

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.

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

Sherri Torjman, "Five –Point Plan for Reforming Disability Supports" (2007) at www.caledoninst.org

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

NL	- \$1,327	-12.0 %
PEI	-1,921	-19.2
NS	-1,525	-14.6
NB	-124	-1.5
QUE	-137	-1.3
ONT	-1,855	-13.3
MAN	-1,132	-11.6
SASK	-541	-5.7
ALTA	-215	-2.7
BC	-693	-6.1

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

National Action Plan on Disability: “End Exclusion 2007”

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