Canadian disability policy: trends, reforms & implications for rehabilitation

Michael J. Prince
Lansdowne Professor of Social Policy
University of Victoria

“Celebrate Research Week”
UBC Medical Student and Alumni Centre
March 12, 2008
My objectives today

- To look at recent trends in Canadian context of personal supports and income for persons with disabilities
- To identify Canadian policy developments and reform proposals
- To raise implications for rehabilitation
Disability-related supports

- Aids and devices, medications
- Assistance with activities of daily living
- Supports within school
- Workplace supports and job accommodations
- Household adaptations/special features
- Supports related to transportation, leisure activities
- Community infrastructure
Profile of need for supports

- About 2 million Canadian adults lack one or more of the disability supports they need.
- Half of children with disabilities who need specialized aids do not have all the aids they require.
- Families supporting a family member with a disability have lower household incomes than other families.

PALS, 2001
Gaps in meeting needs for supports

- Main reason for unmet needs of disability-related supports in Canada is *cost concerns*.
- This costs concern is especially prevalent for people with severe disabilities.
- A second reason for unmet needs is the *lack of information* on availability.
Demand for supports will only grow

- Aging population of Canada
- Pressures on smaller families
- Public expectations for flexible, available, accountable services
- Further deinstitutionalization
- Labour market needs for skilled people
Advocacy style on supports

- Disability organizations frequently target the federal government for action on disability-related supports.
- Ottawa has been resistant to these claims for federal involvement.
- Even less likely now under Harper’s “open federalism” approach.
- Need to direct greater attention to provincial/territorial public sectors.
A five-point plan for reforming disability supports

1. **Providing information** – single access
2. **Easing access to supports** – review eligibility rules
3. **Improving delivery of programs** – consolidate programs, fill gaps
4. **Developing citizen-centred** – more individualized funding, peer support
5. **Changing the broader context** – legislation for accessibility

This plan as a set of ideas

- Focus on provincial/territorial levels; not waiting for Ottawa
- No new major public investments are required; some actions now
- The five elements range from the most modest (information) to more ambitious (legislation on accessibility)
- Can emphasize technical aids and devices; personal services; or environmental changes
Large-scale reform ideas on disability supports

- Involve federal/provincial/territorial action

- Various devices available in principle:
  - Earmark funds through Canada Social Transfer
  - New Personal Supports Fund
  - Re-investment strategy linked with new federal basic income program
Prospects for these large-scale reforms?

- Harper government’s declared intention to limit the use of the federal spending power in areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction, suggests that many of these large-scale reform ideas are not politically acceptable.

- But some options remain feasible.
Federal disability-related income programs as of 2002

- Attendant Care Deduction
- Canada Study Grant
- CPP Disability Benefits
- Caregiver Credit
- Child Tax Benefit
- Disability Tax Credit
- EI Sickness Benefit
- GST Credit
- Infirm Dependant Credit
- Medical Expense Tax Credit
- Refundable Medical Expense Supplement
- Veterans Pensions and War Allowances
Additional federal disability-related income programs as of 2007

- Canada Access Grants for college and university students
- Child Disability Benefit
- Children’s Fitness Tax Credit
- Child Tax Credit
- Disability Supports Deduction (replaces Attendant Care Deduction)
- EI Compassionate Benefit
- Registered Disability Savings Plan
- New Veterans Charter with Disability Awards and Allowances
- Working Income Tax Benefit and Disability Supplement
Changes to existing federal income programs

- Increases in maximum amounts: Child Disability Benefit
- Extended scope of allowable expenses: Disability Tax Credit
- Restricted coverage: Employment Insurance
- Streamlined access: Old Age Security
- Eased contribution requirements: CPP Disability for long-time workers
- Strengthened penalty provisions for fraud: OAS and CPP
Still other new federal income benefits

- Apprenticeship Job Creation Tax Credit
- Canada Employment Credit
- Full Exemption of Postsecondary scholarships and bursaries
- Tax Credit for Public Transit Passes
- Textbook Tax Credit
- Trades people’s Tool Expenses Deduction
Declines in welfare incomes for persons with a disability, 1997-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Change in Incomes</th>
<th>Percentage Decline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NL</td>
<td>$1,327</td>
<td>-12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEI</td>
<td>-1,921</td>
<td>-19.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS</td>
<td>-1,525</td>
<td>-14.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB</td>
<td>-124</td>
<td>-1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUE</td>
<td>-137</td>
<td>-1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONT</td>
<td>-1,855</td>
<td>-13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAN</td>
<td>-1,132</td>
<td>-11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SASK</td>
<td>-541</td>
<td>-5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALTA</td>
<td>-215</td>
<td>-2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>-693</td>
<td>-6.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deepening benefit inadequacy and financial insecurity

- From 1997 to 2005, welfare incomes for a single person with a disability fell in all 10 provinces.
- In half the provinces, substantial declines of between 12% to 19% in the real value of social assistance.
- In 7 provinces, the 2005 welfare incomes for persons with a disability was the lowest level since 1986 when data were first collected by National Council of Welfare.
- For most provinces, the year of highest welfare benefit levels for persons with disabilities was in the early 1990s.

Four areas identified:

- Investments in disability related supports
- Initiatives to alleviate poverty
- Measures to increase access to labour force
- Initiatives to promote access, inclusion and full citizenship
Conclusions

- Recent pattern of numerous, separate add-ons is problematic
- Need for policy mix of tax measures, income benefits, legislation, information, and services
- Expanding supply of supports linked with improving income benefits and fostering labour force inclusion and community living
Conclusions

- Collaboration required
- Federal Government take the lead on income security for Canadians with disabilities
- Provincial/Territorial Governments lead for disability-related services and supports
- Engagement by rehabilitation field, and other social care professions is crucial in these policy developments
- Voice of families and individuals living with disabilities must be heard and respected