



Disability in December*

December 3 is the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. The purpose of an international day is to encourage both reflection and action – reflection on what has been achieved to date and action on what remains to be done.

The disability journey in Canada is a long and complicated one that began – at least in a formal policy sense – in 1981, which the United Nations had declared as the Inter-national Year of Disabled Persons. Its objective was to encourage all member states to identify the needs of persons with disabilities within their populations and take stock of their respective disability agendas – to the extent that these existed at all.

In Canada, the federal government appointed an all-party House of Commons Committee to determine the challenges related to disability and to propose practicable reforms. It was the first time that such an exhaustive inventory on disability had been undertaken in the country. The Committee produced the landmark *Obstacles* report, which made recommendations on all

major policy issues including human rights, income security, employment, and technical aids and devices.

Since that time, there have been many noteworthy achievements, particularly concrete improvements in such areas as transportation, communications, technology and equipment. But significant efforts are still required in education, employment, income security and social participation. At Caledon, we have focused our work on two major components of this incomplete agenda: income security and disability supports.

The disability income system is at best a patchwork quilt that, for the most part, provides spotty and inadequate benefits. The bottom line is that income benefits are determined by the cause and place of disability, resulting in strikingly variable coverage for people with similar functional capacities.

Canadians with severe and prolonged disabilities typically have a tenuous or episodic attachment to the paid labour

* This commentary was published as an online op ed entitled “Ottawa needs to strengthen disability supports” in the *Toronto Star* on December 3, 2013.

market. Those who do work earn low or modest wages in often insecure jobs, and may have nowhere to turn but social assistance (welfare), which virtually guarantees a life of poverty.

There is clearly a need to shore up and reform the disability income system. If nothing else, social assistance benefits for people with severe and prolonged disabilities should be bolstered and indexed to ensure that welfare does not equal poverty. They should not be subject to the strict welfare asset rules that virtually strip them of the basics of a decent life.

But Caledon has argued that individuals with significant disabilities should not have to rely on welfare at all. In our view, they should have access instead to a separate income program, ideally run by the federal government. We have proposed a *Basic Income* initiative that would replace provincial/territorial welfare for working age persons with severe disabilities.

A federal benefit would mean equitable treatment and portability of benefits across the country. It should be an adequate benefit in terms of its amount and its value relative to the cost of living. The current Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors provides an exemplary model.

As part of this income security redesign, Caledon has proposed that any provincial/territorial savings which result from a new federal benefit be used to fund a coherent and comprehensive system of supports for all persons with disabilities, whether working or on welfare or other income program. Under a negotiated accord, provinces and territories would

reinvest their substantial welfare savings into disability supports.

Disability supports are the goods and services that enable active participation in society. They include technical aids and equipment such as wheelchairs, lifts, hearing aids and special computer software; personal services such as home care, attendant services and homemaker assistance; and modifications to the home or workplace to allow independent living.

Thousands of Canadians who require assistance to live independently or who want to participate in education, training or the labour market are unable to do so because they have limited access to disability supports. Many individuals with disabilities are unable to partake in community activities or even visit with friends because they don't have access to the supports that make possible this basic social engagement.

Strategic investment in the supply of disability supports would detach the delivery of these goods and services from welfare. That step is a significant advance in making these essential services more available to the general population.

In the absence of such major income security reform, there are other possible routes to supporting these vital forms of assistance. In 2000, Caledon proposed the creation of a Personal Supports Fund to encourage investment in the broad range of disability supports. We used the term 'personal supports' so that the goods and services would be made available not just to persons with disabilities but to anyone who requires such aid.

Personal supports are virtually the same as disability supports. They are various goods and services that any individual, such as an elderly individual, may require to live independently regardless of the presence of a designated disability. They may need homemaker services, for example, to help with food shopping or snow shovelling. They may require a hearing aid as a result of normal aging but are not formally classified as having a hearing disability. They may need a walker to assist with balance or mobility – again the result of aging.

Enhancing this network of supports is crucial, given Canada's rapidly aging population. The proposed investment could also be called an Independent Living Fund or Community Participation Fund.

The purpose of such a fund, whatever its name, would be to promote the development of a wide-ranging network of goods and services throughout the country. It would help expand the quantity of existing supports, improve their quality, reduce the cost to consumers and ensure their portability across sectors and regions.

The proposal recognizes that provinces and territories already invest in a wide range of personal supports. All jurisdictions would be free to develop the comprehensive system of supports as they see fit. But they would be required to respect a set of common principles, including portability and responsiveness.

On December 3, groups and organizations throughout the world will celebrate the fact that disability concerns are on the public radar screen. But there will also be concerted calls for action to ensure that these issues advance more quickly and prominently to the top of government policy agendas.

References

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