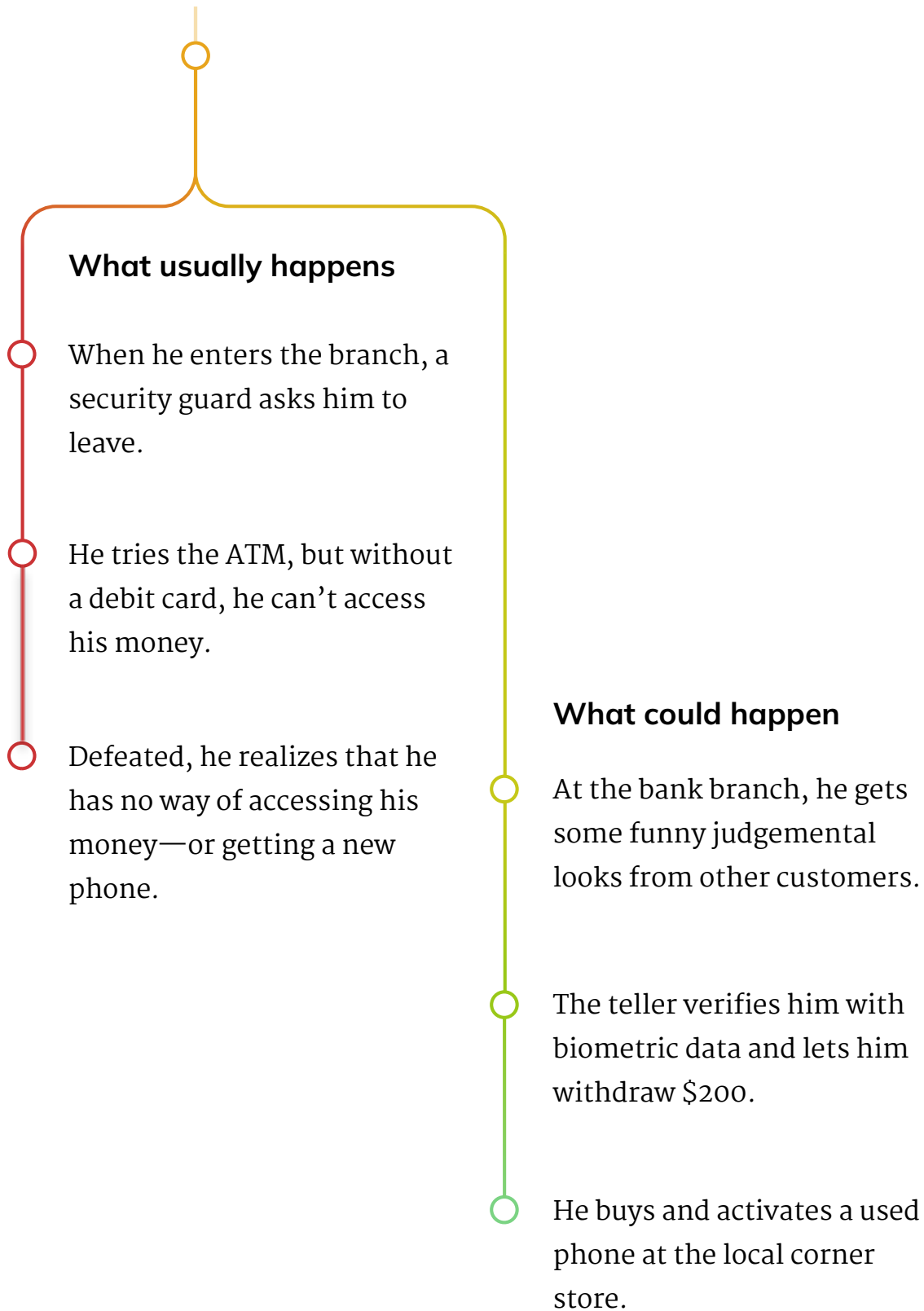
- Because of limited forms of ID, he can't open bank accounts or open credit products
- Any interaction that requires multi-factor authentication may be difficult as he may not have access to a second device

Current & ideal state journey map

Scenario

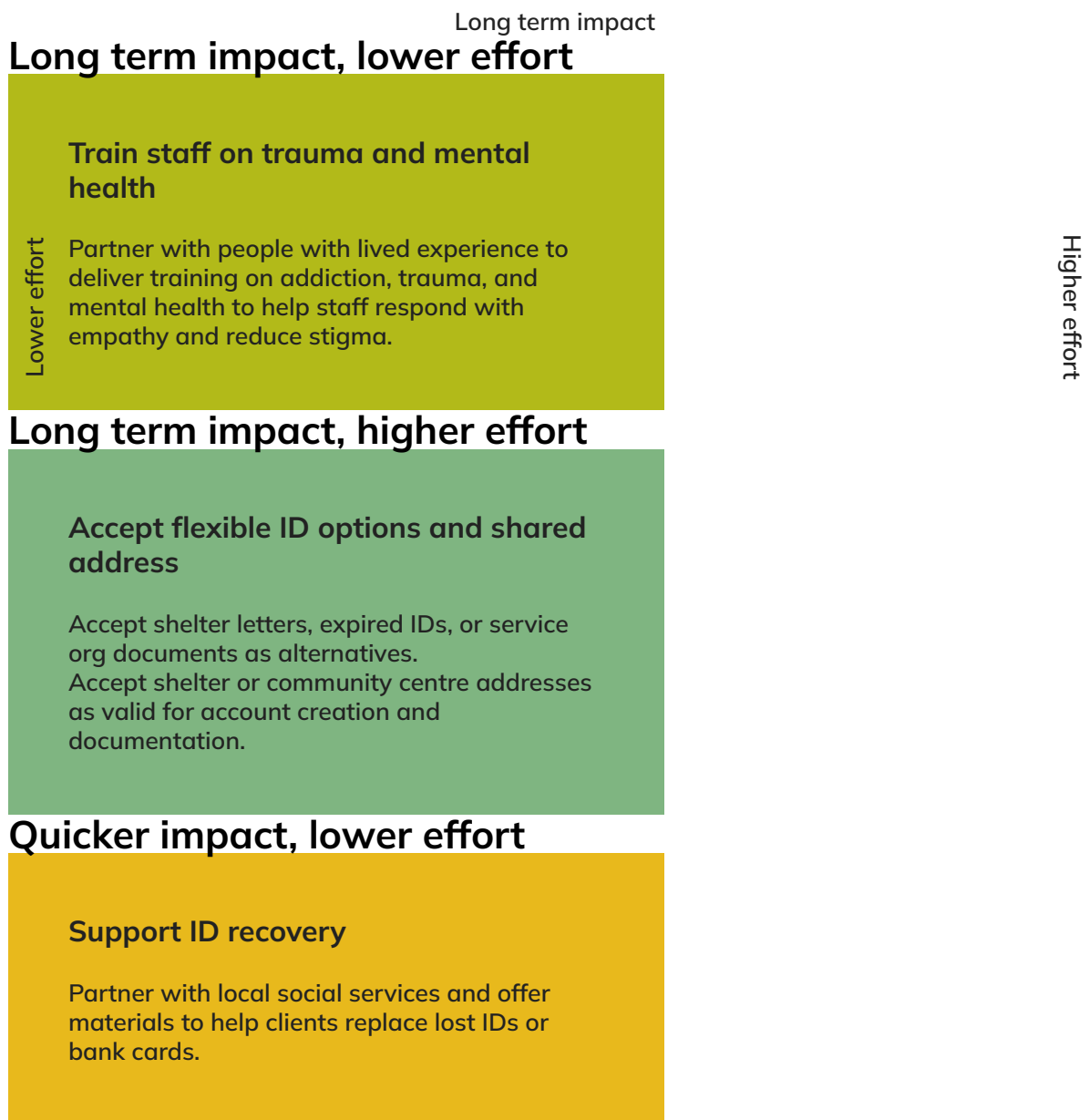
James is trying to withdraw some of his savings to pay for a used phone—his old one was stolen, and he needs a phone number to be contacted for any benefits, programs, or jobs he applies for





Exploring possibilities: Quick wins to big moves

Here are examples to spark ideas for serving clients like James. We use a 2x2 grid to show the scale of effort and impact.



Mobile banking events

Partner with local outreach services to deliver workshops, banking events, and financial education

Quicker impact, higher effort**Offer alternative authentication**

Consider alternative ways to access accounts besides bank cards and ID, such as biometric authentication.

Quicker impact

Edge User Deep Dive: James

After learning about James, consider his life experiences and answer the following questions. How much of your institution's products and services can he access?

Can James...

1. Access your financial touchpoints?

How might James feel safe and welcome at your branch?

2. Access your financial transactions?

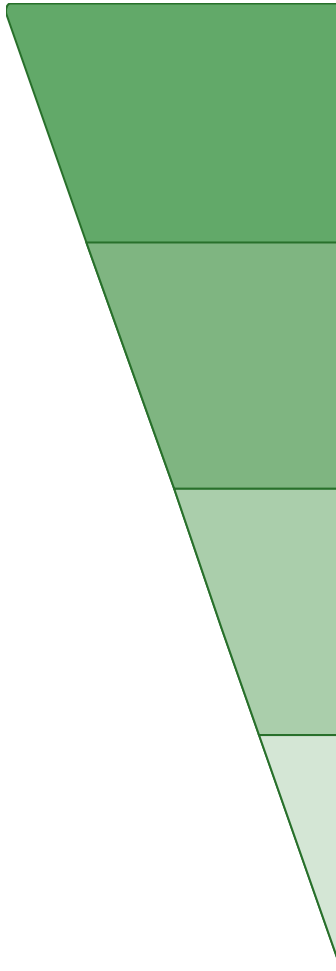
How might James access his funds without a bank card or ID?

3. Access your financial management?

How might James be supported in managing his finances given his transitional situation and fluctuating expenses?

4. Access your financial advising?

How might James be supported in planning for long term stability and growth?



Narrative 2

Going to the bank for remote Indigenous seniors with disabilities

The research

The lack of access to banking services has disproportionate effect on Indigenous peoples. (Share, 2023)

On average, people living on First Nation reserves must travel about 25 km to reach a bank (compared to 9km for rural Canadians). (Chen et al., 2023)

Only 24% of Indigenous households have access to high-speed internet (compared to 37% of rural households). (Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2022)



Althea, 67

Pond Inlet, Nunavut

Althea is an Inuk woman living in a small community in Nunuvut. She has low vision due to diabetes and uses a magnifier for reading. She currently relies on her granddaughter and neighbours to help her do admin tasks, as she avoids doing tasks online—both because of the spotty internet coverage in her community, and because she finds most websites inaccessible and hard to navigate.

Language

While she can converse in English, she's much more comfortable talking in Inuktitut, her native language. Reading in English can be challenging, especially since her vision is limited.

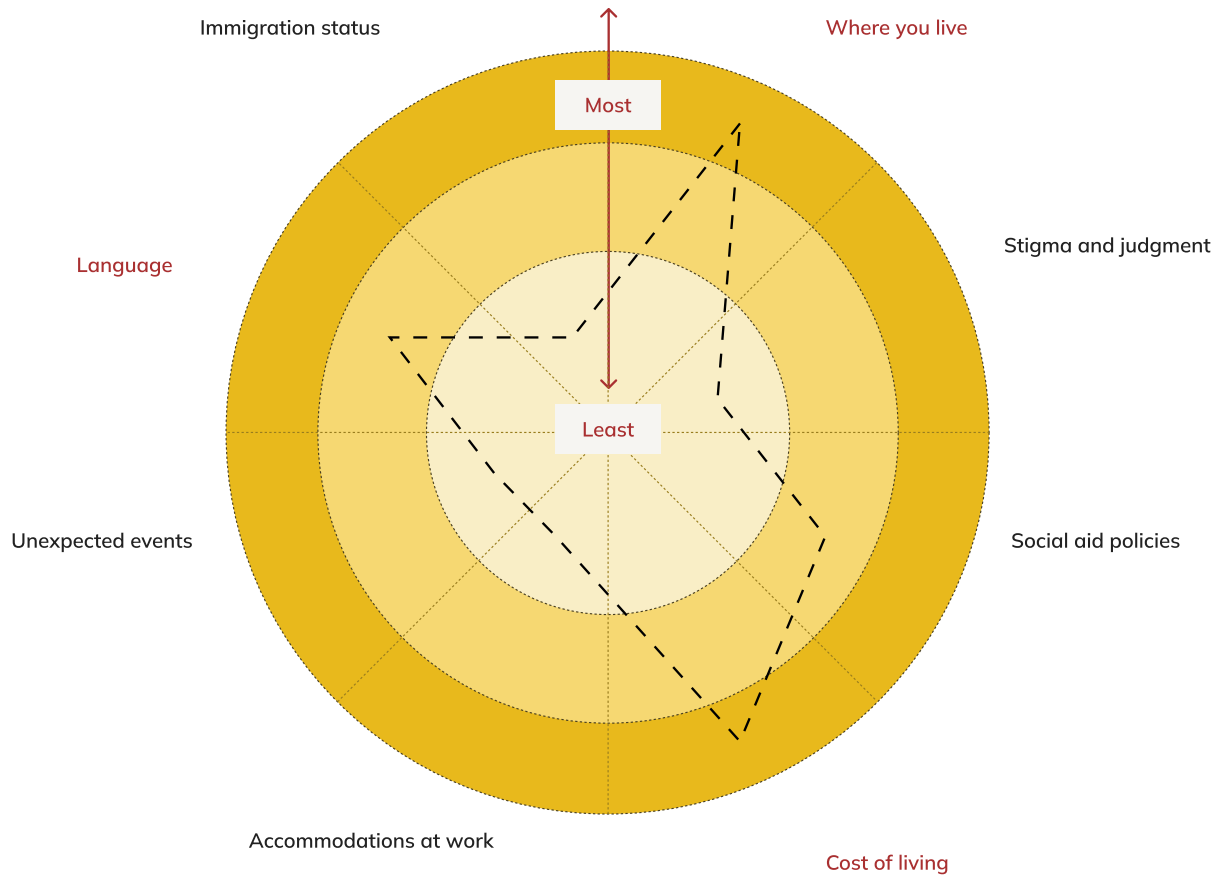
Social aid policy

She's on her province's disability support program, and sometimes makes a little cash on the side playing bingo or other games in her community. While she's able to work basic jobs, she doesn't want to risk having additional income compromise her benefits, housing, and other medical support she's able to get for her disability.

Where she lives & cost of living

Living in a remote town in the North means that everything costs more—groceries cost more, items ordered online have a higher shipping cost, and the cost of going to medical appointments (which are more frequent as she ages) is equivalent to the cost of a plane ticket down to a southern province. As she ages, she's not sure how much she can keep up

anymore—especially since disability benefit amounts don't increase.

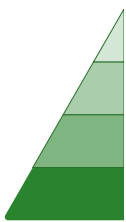


Barriers to accessing financial institutions

She receives her pension and disability benefits via direct deposit but has no access to online banking or mobile apps. In her town, there's no bank. The only access to banking she has is to an ATM machine at the only grocery store in town, which closes at 6:00 pm. Because she doesn't have a license, she relies on friends to drive her to the ATM when they're available, and help her use the ATM to withdraw cash (her community is still very cash-based).

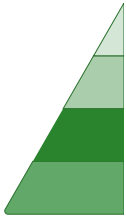
While she is forced to trust her community, she's always scared of being taken advantage of. What if someone doesn't give her all of the cash she withdraws from the ATM? What if someone at the till who's helping her count her money takes a bit more than they should? What if the cab driver charges her more than what the trip costs? What if someone who knows her PIN number uses it?

Access to financial touchpoints



- No access to bank branches
- Difficulty accessing ATMs due to grocery store hours
- Difficulty accessing online banking due to internet instability in remote regions and not having regular access to a computer or device.

Access to **basic financial transactions**



- Interacting with ATM needs to be assisted
- Paying with cash needs to be assisted
- Paying at a POS system needs to be assisted
- All of this increases her risk of fraud and scams

Current & ideal state journey map

Scenario

Althea needs cash for her diabetes medication and groceries. It's icy outside, so she waits all morning for her granddaughter to walk her to the store.





What usually happens

The store owners remind her that the ATM shuts down with the store.

Without a debit card that supports audio or large text, she finds the ATM hard to use and feels uncomfortable asking the store owners for help.

She feels anxious, dependent, and worried about not having enough cash at hand until the next day.

What could happen

Althea goes to the ATM, which has recently been moved to a secure, heated booth with 24/7 access.

Machine upgraded with a large-print screen, tactile buttons, voice guided prompts in Inuktitut and English, and a screen reader mode.

She takes out the amount she needs, confidently follows the voice instructions, and is done in minutes. Althea feels proud and independent.

Exploring possibilities: Quick wins to big moves

Here are examples to spark ideas for serving clients like Althea. We use a 2x2 grid to show the scale of effort and impact.

Long term impact

Long term impact, lower effort

Train staff in disability confidence

Work with trainers with lived experience in being disabled and Deaf to train existing and new staff on respectful communication and assistive tools.

Lower effort

Higher effort

Long term impact, higher effort

Aim for accessible excellence in banking

Work with the disability community to ensure all of your touchpoints, including branches, ATMs, services, and digital platforms meet accessibility standards.

Quicker impact, lower effort

Accessible forms and documents

Design forms and documents with clear labels, organized information, and screen reader compatibility.

Accessible signage

Use large-print, high-contrast, and braille signage and wayfinding within branches.

Quicker impact, higher effort**Continuous testing and improvement**

Engage with a cross disability and intersectional community for research and continual testing to improve the accessibility digital touchpoints. Meet the latest version of WCAG AA at a minimum.

Quicker impact

Edge User Deep Dive: Althea

After learning about Althea, consider her life experiences and answer the following questions. How much of your institution's products and services can she access?

Can Althea...

1. Access your financial touchpoints?

How might Althea be supported to have wider access to ATM's, in-person banking, and online banking?

2. Access your financial transactions?

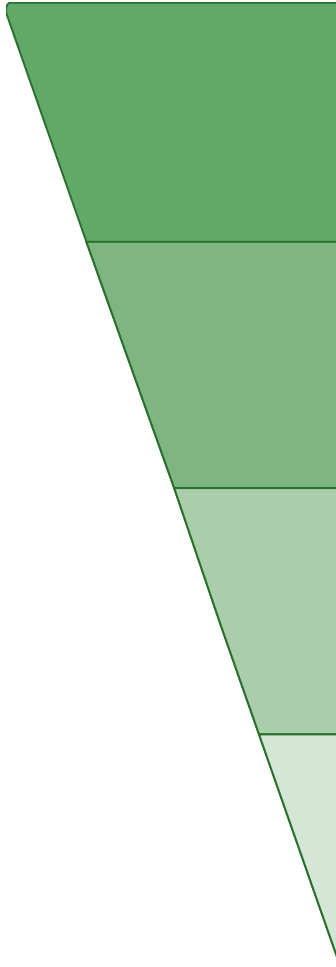
How might Althea be able to deposit and withdraw funds with confidence?


3. Access your financial management?

How might Althea be alerted to any potential fraud or unauthorized transactions on her account?

4. Access your financial advising?

How might Althea learn about disability-related financial products to sustain her through her retirement years?





Narrative 3

Managing finances for racialized single parents with disabilities

The Research

Racialized Canadians—about 26% of the population—frequently report poor treatment and bias when dealing with financial institutions. They are more likely to be pitched inappropriate financial products compared to non-racialized customers. (Share, 2023)

In Canada, about 1 in 3 women experience economic abuse—meaning their partner controls access to money, coerces debt, or sabotages employment. (Canadian Centre for Financial Well-Being & Economic Abuse Awareness, 2023)

In 2020, nearly 26% of individuals in single-parent families lived on a low income—almost four times the rate for couple families with children. (Statistics Canada, 2023)

Lakshmi, 23 (and Naya, 5)

Surrey, British Columbia

Lakshmi and her daughter Naya have been living in social housing for a few months now. She immigrated to Canada with her ex-husband, who had complete control over their family finances. After leaving the marriage suddenly, Lakshmi feels relieved to be in a safe and stable home but also overwhelmed. Having a learning disability makes it even more difficult to focus and manage finances on her own.

Unexpected events

Lakshmi didn't expect to become a single mother so abruptly. With no Canadian work experience, it's been difficult to find a job or earn enough to meet basic needs.

Immigration status and language

Although she's lived in Canada for three years, her husband kept her isolated from the broader community. She had little opportunity to learn English or build connections outside of their cultural group.

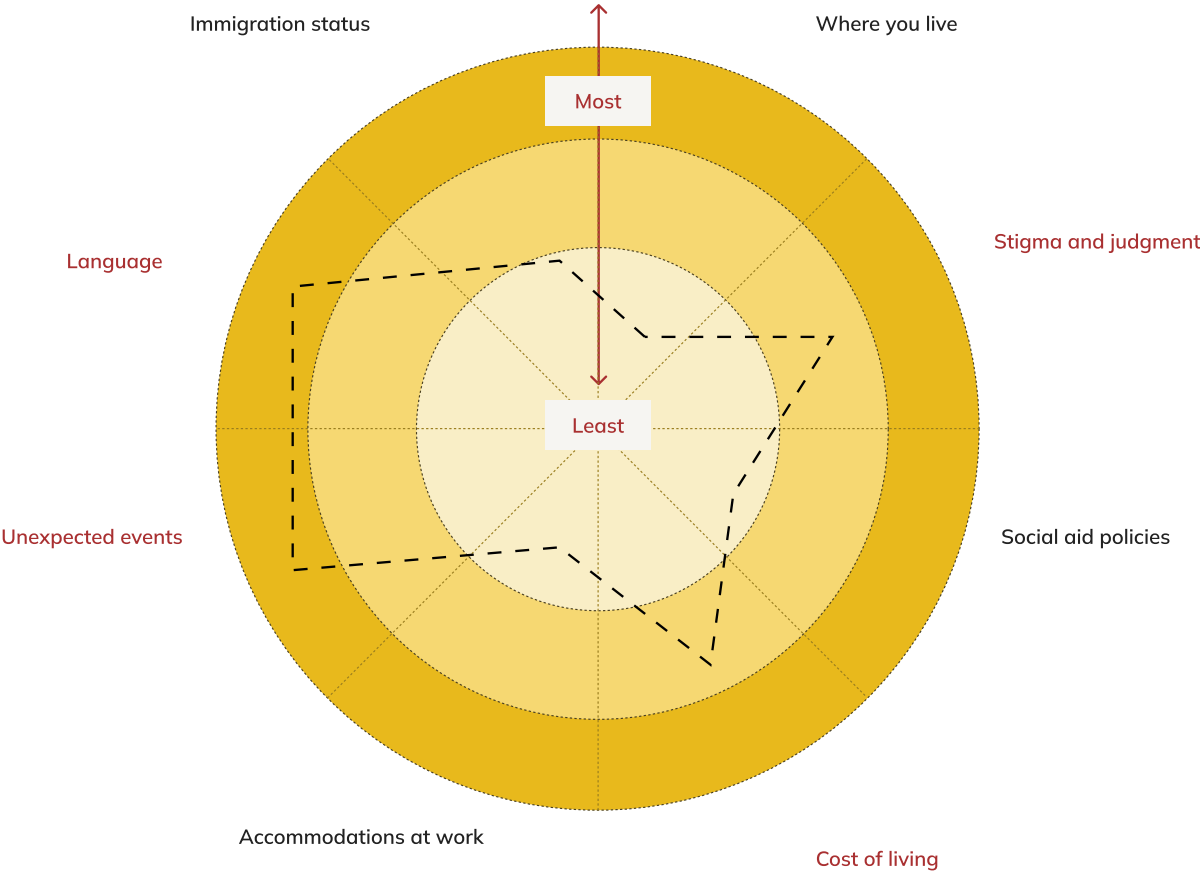
Cost of living

Even with subsidized rent, managing food, clothing, school supplies for Naya, and other basics is a struggle. Her limited income makes keeping up with the rising cost of living difficult.

Stigma and judgment

As a racialized single mother, Lakshmi faces pressure from some family

and community members to return to her ex-husband, even though the relationship was harmful.



Barriers to accessing financial institutions

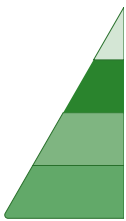
With help from a community settlement worker, Lakshmi recently opened her first bank account to receive social assistance payments.

She's now responsible for paying bills, budgeting for groceries, and making sure Naya's needs are met—all of which are new and stressful for her. She's hearing about benefit programs and support services from her social worker, but the information is complex and hard to understand.

Meanwhile, some people in her community are warning her against using banks or credit. Still, Lakshmi is considering applying for a secured credit card to help get through this difficult period. She's trying to figure things out on her own, but it feels confusing and overwhelming.

Access to financial management

- **The “basics” of financial literacy aren’t basic enough:** Lakshmi needs to understand things like different types of bank accounts, how to pay bills, what is a want versus a need, and the very basics of money management.
- **Inaccessible financial education:** Many resources are written generically in ways that aren’t trauma-informed, or culturally relevant.
- **Complex and technical language:** Financial agreements are often filled with jargon, making them difficult to understand without a pre-existing grasp on financial language.

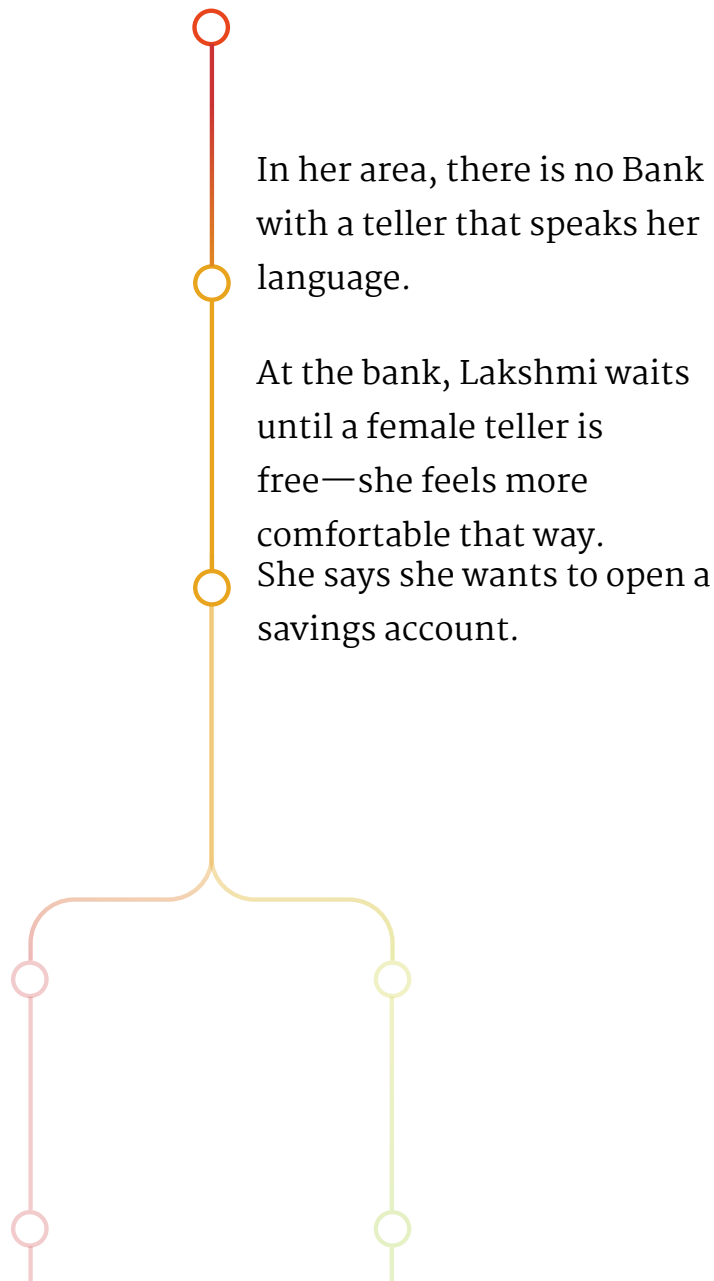


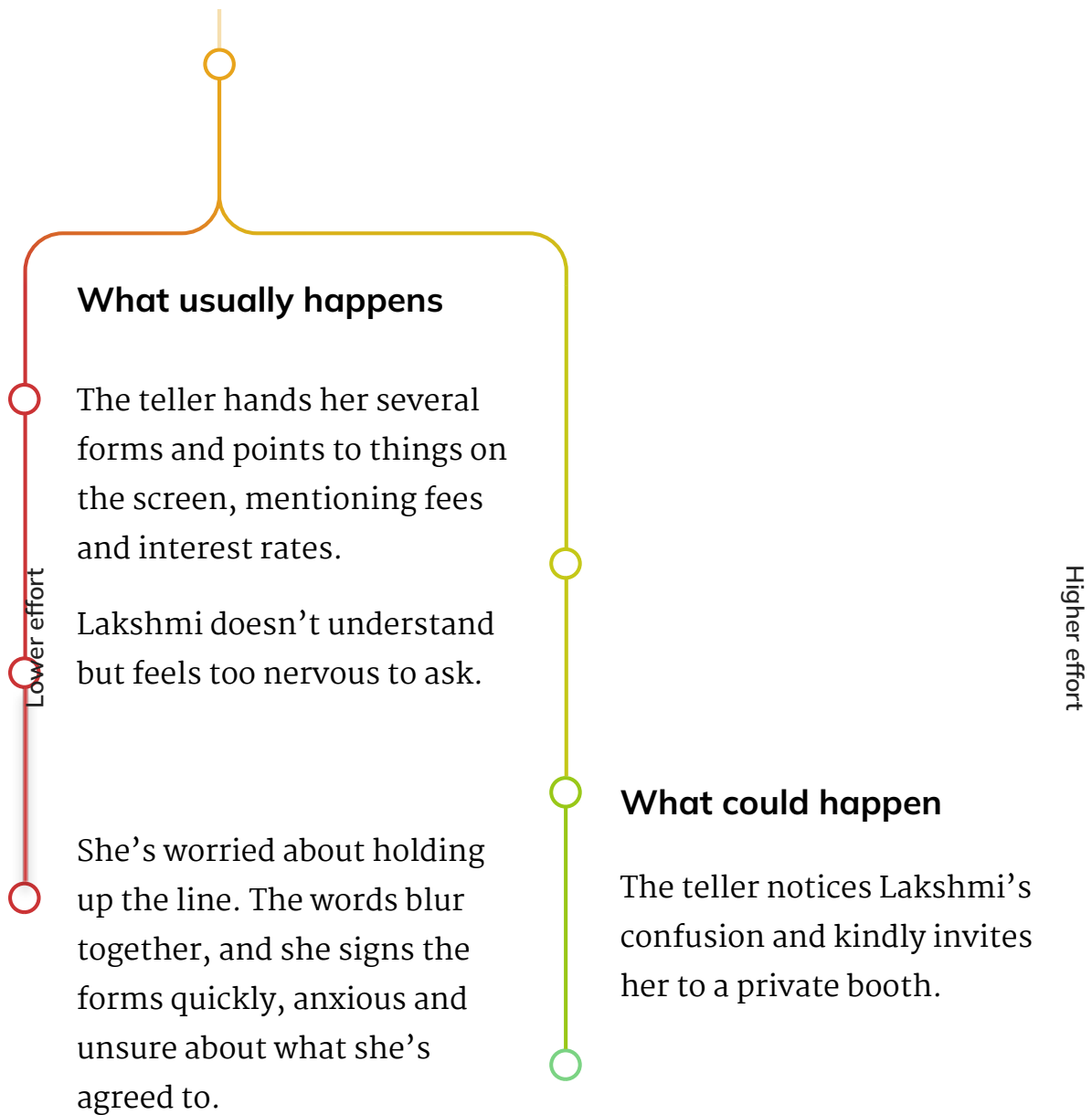
Current & ideal state journey map

Scenario

Lakshmi wants to start saving for her daughter's daily expenses. She has some gold jewelry set aside for her, but she's unsure if it will help when it comes to school supplies, camps, or classes.

Her social worker suggests opening a savings account and slowly building her credit.





Exploring possibilities: Quick wins to big moves

Here are examples to spark ideas for serving people like Lakshmi. We use a 2x2 grid to show the scale of effort and impact.

Long term impact

Realizing Lakshmi's wish to use a bank for her daughter's day to day expenses, the teller suggests a high-interest savings account with no annual fees and helps her through the steps.

Long term impact, lower effort

Train staff on social aid programs and benefits

Train staff about social aid programs to understand how different banking products may impact one's financial states and social aid.

Long term impact, higher effort

Run community workshops

Partner with schools, libraries, community centres, and community groups to teach financial basics like account types, credits, budgeting, financial scams in familiar settings.

Quicker impact, lower effort

Invest in community leaders

Partner with trusted community leaders so they can share accurate information about your services and help others with confidence.

Use clear language

Avoid jargon, and explain financial jargon in clear terms. Make sure people understand the impact of their choices.

Quicker impact, higher effort

Co-create inclusive financial literacy resources

Work with community groups to develop culturally-relevant financial literacy materials in multiple formats, such as videos, visuals, and simple guides for all learning styles.

Quicker impact

Edge User Deep Dive: Lakshmi

After learning about Lakshmi, consider her life experiences and answer the following questions. How much of your institution's products and services can she access?

Can Lakshmi...

1. Access your financial touchpoints?

How might Lakshmi find confidence in navigating financial touchpoints that are both in another language, and in financial jargon?

2. Access your financial transactions?

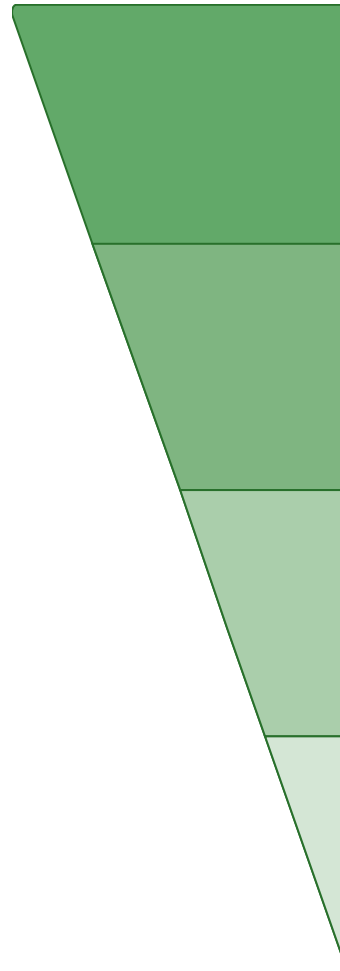
How might Lakshmi be supported in choosing the right account for her needs, and understand how it works?

3. Access your financial management?

How might Lakshmi learn how to manage money and build savings in a culturally-aware way?

4. Access your financial advising?

How might Lakshmi begin to explore investment options, and understand how they're relevant to her situation?





Narrative 4

Future planning for immigrants with disabilities

The Research

21.5% of immigrants in Canada reported having a disability. (Vergara & Hardy, 2024)

34-46% of newcomers encounter financial hardship during some point of settlement, despite newcomers who are more highly educated and skilled than ever before. (Prosper Canada Centre for Financial Literacy, 2015)

Only 31.5% of eligible Canadians (under 60) had a Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP) in 2020. Among those eligible but not enrolled in an RDSP, nearly 50% had never heard of it, 46% said they lacked the money to contribute, and 29% reported not having enough information. (Statistics Canada, 2022)

Ki, 49

Halifax, Nova Scotia

Ki used to run a small restaurant and support his family, including his elderly parents back home. He had a mild heart condition, but he managed it while building a steady life with his wife, Tan, a full-time nurse, and their two kids.

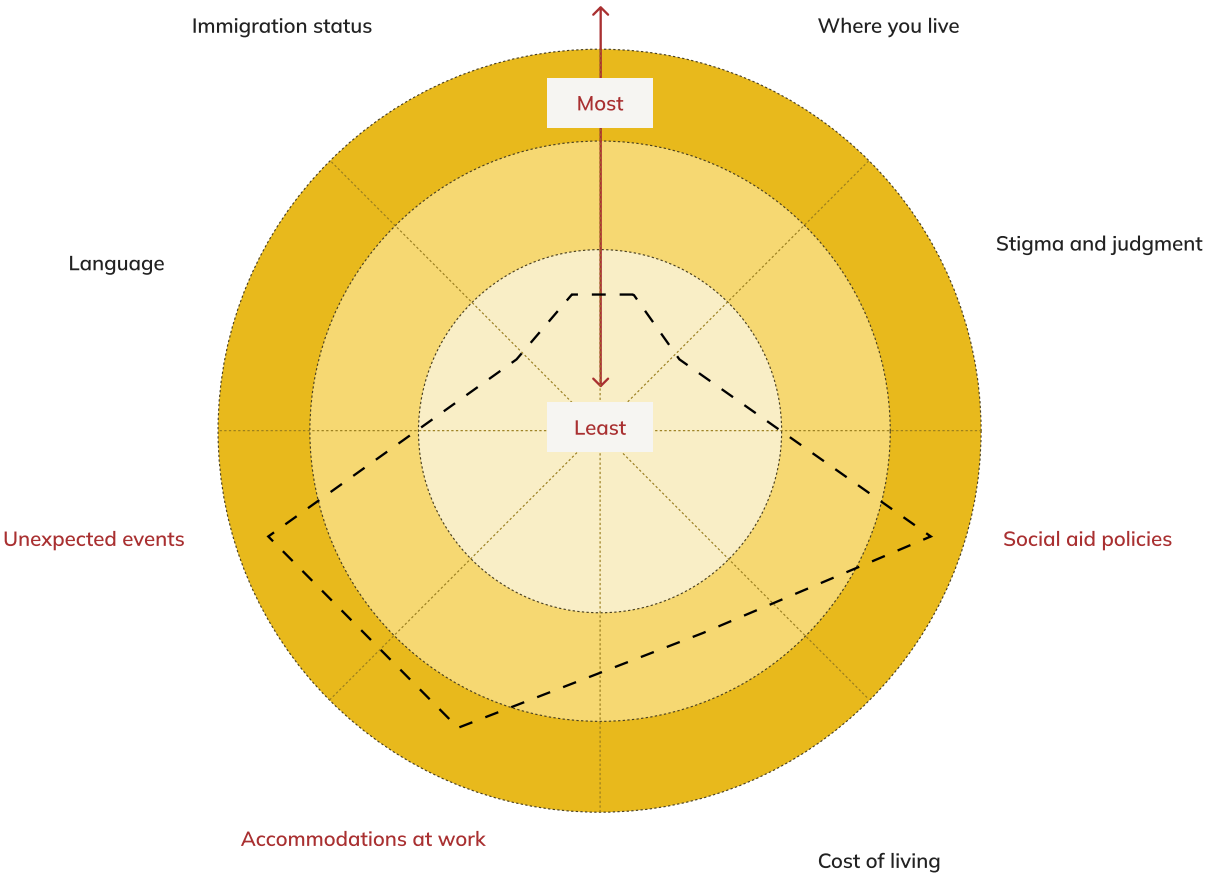
Unexpected events

When COVID hit, Ki's health took a serious downturn. He became very ill, and now he lives with post-COVID syndrome, which leaves him constantly fatigued and unable to work. The restaurant had to shut down as he couldn't keep staff on, and he was too sick to keep it going himself. Since then, he hasn't been able to return to any kind of work.

Ki used to send money home to his parents, who rely on him for essentials like medical care. Now, he can't send anything, and they're at risk of losing access to health treatments. This has caused him deep anxiety and distress.

Accommodations at work

For a while, CERB and unemployment benefits helped them get by. But those programs have ended, and Tan's nursing income just barely covers their expenses. Because her earnings slightly exceed the eligibility cut-off for their provincial disability program, Ki doesn't qualify—yet they still can't afford basics like medication or physical therapy.

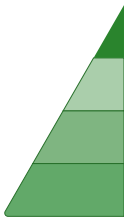


Barriers to accessing financial institutions

With more than half their income gone, Ki knows he needs to plan for the future—but he doesn't know where to begin. He's unfamiliar with financial tools, and when he tried to speak to someone at the bank, they couldn't offer much help. Nobody mentioned options like wills, insurance, or long-term savings strategies that could help protect his family.

Access to financial advice and planning

- **Lack of awareness of protective measures:** There can be a lack of awareness about services like wills, life insurance, trust funds, or other programs and services to support one's family and dependents. This creates a huge gap as people with disabilities and Deaf people tend to live with greater financial uncertainty and with a lot of their income dependent on their caregivers' ability to earn.
- **Lack of awareness of disability-specific financial products:** Although there are several disability-specific investment products for the disability community, such as RDSP, the disability tax credit, and more, many financial advisors at banks are not aware of these products and cannot advise appropriately. This means that many disabled people fall through the cracks, especially when there are cut-off ages for specific products.

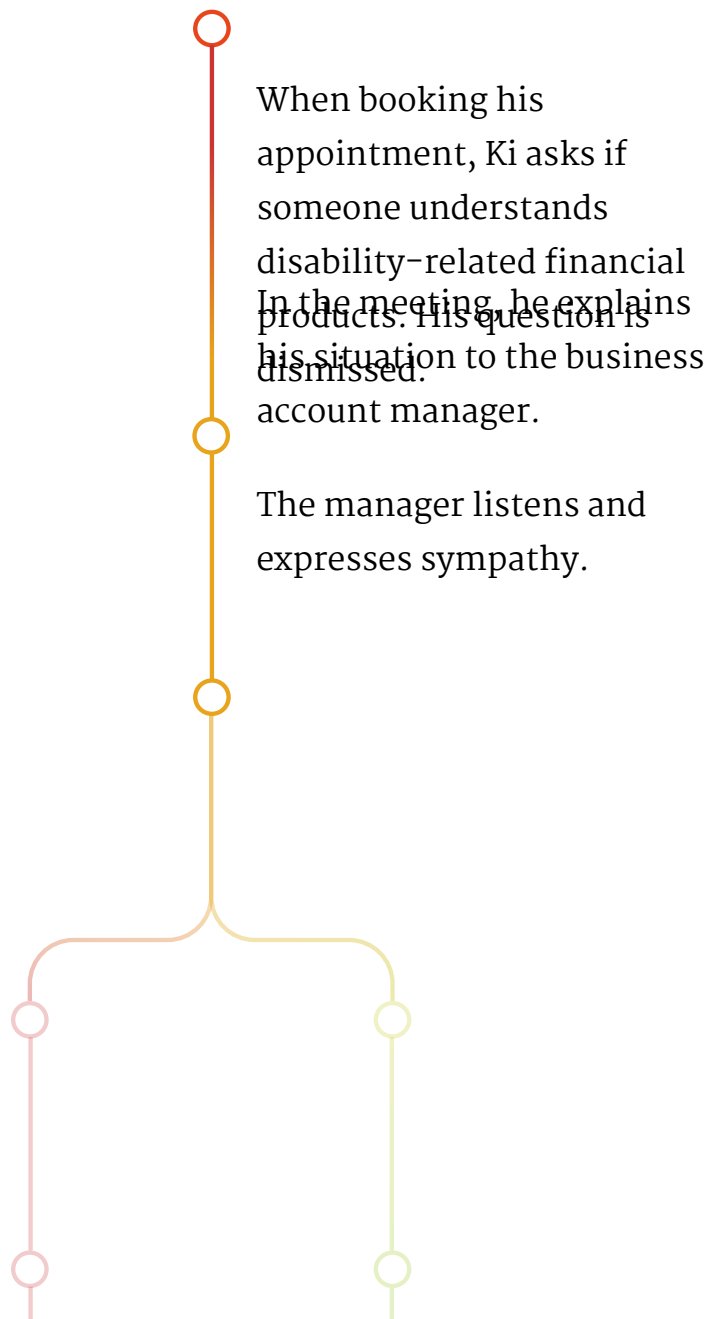


Current & ideal state journey map

Scenario

Ki is struggling to adjust after the closure of his restaurant.

Wanting to explore financial options to protect his family's future, Ki books an appointment with a financial advisor at his bank.





What usually happens

However, he says that unless Ki is officially approved for a disability benefit, there's nothing they can offer.

Ki asks about flexible loans or savings tools for people with health issues, but the manager is unaware of any such options. Ki leaves feeling discouraged and unseen. He tried to be proactive but found no support.

What could happen

The manager refers Ki to a disability specialist advisor.

The advisor walks Ki through different available options. They discuss the pros and cons of each program and how they might meet Ki's needs. Ki takes the information home to discuss with Tan. He feels hopeful—like there may be a path forward through this difficult time.

Exploring possibilities: Quick wins to big moves

Here are examples to spark ideas for serving clients like Ki. We use a 2x2 grid to show the scale of effort and impact.



Quicker impact, higher effort

Train staff on disability specific financial programs

Train staff and advisors on financial supports like the Disability Tax Credit and Registered Disability Savings Plan. Too often, these are unknown or misunderstood even by advisors.

Quicker impact

Edge User Deep Dive: Ki

After learning about Ki, consider his life experiences and answer the following questions. How much of your institution's products and services can he access?

Can Ki...

1. Access your financial touchpoints?

How might online banking be accessible to Ki, who may not have energy to sustain a task for long periods of time?

2. Access your financial transactions?

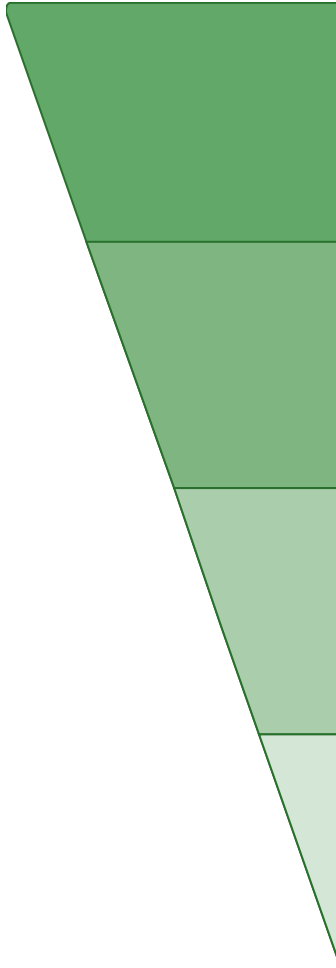
How might Ki still access banking services like opening and managing his accounts without leaving his home?

3. Access your financial management?

How might Ki and Tan be supported in reducing expenses and increasing their earnings?

4. Access your financial advising?

How might Ki be supported in making a financial plan for his family?



Activities & Worksheets

Activity 1: Gap mapping

Goal of the activity

This activity will help you think through how accessible a certain offering is to different edge user groups—this could be products like chequing accounts and RRSP's, or services like financial advising. It will help you discover who your offering already works for, and who your edge users are.

Who to do this with

You can do this with your team that works on a specific product or service—like financial advising, account opening, or your institution's app.

Instructions

1.

Pick one offering that your institution provides.

2.

Look at the systemic and environmental factors in the Wheel of Financial Stability. Select the factors that may create barriers for your customers to what you are offering.

Keep in mind that barriers may be:

Physical and environmental: Can your customers physically access your offering in the environment they have to do it in?

Mental: Do your customers perceive that this offering is for them?

Societal: Do others (tellers, advisors, even family and social networks) perceive that this offering is for your customers?

- Language
- Immigration status
- Where they live
- Employment status and accommodations
- Income and cost of living
- Savings and unexpected events
- Stigma and judgment
- Social aid status

3. Print out the “slices” for each of your factors (see [file](#)).

4. For each factor, mark down which groups of customers your offering can serve without barriers:

•

Can access your offering

•

May not be able to access your offering

•

Not able to access your offering

Remember that when this activity is done internally, it is an assumption (unless backed up by user research). This activity is most effective when done with users who have these life experiences.

Gap Mapping: Example

Offering: RRSP

Gap Mapping: Worksheet

Offering:

Gap Mapping: Evaluate

By connecting the green checkmarks on each “slice” or factor, you can begin to see how inclusive the offering is: the larger the area, the more inclusive your offering, and the better it is at meeting the needs of edge users.

By connecting the yellow question marks, you can begin to see where customers may not be able to access your offering.

The area outside of your shape represents the needs your offering is not able to meet.

To make your product more inclusive, brainstorm how you could stretch further to the edges.

Bonus round: Identifying mismatches between offerings and users

Visualizing gaps further

To see how an offering meets, or fails to meet, the needs of specific edge users, overlay the area that your offering covers with the mapping of one of the narratives. Choose one of the narratives earlier in this guidebook, or create your own through user research.

Activity 2: Edge User Deep Dive

Goal of the activity

This activity can be used on its own, or as a follow up to the Gap Mapping activity. The Edge User Deep Dive helps you pick one specific edge user group, and think through how much of your services and products they can actually access.

Who to do this with

A cross-functional team across the organization, like at a design charette or company-wide conference.

Instructions

1. Pick one edge user group to focus on for this activity.
2. Use the worksheet to think through what barriers this user may encounter at each level of the Hierarchy of Needs at Financial Institutions, and ideas on how to remove those barriers.

Edge User Deep Dive: Worksheet

Can (edge user group)...

1. Access financial touchpoints?

Bank branches, ATM's, online banking

2. Access financial transactions?

Opening an account, depositing and withdrawing funds, making purchases

3. Access financial management?

Money management, budgeting, using and managing credit

4. Access financial advising?

Disability-specific financial advising, future planning

Bonus: Circles of control

Now that barriers have been identified, it's time to focus on what you can tangibly change. The circles of control will help you articulate what you and your team can change, and what you can't – and therefore what you can focus your efforts and energy on.

Instructions

1. Referring to the barriers from the edge user deep dive worksheet, work with yourself or your team to articulate:
 - **What can I or we change?** This can range from small differences in the way you do your tasks, or projects that your team can initiate.
 - **What can I or we influence?** This can include things that you and/ or your team may be able to influence through partnership or allyship with others in your organization, but may not be able to directly change.
 - **What can't I or we change?** These are things, usually larger systems or constraints that you and/or your team can't change.
2. Do this in whatever order feels best or is most productive for your team. There's no hard or fast rule.
3. When you are done, create action items based on what you and/or your team can change, and what you and/or your team can influence.

Circles of control: Worksheet

Now that barriers and ideas have been identified, it's time to focus on what you can tangibly change. The circles of control will help you articulate what you and your team can change, and what you can't—and therefore what you can focus your efforts and energy on.

- What can't I/we change?
- What can I/we influence?

- What can I/we change?

Sources

1. Financial Consumer Agency of Canada. (2024, June 25). Annual report 2023-2024. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/financial-consumer-agency/corporate/planning/annual-reports/annual-report-2023-2024.html>
2. ACORN Canada. (2023, June). Fair credit for all: ACORN members speak out on access to fair banking and credit in Canada. <https://acorncanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/EN-ACORN-Report-Fair-Credit-2023.pdf>
3. McDiarmia, C. (2021, August 18). Accessibility in federal sector organizations in Canada, 2021 (Report No. 89-654-X2021001). Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2021001-eng.htm>
4. Chollangi, N. (2022, March 15). 15 percent of Canadians are ‘underbanked’ – Here’s what that means and why it’s a barrier to equitable recovery. Prosper Canada Learning Hub. <https://learninghub.prospercanada.org/knowledge/15-percent-of-canadians-are-underbanked-heres-what-that-means-and-why-its-a-barrier-to-equitable-recovery/>
5. Dionne, M.-A., et al. (2023, June 16). A review of Canadian homelessness data, 2023 (Income Research Paper Series No. 2023004). Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75f0002m/75f0002m2023004-eng.htm>
6. Ali, N. (2018, August 1). Understanding hidden homelessness. Homeless Hub. <https://homelesshub.ca/blog/2018/understanding-hidden-homelessness/>
7. Hung, J., et al. (2025) Community Perspectives on Financial Inclusion. Inclusive Design Research Centre. <https://idrc.cachefly.net/financial-inclusion/Community-Perspectives-on-Financial-Inclusion.pdf>
8. Financial Consumer Agency of Canada. (2021). Improving financial literacy. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/financial-consumer-agency/programs/research/2021-building-better-financial-futures-challenge/improving-financial-literacy.html>
9. Chen, H., O’Habib, D., & Xiao, H. Y. (2023, November 16). How far do Canadians need to travel to access cash? (Staff Discussion Paper No. 2023-28). Bank of Canada. <https://doi.org/10.34989/sdp-2023-28>
10. Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada. (2022, April 11). High speed access for all: Canada’s connectivity strategy. Government of Canada. <https://ised-isde.canada.ca/site/high-speed-internet-canada/en/canadas-connectivity-strategy/high-speed-access-all-canadas-connectivity-strategy>

11. Share. (2023, March). Proxy alert: RBC and BMO racial equity audit. https://share.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PROXY-ALERT_RBC_BMO_racial-equity-audit.pdf
12. Canadian Centre for Financial Well-Being & Economic Abuse Awareness. (2023, July). The state of economic abuse report. <https://ccfwe.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/The-State-of-Economic-Abuse-Report-ccfwe.pdf>
13. Statistics Canada. (2022, April 1). Survey on savings for persons with disabilities, 2020. Statistics Canada: The Daily. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220401/dq220401b-eng.htm>
14. Statistics Canada. (2023). Despite progress, one-parent families headed by mothers continue to face labour market challenges. Statistics Canada: The Daily, <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/01/en/plus/7523-despite-progress-one-parent-families-headed-mothers-continue-face-labour-market>
15. Vergara, D., & Hardy, V. (2024, June 13). Labour market characteristics of persons with and without disabilities, 2023 (Catalogue No. 71-222-X2024002). Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-222-x/71-222-x2024002-eng.htm>
16. Prosper Canada Centre for Financial Literacy. (2015, November). Financial literacy and newcomers to Canada. Prosper Canada. <https://prospercanada.org/getattachment/3ff26769-c2d4-4d9e-82e9-f56467e4eb31/Financial-Literacy-and-Newcomers-to-Canada.aspx>

Credits

Special thanks to our community partners

Whole Woman Network

University of Alberta Inner City Health and Wellness Program

Nunavummi Disabilities Maqinnasuak'tiit Society

Deen Vision Network

Realize Canada

Financial Inclusion team

Cheryl Li, author

Sepideh Shahi, author

Lisa Liskovoi, contributor

Jonathan Hung, contributor

Dana Ayotte, contributor

Michelle D'Souza, contributor

Daniel Cho, contributor

Ned Zimmerman, contributor

Funded by

Employment and Social Development Canada

Special thanks to the financial institutions who generously shared their time to give us feedback and co-design this resource with us.

Last edited August 2025