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Message to persons with disabilities:

The Government of Alberta wants YOU on WELFARE

AISH Redesign Quickfacts

January 1999

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The Edmonton Social Planning Council has studied the Alberta Family and Social Services internal planning paper, *Re-design of Income and Employment Programs*, and learned that AISH—Alberta Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped—is changing. Alberta Family and Social Services plans to:

Freeze AISH. Once the changes become law, new clients will apply for welfare, not AISH. If you're already on AISH, you can stay, as long as your cash assets are less than \$20,000. If you have more than \$20,000 in cash, your AISH benefits will stop. You will have to support yourself until your money runs out and you can apply for welfare.

Create a new welfare program called *Open Doors*. This program is for welfare clients who cannot work, and that includes persons with disabilities. To qualify for *Open Doors*, your cash assets must add up to less than \$5,000. Cash assets include money in your bank account plus anything you can turn into cash—RRSPs, RRIFs, term deposits, trust funds, life insurance, pension contributions, GICs, etc.

Cut your benefits. *Open Doors* will pay \$610 for single clients. For people with disabilities already on welfare, this is good news. They will receive \$58 more a month. But *Open Doors* will pay \$213 less than AISH. Alberta will have the second lowest benefits in Canada. For example, persons with disabilities in Ontario will receive \$4,400 more every year than Albertans with disabilities will receive on *Open Doors*.

Make you depend on family. With *Open Doors*, clients who live with their families will see lower benefits because they will not receive a shelter benefit.

Put you to work. Like other welfare clients, you will constantly have to prove you cannot work. You will qualify for an employment related expense benefit. And you will be able to keep your medical benefits for one year. However, if you work part time or earn some extra money, your benefits will drop.

Get tough. Alberta Family and Social Services plans to use tough rules to control caseloads and make sure social workers cannot respond to your special needs. According to the department's own planning paper, the department will set "very restrictive regulations which limit discretionary decision-making...and the discretion of the program to respond to unusual situations." These restrictive regulations "would ensure...effective control of benefits and rising caseloads."

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"Quite frankly I find it extremely hard to believe that in some months we're seeing an increase of 100 people on AISH."

AFSS Minister Dr. Lyle Oberg questioning whether AISH clients are really disabled.

You said you wanted

Recently, the Federal Task Force on Disability Issues heard from persons with disabilities. *The task force learned that persons with disabilities want:*

- *a nation that demonstrates leadership*
- *a holistic approach to disability issues and input into the policies, programs and decisions that affect them*
- *a decent standard of living*
- *social and economic equity and equality of outcomes.*

The Federal Task Force on Disability Issues said you wanted

The task force included all provincial governments except Quebec. The task force led to a policy paper called *In Unison: A Canadian Approach to Disability*. *In Unison* envisions a world that promotes equality and includes persons with disabilities. With *In Unison*, provincial ministers agree to "work together for the benefit of Canadians with disabilities." In its planning paper, *Re-design of Income and Employment Programs*, Alberta Family and Social Services pretends to share the Canada-wide vision. However, the planned redesign cares more about the department's own business plan and its desire to control "benefits and rising caseloads."

What we want: leadership

In Unison asks for a seamless and co-ordinated system of benefits and services for Canadians with disabilities. And it recognizes that "this new disability agenda may require new investment."

The In Unison vision: Persons with disabilities participate as full citizens in all aspects of Canadian society. The full participation of persons with disabilities requires the commitment of all segments of society. The realization of the vision will allow persons with disabilities to maximize their independence and enhance their well-being through access to required supports and the elimination of barriers that prevent their full participation.

What we'll get

No new money. Instead the redesign will cut 1,500 people off AISH and save the department \$14 million. The redesign introduces asset testing. Only the very poor will stay on AISH or qualify for the new welfare program, *Open Doors*.

The redesign raises benefit levels for SFI Assured Support (to be renamed *Open Doors*) from \$552 to \$610 per month. The new \$610 benefit level is not based on how much money people actually need to live but on how much the department can save by cutting elsewhere.

The department estimates that raising the benefit to \$610 would cost \$6.5 million more per year. Cutting off 1,500 AISH clients would cover those extra costs. The Edmonton Social Planning Council estimates it would cost about \$24 million more per year to keep the benefit level at \$823 per month for all Albertans with disabilities—not just those lucky enough to get on AISH before the doors close forever.

Since 1992-93, welfare reforms have saved the department about \$700 million a year. Minister Lyle Oberg has promised to put money saved into programs that need it—into "children's services, into AISH...." Despite the promises, more than \$500 million has never been reinvested. Keeping benefits at an adequate level for all Albertans with disabilities would require just 5 per cent of that \$500 million.

What we want: a holistic approach

A holistic approach involves everyone and depends on broad government support. According to *In Unison*, social services ministers must start by working with other ministers, those responsible for health, labour, employment, education, training, learning, finance, aboriginal affairs, women, justice, housing, transportation, Workers' Compensation and citizenship.

What we'll get

The proposed redesign is an Alberta Family and Social Services plan that restricts access to support and aims to save the department money.

What we want: full citizenship

In Unison envisions a world where the needs of persons with disabilities are incorporated into every social domain—schools, health care, cultural programs, transportation, student loan programs, training, workplaces, recreation centres, libraries, parks and other public spaces. The first step, says *In Unison*, is to change attitudes and provide information.

What we'll get

The redesign pushes persons with disabilities into the workforce. Other government departments are not involved. There is no review of public programs and no attempt to change attitudes or provide information.

The department has not studied what persons with disabilities need in Alberta. In May 1997, Minister Dr. Lyle Oberg told the Designated Supply Subcommittee, Family and Social Services, that he doesn't understand why more Albertans are applying for AISH. "This is one of the areas that we are a little bit unsure of, as to exactly why the Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped program is being elevated so much."

In March 1998, he told the same committee that he questions whether all AISH clients are really disabled. "The reason for the increase in cases is something we are looking at. Quite frankly I find it extremely hard to believe that in some months we're seeing an increase of 100 people on Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped."

What we want: portability

In Unison calls for portability. In other words, your supports stay with you, wherever you go. "Disability supports are often attached to residential care such as group homes, nursing homes or institutions. Because the funds go to the residences, the services are not portable—creating problems for residents who wish to seek independent living arrangements."

In Unison also says supports should not be tied to welfare benefits. Providing "disability supports through welfare ...makes it difficult to move off the program." *In Unison* also recommends individualized funding. "Individualized funding helps offset the direct and additional costs of the disability and allows services to be tailored to individual needs—the amount of the payment is different for every person and is determined on an individualized basis depending on specific needs."

What we'll get

The redesign will put persons with disabilities on welfare. There is no individualized funding. If you're applying for the first time or reapplying, to get any benefits you will have to qualify for welfare.

Clients who can prove they have ongoing special needs may qualify for some additional money—up to a maximum \$823. To get this extra money, you will need the help of an expert—your "doctor, community health nurse, mental health worker, registered nutritionist." Again, "very restrictive regulations" will prevent social workers from responding to "unusual situations."

The AISH caseload started to rise in 1993-94, as the department cut welfare benefits. Anyone who could probably applied for AISH because living on welfare is next to impossible. Now, with *Open Doors*, the department wants to make sure persons with disabilities stay on welfare.

What we want: employment

In Unison recognizes that, "While most persons with disabilities would like to work, they face a range of barriers." *In Unison* recommends strategies directed toward employers, including special supports to help employers hire and keep employees with disabilities. It recommends programs to help persons with disabilities move from school to the workplace. And it recommends creating opportunities for communities and individuals to create locally run and controlled businesses that employ persons with disabilities.

What we'll get

The redesign asks you to work but offers no new supports or programs for employers or communities. The workplace stays the same. You will have to change. *Open Doors* will give you access to training and employment opportunities. According to the department's planning paper, the approach will be similar to the approach taken during the 1993 welfare reforms. Like other welfare clients, you will be assessed to determine your "capacity to work." Like other welfare clients, you will be "expected to work" until the assessment proves you can't.

What we want: income

In Unison criticizes the way income support programs classify people as "permanently unemployable." To get welfare and or Canada Pension, persons with disabilities must leave the workforce completely. If you can work at all, you cannot receive any support.

With *In Unison*, provincial governments agree to remove disincentives to work and streamline assessment and reassessment processes. *In Unison* also recommends that governments revise earnings exemption rules to encourage people to work.

What we'll get

Under the proposed change, you will be able to keep your medical benefits, if you take a job. The redesign also promises a "rapid reinstatement policy." If you leave the program to work and the job doesn't work out, it should be easy to get back on benefits.

However, there is a catch. To get benefits, you will have to go through an assessment, and you will only qualify if that assessment shows you cannot work. Once you have taken a job and shown you can work, how will you get back on benefits?

The department's planning paper stresses its get tough policy. Again, the department will set "very restrictive regulations which limit discretionary decision-making....and the discretion of the program to respond to unusual situations."

What we want: input into programs

Over the years, persons with disabilities have articulated their vision. The Federal Task Force on Disability Issues heard that vision. Through *In Unison*, provincial ministers have made a commitment to work together to "modernize social programs" and "work together for the benefit of Canadians with disabilities."

What we will get

This January, Alberta Family and Social Services will begin consulting with persons with disabilities. However, the department is not asking you to help redesign AISH. According to its planning paper, the purpose of the consultations is to "explain to stakeholders its reasons for introducing changes or new programs." The department already knows what the program will look like, and they are not giving you all the facts.

If you are part of the consultation, you will receive a discussion paper, *Redesigning Income Support for Persons with Disabilities*. The paper describes parts of the redesign but does not include the details. It does not describe *Open Doors* or the government's plan to put you on welfare. It asks you to agree to several principles without telling you what those principles will mean to the everyday life of persons with disabilities.