

Removing Barriers to Work for People with Disabilities

Flexible employment opportunities remove barriers and allow people with disabilities to take their place in the workforce.

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SPARC BC has been a partner in a project working to identify policy and funding changes that could improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities. This article is a summary of the goals and conclusions of the report released on February 28, by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Society recognizes that people with disabilities benefit personally, socially, and economically from participating in the world of work. That's true not only because of the obvious link between income and employment, but because of the deep connection between well-being, self-esteem, and meaningful work.

To date, most government policy initiatives have focused on supporting those who are able to participate in the labour market on an equal footing with non-disabled peers when provided with limited accommodation and unbiased opportunities. Considerably less attention has been paid to those who require access to additional support or, due to the nature of their disabilities, may be able to participate only on a part-time basis, episodically, or at a level below the norm of expected productivity.

Some people with disabilities need a combination of income assistance and employment in order to function to their full capacity. Current

restrictions often discourage this population from participating in the labour market. If they become employed, they fear forfeiting some or all of their disability benefits, and if they commit to full-time employment and then find they cannot maintain that employment, they may find themselves without employment income or income assistance from disability benefits. The report identifies the policies and supports needed to create more employment opportunities in BC for persons with disabilities.

The research included a comparative analysis of income assistance policies for people with disabilities in the five westernmost provinces and four other countries. The research also included interviews with eight successful supportive employment programs, seven social enterprises that employ people with disabilities directly, and three coordinating groups that support the development of social enterprises.

While the goal of the paper is to increase the opportunities for people with disabilities to work, it is essential to remember that employment is not a realistic goal for many people on disability assistance. It is an important option, but the primary goal of the disability assistance system should be to ensure that all people with disabilities have access to social support and are

able to live with dignity, regardless of their ability to engage with the labour market. This is not the case in BC. For although PWD benefits are much higher than regular welfare, people on PWD still live well below the poverty line.¹

Recommendations

The recommendations in the report cover four major categories of actions that the BC Government should take.

Eligibility

- Ensure that individuals who leave income assistance receive continued medical and dental benefits until they receive an equal or greater level of extended benefits from their employer, as is the case in Ontario. This would include post-secondary education, training or employment.
- Ensure unlimited reinstatement, as is the case in Ontario, and rapid reinstatement for two years, as is the case in Alberta.
- Increase asset limits to \$100,000 (excluding principal residence and retirement accounts) for a person to be eligible for disability benefits in BC. This change would make the asset limit in BC closer to that in Alberta.

Income Support

- Provide one \$500 employment start-up benefit per year for any employment-related activity, as done in Ontario.
- Maintain the bus pass provision, or provide a \$120 per month transportation allowance for

people who can't access public transportation until an individual's income rises above Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut Off.

- Increase earnings exemptions by retaining the BC \$500 earnings exemption, plus adding a %50 reduction on the next \$1,400 in earnings for a total maximum monthly earnings exemption of \$1,200 for a single adult. This expands on Alberta's earnings exemption policies.
- Develop "working credits" to even the flow of earnings exemptions for those who, because of their disability, have fluctuations in their ability to earn employment income. A working credits system is in place in Australia.

Employment Supports

- Increase the amount of funding for supports to employment and training to PWD and PPMB, as people with disabilities now represent more than %60 of the income assistance caseload.
- Require that all future funding for employment programming is based on a global and not "pay-for-performance" method of payment and includes population-specific employment supports.
- Ensure greater accountability through independent audits of employment programming, including reporting of dropout, placement and retention rates, costs and best practices. The findings from these audits should guide future funding decisions. ▶

¹ (PWD) Persons With Disabilities is a category of Income Assistance benefits available to people in British Columbia. PPMB (Persons with Persistent Multiple Barriers to Employment) is an additional category which is seen as less permanent, and receives comparably less financial support.

Community Extras

- ▶ • Expand college-based adult special education programs, given the evidence that these programs have been very successful in supporting younger people with disabilities to transition into mainstream employment.
- Provide stable long-term (four year) provincial government funding for three to five social enterprise coordinating groups around the province to support business development and supports for social enterprises employing people with disabilities and/or a combination of people with disabilities and people without a disability.

Communications

- Develop plain language fact sheets on all benefit provisions, employment supports, and information on how to report income. These fact sheets should be in multiple formats and languages and should be made easily accessible to front-line ministry staff, community agencies and persons with disabilities.
- Provide education to front line ministry staff and communication materials for agencies working with people with disabilities on the policies that allow persons with disabilities who are working to retain medical coverage.
- Provide annual audited reports on levels of funding for different types of training and employment programs (i.e. college-based, community, pay-for-performance) including annual placement and retention rates.

These recommendations are the way forward if the provincial government truly wants BC to be

a leader, as Minister Claude Richmond recently said, in “building the best system of support for persons with disabilities.”

The complete report is available at
<www.policyalternatives.ca>



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