

A Question of Citizenship

The Argument for Adequate Income Support for People with Disabilities

September, 2007

Introduction:

The Saskatchewan Disability Income Support Coalition (DISC) was formed by a broad cross section of disability advocates, consumers and organizations. We have joined to speak as one voice and advocate for a distinct income system for people with disabilities who presently rely on social assistance for their income.

Our primary vision is to see developed and implemented a respectful and separate income system for people with disabilities that offers both an adequate baseline income and a user-friendly mechanism to address individual financial needs based on the impact of disability. An adequate baseline income must be implemented to accommodate and ameliorate for the most significant and common impact of disability, which is poverty.

The Issue:

Our current system allows only for the most basic, below subsistence level of support, condemning people with disabilities to live far below the poverty line, over 50% below,—some for their whole adult lives. Although social assistance was created to be a last resort, temporary program, it in fact has become a default program and a permanent reality for many recipients who have disabilities. A recent Government of Saskatchewan report indicated that 70% of the long-term caseload are people with disabilities, a fact which demonstrates the need for real, substantive change.

The vast majority of people with disabilities whom DISC surveyed felt stigmatized by having to be on social assistance and they not receive enough money to meet their basic needs for food, rent, medication, or transportation. What they are asking for is to have a life that is not defined by basic economic survival, a life that is free of stigma and to be valued as full citizens. As well, individual responses to DISC surveys and reports from advocates indicate the social assistance system is inconsistent and difficult to navigate.

This is not a new issue. Saskatchewan disability advocates have been calling for change for many years. In 2005, Saskatchewan based cross-disability group, “Voice of People with Disabilities,” identified poverty as the most pressing issue confronting people with disabilities in Saskatchewan in their document “*Income Support for People with Disabilities.*” DISC members have joined together because as groups and individuals, we represent those who experience the impact of poverty everyday.

On a large scale, the labour market has yet to learn the meaning of accommodation, leaving people with disabilities with no opportunity to be self-supporting. When people with disabilities do find work that is flexible to meet their needs, it is often insecure, poorly paid, and lack benefits that are essential. As well, there are many who legitimately cannot work in paid, competitive employment. For these reasons, a disability income program is not a handout, it is a reasonable accommodation for those whom the economy permanently keeps out.

Our Position:

Individuals with disabilities are turning to community organizations and other agencies seeking help to deal both with the current crisis of rising costs and falling further behind, and to affect meaningful change. DISC members believe that it is time that we move this agenda along.

The current system provides an allowance that does not allow individuals to meet their basic needs, severely affecting the quality of life of those who have no other option. The earning exemption does not facilitate people reaching their employment potential, unless the goal is full-time permanent employment. The disincentive to work and the subsequent clawbacks if one does work further marginalize people with disabilities.

DISC maintains that people with disabilities have the right to adequate, respectful income support delivered with the assistance of income workers who have the mandate and discretionary power to respond quickly to individual, discreet needs. Lifelong disability and subsequent economic insecurity needs to be foremost considerations when designing an income support program. People with disabilities deserve to have an adequate income to truly meet their needs, both disability specific and economic. A new income system for people with disabilities must be user-friendly, flexible, accommodating, respectful and must allow them to participate in the labour market without extreme penalty.

As we look towards our vision of developing a distinct income system, it is evident to us that no one person, organization or department can create a better system alone. The government needs our front-line experience and support. Through our own collaborative processes and research, DISC members have gained a deeper knowledge of the complexity, and yet the simplicity, involved in creating a new income system. Yet we remain committed and determined that this is a realistic and reasonable policy proposal. Moreover, it is the right thing to do.

While DISC members appreciate the exchange of ideas that happens in consultation, our coalition is united in its conviction that the only way to move forward is in a collaborative, full partnership, i.e. a true joint effort, with the Government of Saskatchewan and the Department of Community Resources. We believe that a program designed without the full collaboration of community experts will lack credibility and be unsatisfactory in meeting the income support needs of people with disabilities.