

Five-Point Plan for Reforming Disability Supports

The scope of reform

The disability community has long struggled with the challenge of how best to improve the availability and responsiveness of disability supports – the goods and services that help persons with disabilities participate as active citizens in society. These supports include technical aids and equipment such as wheelchairs, lifts, hearing aids and special computer software; personal services like home care, attendant services, homemaker assistance and interpreter services; and modifications to the home or workplace to allow independent living.

Recommendations for reforming disability supports typically have been directed toward the federal government. The proposals target Ottawa largely because it is the steward of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The proactive interpretation of this legislation implies a duty to promote rights – not simply to defend them if they are violated or removed. Disability groups have long called upon the federal government to play this active role and to respect the intent of the *Charter* through supports that enable active citizenship.

Calls for substantial federal investment in the supply of disability supports have gone largely unheard. Ottawa prefers not to wade into these provincial waters for fear it might drown in the ensuing costs. Rather, it generally opts to help Canadians directly through maple-leaf cheques or tax breaks that are clearly federal. Ottawa tries to avoid the inevitable heartache of federal-provincial/territorial negotiation – both the cornerstone and millstone of Canadian federalism. Moreover, it is loathe to muddy the constitutionally-drawn divide in which provinces and territories bear primary responsibility for the provision of disability supports. Ottawa is directly responsible for a few selected groups, including veterans and Aboriginal Canadians on reserve.

The federal reluctance to invest in the actual supply of disability supports leaves provinces and territories with the tab. While it is difficult to introduce substantive change in the absence of adequate financial investment, important reforms can be made nonetheless to improve the existing configuration of programs. These reforms can be grouped into five main categories, each of which is described below:

- provide information
- ease access
- improve delivery
- develop a citizen-centred approach
- change the broader context.

Provide information

On the least-they-can-do-but-should-at-least-do end of the spectrum, provinces and territories should seek to do a better job when they provide information about disability supports. They can introduce a consistent method for promoting materials in all existing programs that deliver or help pay for disability supports. Governments might consider, for example, the creation of a single-window access point for information and assistance about disability. They can make available information in alternate formats to help raise awareness about various measures. Governments can assist selected voluntary organizations to undertake similar promotion of their respective programs, particularly those that are fully or partially publicly funded.

Ease access

At the next stage along the continuum of reform, provinces and territories should determine the steps they might take to ease access to disability supports. They can review current eligibility procedures across their jurisdiction if only to ensure the consistent use of terminology. Definitions around mental health-related conditions, in particular, are especially problematic.

They can consider moving, for example, to a common cross-government approach to assessing disability in order to reduce or even eliminate multiple screening procedures. They

might introduce a single-entry point or gateway, as in Quebec and Prince Edward Island, for eligibility assessment. An associated ‘navigational system’ could help consumers and their families make their way through what is often a complex maze of programs. Provinces and territories can also ease eligibility for those who already qualify for certain programs, such as long-term social assistance, the Canada Pension Plan disability benefit, the disability tax credit and the child disability benefit. In other words, one key can be used to open several doors.

Improve delivery

Improved delivery of disability supports is the third major objective along the continuum of reform options. Possible improvements include the consolidation of similar measures, such as those that make available technical aids or provide vocational rehabilitation. In some jurisdictions, three or more programs offer similar services. Provinces and territories can eliminate the gap in program options that typically occurs in the transition from child to adult status between the ages of 18 and 21.

All jurisdictions should pay special attention to the needs of persons currently underserved by the system – notably consumers with multiple barriers, such as mobility and visual impairment or physical disability and mental health problem. In fact, persons with any form of mental impairment as a secondary problem are often not welcome in the mainstream system. The new Canadian Mental Health Commission, announced in the 2007 federal Budget, represents an important step in trying to counter widespread stigma.

Targets can be set for reducing the waiting lists for services that require professionals, such

as speech therapists or psychologists, especially in rural and remote regions of the country. There is also a lack of services related to fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and mental health-related conditions.

Greater policy consistency is required in all jurisdictions around payment for the purchase, upgrading and repair of technical aids and equipment. Is a recreational wheelchair a necessity? What is considered reasonable wear and tear on equipment used daily? How frequently are provinces and territories prepared to cover upgrades? These are difficult questions in a world of rapidly changing technology. In fact, governments should ensure continual training for consumers and staff around technological upgrades to aids and equipment.

Provinces and territories can also increase compensation for selected disability supports – both the amounts paid directly and the rebates available in respect of their purchase. In many jurisdictions, the amounts for these supports have not changed in years, despite rising prices and new technologies. Governments can provide special training around the culturally sensitive delivery of disability supports. Finally, they can set targets for reducing the waiting lists for services that require professionals, such as speech therapists or psychologists, especially in rural and remote regions.

Develop a citizen-centred approach

The fourth step along the continuum of reform is to develop a citizen-centred approach to the provision of disability supports. All jurisdictions can begin this process by removing these supports from social assistance, in which they are typically embedded, and setting them up as an independent program. The removal of these

supports from social assistance helps break down the ‘welfare wall,’ which refers to the fact that it is difficult to leave this income program when it means giving up access to essential assistance, such as disability supports.

Governments can also create more opportunities for individualized funding – the direct payment of cash to individuals or families to enable them to purchase the type and quantity of supports they need. In addition, small amounts of flexible funding should be made available to allow modifications to households, relief for caregivers or other modest requests for assistance.

Other actions include building, over time, the capacity for peer and community assessment of need. This type of capacity would reduce the inordinate reliance on professionals for certification, case planning and service provision. For example, provinces and territories can create community boards, as in British Columbia, which involve citizens in decisions about the delivery of supports and the development of individualized case plans. Governments and communities can enable the creation of circles of support around individuals and families in order to reduce dependence on professional assistance. Finally, all jurisdictions can introduce a review process to allow persons with disabilities to question decisions made in respect of their circumstances.

Change the broader context

The final major area for reform focuses not so much upon the system of disability supports. Rather, it seeks to *change the broader context* to ensure that it is more responsive to persons with disabilities. One of the major actions that provinces and territories can take to modify the broader context is to ensure the accessibility of all spaces and programs. The accessibility initia-

tive announced in the 2007 federal Budget is an important step; the Enabling Accessibility Fund of \$45 million over three years will promote the accommodation of physical environments.

Another positive initiative is the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* which was passed in 2005. The legislation sets out accessibility standards and associated compliance requirements.

Provinces and territories can take action to promote employment opportunities for persons with disabilities within all ministries and agencies. Governments can set up or share access to a web-based centre for universal design in which employers, municipalities, builders, universities, developers and members of the public can find information about accommodation. The website might incorporate a question-and-answer capacity to communicate directly with employers.

Governments can design and implement a communications campaign, including the documentation of success stories, to advance private sector work opportunities. Tax credits can be introduced to encourage the hiring of persons with disabilities by helping to offset the cost of accommodation. All jurisdictions can introduce a government-wide procurement policy which favours community-based businesses that support diversity, including those run by persons with disabilities or that actively promote their employment.

Starting points

The scope of actions described here represents a landscape of possibilities. There are several options with respect to prioritization.

The first is to work sequentially through each of the five reform objectives as they are outlined above. A second possibility is to commit to reforms in all five areas but to start with actions that can be taken immediately. A third option is to prioritize interventions on the basis of designated populations where pressing needs have been identified, such as children, young adults or Aboriginal Canadians.

Yet another avenue for reform is to direct top attention to specific goals, such as promoting the employment of persons with disabilities. In this case, provinces and territories would focus primarily upon interventions related to work preparation and training. These include, for example, readers and interpreters, job search and placement support, transportation assistance, adapted work-related equipment and subsidies for workplace accommodation.

Regardless of the preferred starting point, all jurisdictions can take immediate steps to reform disability supports. At the very least, they can improve the provision of information and ease access to existing programs. Ideally, they will move even further both to improve the delivery of these supports and to create more substantial changes to the context in which these supports are embedded.

Sherri Torjman

Copyright © 2007 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy

401-1390 Prince of Wales Drive
Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6
CANADA

Phone: (613) 729-3340
Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
Website: www.caledoninst.org