

Building an Inclusive and Accessible Canada: Supporting People with Disabilities

INTRODUCTION

Exclusion and a lack of access to disability supports perpetuate the poverty of people with disabilities and their families. The result is isolation, increased vulnerability, and limited opportunity for Canadians with disabilities to participate and be valued as full citizens - in early learning and child care, in school, communities, in training and employment. For working-age adults lack of access to needed disability supports stifles earning power, weakens productivity and diminishes potential to play a role in Canada's future.

With the aging of the population, people with disabilities make up a growing proportion of the Canadian population. One third of Aboriginal Canadians have a disability. Alarming, Canadians with disabilities are more than twice as likely to live in poverty than other Canadians. They face exclusion from quality education, from employment and from participation in their communities. Rates of violence and abuse against people with disabilities are among the highest for any group in Canadian society.

BACKGROUND

There are more than three million Canadians with disabilities and more than 2.3 million families in Canada who provide day-to-day support for a family member with a disability. Despite progress in the last two decades, Canadians with disabilities and their families still face significant barriers. It is clear that the experience of exclusion, poverty and isolation for people with disabilities continues. This is unacceptable in a country as prosperous as Canada.

AN INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE CANADA

An inclusive and accessible Canada reflects our greatest values as a nation. An inclusive and accessible Canada is one where Canadians with disabilities - children, youth, working-age adults, and seniors - have the necessary disability-related supports to fully access and benefit from all that Canada has to offer. It is a Canada where people with disabilities have the income, aids and devices, personal supports, medications and environmental accommodations that make social, economic, cultural, and political citizenship accessible to all. The result is that people with disabilities benefit from Canadian society in ways that are equal to other Canadians.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Persons with disabilities face levels of poverty almost twice that of persons without disabilities
- Two-thirds of Canadian adults with disabilities lack one or more of the educational, workplace, aids, home modification or other supports they need
- Slightly more than half of Canadian children with disabilities do not have access to needed aids and devices
- Almost 60% of working age adults with disabilities are currently unemployed or out of the labour market
- For women with disabilities, almost 75% are unemployed/out of the labour market

- According to the International Labour Organization, the annual loss of global GDP due to the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the labour market is between US\$1.37 trillion and US\$1.94 trillion
- One third of Aboriginal Canadians have a disability
- Rates of violence and abuse against people with disabilities, in particular women with disabilities, are among the highest for any group in Canadian society
- More than 10,000 persons with intellectual disabilities remain warehoused in institutions across this country

A CONSENSUS FOR ACTION EXISTS

There is unprecedented consensus among the Canadian public, governments, the disability community and experts about the need for national action on disability with a particular focus on disability supports.

THE IMMEDIATE PRIORITY: INVESTMENT IN DISABILITY-RELATED SUPPORTS

The Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD), the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) and the broader disability community have identified disability supports as the key priority. Over two million Canadian adults with disabilities, or two thirds of the disabled adult population lack one or more of the educational, workplace, aids, home modification or other supports they need. The lack of these supports results in poverty, unemployment and exclusion from workplaces, schools and communities.

The Roeher Institute defines disability supports as: any good, service or environmental adaptation that assists persons with disabilities and their families to overcome barriers they face in carrying out daily living activities at each stage of their lives and in participating and being recognized as full citizens, in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community.

In the last 15 months there has been significant progress on disability issues between the federal, provincial and territorial governments. All levels of government have worked to find options for action on disability supports. **In the communiqué following their October 2005 meeting Federal/Provincial/Territorial (FPT) Ministers of Social Services agreed that:**

"The focus for achieving [the full inclusion of Canadians with disabilities] will be joint work with emphasis on improving access to and funding for disability supports and services and for income supports for persons with disabilities, at the same time working to build public awareness and stakeholder and government support to address the challenges facing people with disabilities."

More than 55 civil society organizations representing Canadians with disabilities, their families, the early learning and childcare community, the education community, Canadian workers, and millions of Canadians stand in solidarity on the issue of disability supports.

TIME FOR CHANGE

The disability community has been calling for a long-term disability strategy. In the short-term address the issue of disability supports. In the the long-term address the exiling of persons with disabilities to systems of income support that are both inadequate and ineffective. Multiple efforts will be required to put this strategy into place.

Make Disability Supports a Priority for FPT Governments

The Federal Government can show leadership on disability issues by encouraging FPT Ministers of Social Services to continue making disability supports a priority for joint action.

Creating a Fiscal Balance

Research commissioned by the Federal/ Provincial/Territorial Ministers of Social Services has identified a national multi-billion dollar gap in meeting the need for disability supports and services. People with disabilities are overly represented in provincial welfare systems because they are excluded from the labour market and/or lack the appropriate income supports they need. It is clear that the fiscal limitations of provinces and territories are creating barriers to new investments in disability supports and income supports. Without support from the Federal Government, provinces and territories are unable to move this agenda on their own.

A Federal Disability Act - what can it contribute to the Agenda?

The Conservative Party of Canada, in their 2006 election platform, committed to the development of a Disability Act. CCD, CACL and the broad disability community are interested in further exploring the commitment to the development of a Disability Act and have begun to define from a community perspective what might be achieved through such a vehicle.

A Federal Disability Act could have impact in key areas of federal jurisdiction such as transportation or access to new technologies. It may be able to strengthen federal enforcement mechanisms such as the Canadian Human Rights Commission, CTA or CRTC.

While we commend this Government's recognition of the need for action in areas such as medical care, medical equipment, education, employment, transportation, and housing, we have some concerns that, because these areas largely fall in provincial/territorial jurisdiction, a Federal Disability Act would not be able to fully address them. Further, the experience of the disability community has been that a significant barrier to access in these areas is the lack of disability supports.

A Federal Disability Act will not be able to address the more substantive issues such as poverty, exclusion and a lack of access to needed disability supports because these issues are within provincial/territorial jurisdiction. This reinforces the need for a comprehensive FPT disability-supports strategy. We believe that a Federal Disability Act may be part of a broader disability strategy but, on its own, is not sufficient to create the lasting change that Canadians with disabilities and their families need.

Parliamentary Committee

The establishment of a parliamentary committee focused on persons with disabilities provides a focal point and profile for disability issues within the Government of Canada. Past parliamentary committees have proven to be successful non-partisan mechanisms for researching and reporting on the status of persons with disabilities. Given that this year marks the 25th anniversary of the Obstacles report, it would be an opportune time to have a parliamentary committee hold public hearings on the achievements of the last 25 years and the challenges that still need to be addressed.

MOVING FORWARD

To build an inclusive and accessible Canada the Federal Government should signal a commitment to look beyond a Federal Disability Act and to explore other measures to address the number one priorities of the disability community - addressing poverty and the need for disability supports. Continued collaborative efforts are needed at the FPT level to ensure that the important commitments and groundwork laid in the area of disability supports is not lost.

Developing a long-term disability strategy requires a comprehensive, coordinated, inter-sectoral, multijurisdictional collaborative approach. We believe that a progressive long-term solution to the exclusion and persistent poverty of people with disabilities is essential and achievable. Committing to a long-term disability strategy is a commitment to building a better Canada for all.

WHO WE ARE

The Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD) advocates at the national level to improve the status of women and men living with disabilities in Canada by eliminating inequality and discrimination. CCD continues to be a team of people with disabilities, who are deeply committed to self-help and consumer advocacy. CCD has worked collaborative with governments for over 30 years to improve the status of Canadians with disabilities.

The Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL) is a national federation of 10 provincial and 3 territorial associations that advocates for people who have an intellectual disability and their families. CACL is comprised of more than 40,000 members from 430 local associations across the country. CACL works to promote and achieve the full inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in all aspects of community life.

The grassroots base of CCD, CACL and the broad disability community is a significant strength in providing a collective voice across the country for Canadians with disabilities and in advocating for change at the local, provincial and national level. The disability community is committed to working collaboratively and in solidarity.